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Realities of War or War of Realities: An Analytical Reading of Six Persian Novels of the Iran-Iraq War

DISSERTATION

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements

for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in Comparative Literature

by

Babak Mazloumi

Dissertation Committee:
Professor Nasrin Rahimieh, Chair
Professor Rajagopalan Radhkrishnan
Professor James Steintrager

2023

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Transliteration: It will be more appropriate to write like this

Kurdistan, Hafiz, Isfahan, Majlis (instead of Kordestan, Hafez, Esfahan, Majles).

***Iranian Studies* transliteration scheme**

Consonants

z	ض	b	ب
t	ط	p	پ
z	ظ	t	ت
‘	ع	s	ث
gh	غ	j	ج
f	ف	ch	چ
q	ق	h	ح
k	ک	kh	خ
g	گ	d	د
l	ل	z	ذ
m	م	r	ر
n	ن	z	ز
h	ه	zh	ژ
v	و	s	س
y	ی	sh	ش
‘	ء	s	ص

Vowels

short	long	diphthongs
a (as in *ashk*)	a or ā (as in *ensan* or *āb*)	-
e (as in *fekr*)	i (as in *melli*)	ey (as in Teymur)
o (as in *pol*)	u (as in Tus)	ow (as in *rowshan*)

Other Rules:

-The *ezafeh* is written as -*e* after consonants, e. g. *ketab-e* and as -*ye* after vowels (and silent final *h*), e. g. *darya-ye* and *khaneh-ye.*

-The silent final *h* is written, e. g. *Dowleh.*

-The tashdid is represented by a doubling of the letter, e. g. *takhassos.*

-The plural *ha* should be added to the singular as in *dast-h.*

Acknowledgments

It is next to impossible to acknowledge all the people who contributed to the present dissertation and the extent, depth, and type of their contribution. This research would only exist with their dedication, thoughtfulness, and scholarly depth.

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I have had the privilege of having Professor Rajagopalan Radhakrishnan (or simply "Radha") as one of the Professors in whose courses I registered as well as a member of my qualifying exams committee and a member of my dissertation committee. A mixture of profound modesty and deep knowledge of critical theory is what describes him best. I believe his theoretical rigor helped my dissertation to gain shape and strength. His exceptional modesty also helped me never feel proud or even content with my work, always seeking advice from others.

I also abundantly learned from Professor James Steintrager, who was on both my qualifying exam and dissertation committees. His insights on how to read potential primary sources to develop a good dissertation topic and integrate critical theory with my analysis of the primary sources were beneficial.

I would not have been able to complete the present dissertation if UCI's Graduate Division had not granted me their generous Completion Fellowship.

Last but not least, the director of Samuel Jordan Center or Persian Studies, Professor Touraj Daryaie has been one of my most incredible research supporters. Generous fellowships offered by the Jordan Center enabled me to continue my research almost each summer. I also got an office in the Center and access to the books in the Center's library.

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Where is Akbar Radi's Home? A Study of the Concept of Exile at Home in Through the Windowpanes presented (presenter). 42nd Comparative Drama Conference, Orlando, Florida, April 5-7, 2018.

Mapping out the Unmappable: A Critical Study of Dead Reckoning: A Novel by Bahman Sho'levar (presenter) at *"Identities in Motion:* Communities of Belonging and Exclusion in Diasporic Spaces*,"* The Graduate Student Conference held at the University of New Mexico, March 23-24, 2018.

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Shredding the Space-Geocencorship: The Impact of Censorship on Geography of Literature presented at American Comparative Literature Association ("Literary Translation in Capitals-Stream B), March 23, 2014, New York University.

*A Glance at Three Censored Books as Instances of Censorship of the Literary Translations in Post-Revolutionary Iran: A Major Factor Contaminating the Language through Distortions and Misrepresentations (*presenter). "Contaminated Language: Distortions, Innovations, Misrepresentations, and Neologisms, An interdisciplinary graduate student conference," November 16, 2013, John W. Draper Program, New York University.

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Realities of War or War of Realities: Realities: An Analytical Reading of Six Persian Novels of the Iran-Iraq War

by

Babak Mazloumi

Doctor of Philosophy in Comparative Literature

University of California, Irvine, 2023

Professor Nasrin Rahimieh, Chair

My dissertation, titled *Realities of War or War of Realities: An Analytical Reading of the Six Persian Novels of the Iran-Iraq War,* demonstrates how the novelistic representations of the Iran-Iraq war and their critical reception transformed over time, allowing for more complex understanding of the war. I focus on the following six novels, unsettling the stark binaries of their early reception: *The Scorched Earth* (1981) by Ahmad Mahmud, *Soraya in a Coma* (1983) by Esmail Fasih, *The Winter of* 84 (1987) by Esmail Fasih, *The Headless* Palms (1983) by Qasemali Farasat, *Chess with the Doomsday Machine* (2008) by Habib Ahmadzadeh, and *The Scorpion on the Platform of Andimeshk Railroad or Blood's Dripping from This Train, Sir*! (2012) by Hosein Mortezaian Abkenar. If one considers the timeline of publications of each one of the novels and the related critical essays, published mostly on the heels of each other, it is possible to see a gradual change starting from the 1980s with novels and critical stances representing either Islamic (as crystalized in *The Holy Defense doctrine*) or Marxist perception of the Iran-Iraq War. The last novels I study, published almost thirty years after the inception of the war, exhibit a drastic change leading into an individualized and singular perceptions of the

war, defying any dominant value system. One can see this defiance crystalized in the structure and style of the novels as well as the critics' approaches to them.

How do the Iran-Iraq war novels represent the realities of this war? Is there a single reality or are there a multitude of realities represented? Either way, should one employ a variety of epistemological approaches to examine this reality? The present research endeavors to go above and beyond a myriad of heterogenous, if not downright contradictory, approaches to the subject. That is, it tries to examine the changes these literary works and the critical commentaries have endured not just through time but also because of time. Then, there is a second layer resulting from the interaction between the novel and the outside world. In other words, the present research evinces how factors such as historical-biographical conditions and critical commentaries on the work influence our perception of the novel's realities.

Introduction

Historical Background

The Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988) was the longest and one of the bloodiest wars of the twentieth century that brought about significant casualties and destruction for both sides. It ended on August 20, 1988, after Iran accepted an UN-brokered ceasefire. On September 22, 1980, Iraqi forces invaded the Iranian southern and southwestern provinces. "Estimates of total casualties range from 1,000,000 to twice that number. The number killed on both sides was perhaps 500,000, with Iran suffering the greatest losses" (Encyclopedia Britannica online). Iran's slogans of exporting the Islamic Revolution, especially to the neighboring countries and the countries in the region provoked Iraq to embark upon an extensive invasion. Another reason behind the invasion was Saddam Hussein's ambition to play a more significant role in the Persian Gulf, acting as the leader of the Arab World. Counting on a swift onslaught and a quick victory, Saddam Hussein attacked Iran that was fresh out of the 1979 revolution and had a disbanded the army, the top commanders of which had been either executed or fled the country. It soon became clear that Saddam Hussein had made a fatal mistake. "Iranians rallied behind their leader, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, and repelled Iraqi invaders in 1982. The war then settled into a bloody stalemate between the smaller but heavily armed Iraq, and Iran, which was ostracized by the world but sustained by ideological fervor" (Potter & Sick 2). This ideological fervor was nothing but the Shiite version of Islam. It was also the backbone of the 1979 revolution that had triumphed more than a year earlier. Inspired by the tragic death of the Prophet Mohammad's grandson and the third leader of Shiites, Imam Hussein, the Iranian armed forces valued death for God, Islam, and the country as the highest reward. As the supreme religious authority of the

Shiites, the leader of the Islamic Revolution, and the Commander-in-Chief of the Iranian armed forces, Ayatollah Khomeini tapped into this ideological fervor that valued death in the way of God above and beyond any other thing. Later, toward the beginning of the 1980s, one can see how this ideological fervor made itself felt in some of the Persian literary works dealing with the same war. Also, the very fact that unlike many other wars, especially the ones fought in the Middle East, both superpowers of the time, that is, the USA and the USSR were on the same side: the Iraqi side of the war (Potter & Sick 2), which forced the Iranian side to compensate their weakness with "human wave" attacks (Encyclopedia Britannica Online), that is, by sacrificing a great number of volunteers. The traumatic memory of the loved ones lost in the war with Iraq, together the beforementioned ideological fervor left an indelible impression on the Persian novels written on the war, especially the ones written towards the beginning of the war.

The Contribution of This Dissertation to the Existing Scholarship- An Overview of Methodology:

How do the Iran-Iraq war novels represent the realities of this war? Is there a single reality or are there a multitude of realities represented? Either way, should one employ a variety of epistemological approaches to examine this reality? (with an epistemological approach, meaning a method of knowing *about* reality using "the structure of thought" (Guyer & Horstmann). The present research endeavors to go above and beyond a myriad of heterogenous, if not downright contradictory, approaches to the subject. That is, it tries to examine the changes these literary works and critical commentaries have endured not just through time but also because of time. The first stage of my research is the close reading of the six novels. This means considering the novel as an autonomous world ignoring external, i.e., outside-the-text influences. In other words,

one aims to develop a framework containing several minuscule, independent realities. Conversely, it is unreal if an incident seems implausible according to the same logic.

Then, there is a second layer resulting from the interaction between the novel and the outside world. In other words, the present research evinces how factors such as historical-biographical conditions and critical commentaries on the work influence our perception of the novel's realities. Furthermore, this study's case has to do with "what could exist" as the perception of novels and critical commentaries become different over time. I contend that these novels, together with their critical responses, construct and posit what becomes the perceived reality. This reality may not be entirely under the control of that/those construct(s); instead, it could move above and beyond them. Presumably, just saying what has happened in a literary work is not enough to represent reality. I have chosen the six novels in this study to demonstrate, *inter alia*, a line of changes in terms of genre and techniques of story writing from what one perceives as a straightforward, realist novel to non-conventional types of realism which may, at times, border on non-realist including what one may loosely call, postmodern novel." Presumably, postmodern works (such as the last literary work I have chosen to study in this dissertation, that is, Hosein Mortezaiaān Ābkenār's *Aqrab Rouye Pelleh-hāye Rahahan-e Andimeshk Y*ā āz *In Qat*ā*r Khun Michekeh, Qourban!* [*The Scorpion on the Platform of Andimeshk Railroad or Blood's Dripping from This Train, Sir!]* (2012)) have analyzed and depicted the reality of the war in a different and possibly more profound manner, than chronicle-like novels. It is the question of irrepresentability of reality by realism (in the classic sense of the term, that is, an exact, scan-lie representation n of the objectively realities). How many understandings and ways of narrating the reality of the war are there? In this dissertation, I do not mean to debunk facts such as "Writing by commission" (sefāreshi-nevisi) as Shahnehpur calls it

(4) and those who wrote on the war trying to reflect the reality the way they internalized it. Likewise, I do not mean to deny the novels written during the war (especially towards its beginning) were mostly chronicle-like and documentary-like accounts of war focusing on external observations. That is, the said novels were way different from the post-war novels contemplating the war and its incidents in a way to represent a gist of reality instead of a photograph-like presentation of it.

As I explained earlier, what was theoretically at stake was that no single novel on Iran-Iraq War and no critical commentary on either of the stories of war could claim to hold the reality of the war. Likewise, no single or epistemological critique can claim to ascertain the said reality. It is an array of literary works, the related critical commentaries, and the readers' responses to them all through time that create reality that is constantly changing.

In a word, the timeline of publications of each of the novels and the related critical essays, published mainly back-to-back, constitute the skeleton of this research. Then, the single reader's (a single reader or literary critic) perception of the work and how it changes it not through time but because of time as this study proceeds. In that case, it is possible to see gradual changes starting from the 1980s with novels and critical stances representing either Islamic (as crystalized in *The Holy Defense doctrine*) or Marxist perception of the Iran-Iraq War. The last novels I study, published almost thirty years after the war's inception, exhibit a drastic change leading to individualized and singular perceptions of the war, defying any dominant value system. One can see this defiance crystalized in the structure and style of the novels and critics' approaches to them.

Organization and Chapter Division:

This dissertation includes an introduction, three body chapters, a conclusion, and a bibliography: In the introduction, I endeavor to demonstrate that on a bigger scale. As I move from each chapter to the next, I will demonstrate that the more time has passed, the more complex and nuanced understandings and critical commentaries on the Persian Iran-Iraq novels have been built as the historical, literary, and theoretical bases to analyze the Iran-Iraq War novels I have chosen for this research. I discuss points such as the historical and political backgrounds of the Iran-Iraq war, the contribution of this dissertation to the existing scholarship, a review of the related literature on the Iran-Iraq war, the relation between reality and realism, reality and realism in the context of Wars in or in the context of the Iran-Iraq War only.

The first chapter intends to examine the two Persian novels of the Iran-Iraq War, *The Scorched Earth* by Ahmad Mahmud, and *Sorraya in a Coma* by Esmail Fasih, with the second published back-to-back the first one. This is in fact, my perception as the novel's single reader. I make comparisons and contrasts between the two novels to demonstrate how similarities between the two attach them and how the differences make them create a continuum. I examine the texts of the novels as a practice in close reading in which I consider the novel as an autonomous world trying to criticize it as it is. Subsequently, I analyze several critical commentaries that display how critical views and perceptions have evolved. The novel's text, as an autonomous entity, fuses with an array of critical commentaries.

While performing a close reading of the novel, to determine what is realistic, I will focus on whether a particular incident or conversation comports with the novel's internal logic as an autonomous world. In other words, I will tend to disregard whether the incident or conversation in question tallies with outside sources. This is because my close reading of the text transpires in

an incomplete historical moment. If the present moment passes, a new version of the reader or me should turn back and read the text in a historical moment that is past and gone. Hence, a recuperative reading of the text in the present moment seems out of the question. As a result, I confine myself to a reading of the text that deems it as an independent and autonomous entity. Here, the work's internal logic is the benchmark for being either close to or far from reality. This logic may alter what the text *prima facie* would mean while the critic examines it within the paratextual perimeter.

` In the second chapter, I compare and contrast *The Headless Palms* (1983) by Qasem'ali Farāsat and *Winter of 84* (1984) by Esmail Fasih as the Iran-Iraq War novels I have chosen for this chapter. To this end, I embark upon close readings of each novel respectively, considering them as independent and autonomous entities. Subsequently, I study the critical commentaries written on each one examining their evolution or lack thereof through time against the backdrop of an immense horizon. Furthermore, since drawing upon essays and reviews written on *The Headless Palms*, I contend that this work, along with the critical analyses written about it, falls into the category of "Holy Defense" literature. To analyze this, I have used Althusserian notions of "ideology in particular" and "ideology in general" and how these two correspond with small and big horizons. Finally, I venture to prove that due to its prescriptive and inflexible nature, the ideology in particular, as well as its smaller horizon in the case of *The Headless palms,* does not readily fuse with the bigger horizon or backdrop of the shared and collective experiences, nor with the smaller nor bigger horizons of the related critical commentaries on the novel. *Winter of 84*, on the other hand, does not fall in the *Holy Defense* category even though it tackles Iran-Iraq War. As such, there is no "ideology in particular" or corresponding "smaller horizon" to be addressed. It is merely the novel or each of the critical commentaries that are changing against

the backdrop of experiences through time. One can regard this as a fusion with a horizon that corresponds with ideology in general. Such fusion is ever prevalent, just as a general ideology is inescapable.

I will stress the critical responses only, documented and verifiable responses. A fact that sheds light upon the reception of the Iran-Iraq War literary works is that many war stories penned between 1980-1988 are the creations of amateur writers. These writers had a first-hand experience of the war, especially what transpired on the fronts. Mostly devoid of literary and artistic merits, the works could serve as raw materials and sources of inspiration for the more professional and skillful writers who might choose the same subject after the termination of the war. To that end, The Bureau for the Perseveration of Art & Literature of Resistance (with resistance being an equivalent for The Holy Defense) was established in 1988 (Mir'ābedini 909-910). The conclusion one can draw here is that the literary (i.e., both creative and critical) responses to the Iran-Iraq War were negligible at the beginning of the War but then, increased over time. Some scholars regard The War of Cities stories as a subcategory of the Iran-Iraq War Literature (Mir'ābedini 910), which started after the Iraqi forces bombarded Iranian cities. However, *The Scorched Earth* which, certainly falls in the category of War of Cities, came out in 1981. That is, at the onset of the war and indeed prior to the commencement of the War of Cities, the stories of which mainly deal with the effects of war on the cities that were far from the fronts and not a city such as Ahvaz, the setting of Mahmud's novel. Its first edition, *The Scorched Earth* enjoyed a considerable critical response. As for what literary critics wrote upon and after the novel's first edition, one should distinguish between critical response and critical approval. Unlike *The Holy Defense* stories by the novice Islamic writers of the time that drew an almost negligible critical (incredibly professional) response at the beginning of the 1980s, Mahmud's

novel elicited a significant, albeit primarily negative critical response. In this dissertation, I will endeavor to demonstrate how the critical responses to *The Scorched Earth* have changed in recent decades. This is a change from an out-and-out condemnation on political and ideological as well as technical grounds to an out-and-out approval deeming the work as a prism portraying the true essence and spirit of the reality of the Iran-Iraq War.

My plan in this chapter is to make analyses and comparisons. It contrasts *The Headless Palms* (1983) by Qāsem'ali Farāsat and *Winter of 84* (1984) by Esmail Fasih as the Iran-Iraq War novels I have chosen for this chapter. As in the previous chapter, the reader's perspective is the lynchpin to all critical analyses. This perspective could be either a single reader's perception of the novel (e.g., my close reading of the novel by Farāsat) or a critical commentary on either of the novels by a literary critic).

In this chapter, I offer a concise history of the reception of Farāsat's novel. As in the novels I analyzed in the previous chapter, I will anchor my analysis in the work's critical reception, considering whether they have undergone any changes over time. Then, I embark upon a close reading of the same novel, considering it as an autonomous entity. Furthermore, in my analysis and close reading of *The Headless Palms*, I draw upon ideology. I contend that, in so far as *The Headless Palms,* as well as each one of the critical commentaries written on it fall in the category of the *Holy Defense*, it is possible to establish correspondences between them and Althusser's notions of ideology in general and ideology in particular.

Additionally, the novel's internal logic may count as the governing principle determining whether and to what extent the work is a realistic one. In this novel, the Islamic and ideological characteristics are the dominant components of the novel that affect how its various other components connect, rendering a shift in the internal logic of the work. Finally, I venture to

prove that due to its prescriptive and inflexible nature, the critical perception of the novel does not readily change through time or because of it. *Winter of 84*, conversely, does not fall in the category of Holy Defense even though it tackles the Iran-Iraq War. I will also juxtapose *The Headless Palms* and *Winter of 84* as the two novels interact and overlap in the reader's perspective in what one may consider a second stage in the development of war novels. It is also possible to see how, from the reader's perspective, each novel merges with the related critical commentaries. Subsequently, one can investigate how the overlaps and fusions of each novel with the related critical commentaries transform against the larger backdrop of time in *Winter of 84*. Moreover, it is also possible to investigate how, to a greater extent, it fails to change as much due to the ideological sediments that constitute the label *the Holy Defense* as many critics use to describe Farāsat's novel.

In the third chapter, I will focus on *Shatranj Bā Māchin-e Qy*ā*mat* [*Chess with the Doomsday Machine: A Novel*] (2005) by Habib Ahmadzādeh and Hosein Mortezāiān Ābkenār's *Aqhrab Ru-ye Peleh*ā*-ye R*ā*h*ā*han-e Andimeshk Y*ā *Az In Qat*ā*r Khun Michekeh, Qorb*ā*n!* [*The Scorpion on the Platform of Andimeshk Railroad or Blood's Dripping from This Train, Sir!]* (2006). What comes as the lynchpin between the two novels is their playfulness in dealing with what in other novels of the Iran-Iraq War considered as sacred. What distinguishes the two novels is that Ahmadzādeh's work achieves the aforementioned by confronting the protagonist with bizarre people and darkly humorous situations, which help challenge traditionally established concepts. To that end, he deliberately juxtaposes antithetical people, places, and situations as the plot unravels. In the end, the lack of organic, structural relations makes it possible for the narrative to return to the preexisting Islamic and ideological values endorsed by the regime in Iran, of course, with a mystical and humorous twist that act

similar to a new skin or camouflage. Ābkenār's novel, however, is technically more complex. Throughout the story, one can see an indefinite interplay of binary oppositions rendering a firm belief in any long-established ideology out of the question. The two novels analyzed in this chapter are the final part of a chain that started in 1981 by *The Scorched Earth.* One observes significant developments between the novels and the related critical commentaries penned at the beginning and at the end of this period (i.e., 1981-2006). This divulges that not only have there are shifts throughout time, but these said shifts have transpired because of time. Taking all into account, I believe the reader will be able to move past contradictory epistemological approaches to the reality of the Iran-Iraq War, in particular and in general. It is also possible to argue that, unlike the novels such as *The Scorched Earth*, which are report-like narratives without any symbolic dimensions, the two novels I discuss in this chapter are not chronicles. They are not even symbolic in a way one can find symbolism in many other literary works.

The theoretical underpinnings I have employed here is similar to the ones I used in the previous two chapters; that is, one uses their perception and those of literary critics whose stances I have mentioned here. I will start the chapter with a recuperative account of the critical perceptions of *Chess with the Doomsday Machine: A Novel by* Habib Ahmadzādeh. I will demonstrate how the critical perception of the work has gone through a trajectory not only through but because of time. It is also possible to demonstrate that this novel,
compared to those discussed in the previous chapters, is more structurally and verbally complex and multilayered. Additionally, the text has the capacity to partially extricate itself from the hegemony of ideological thinking, as manifested in *The Holy Defense* doctrine. Hand in hand with the novel's complexity, it is possible to discern an increasing pattern of employment of critical concepts and theoretical richness in the critical essays written about the novel.

The Iran-Iraq war and contemporary Persian Literature: A Review of the Related Literature

Throughout the world, war literature is as old as literature itself. War was a dominant theme in three ancient cultures: the Greeks, the Romans, and the Hebrews. Over the course of centuries, the literary works in those languages contend that war has been a constant reality in literature as love, death, and human weaknesses and has consistently raised critical debates. In the contemporary era, there has been substantial scholarship on the wars fought in the 20th and 21st centuries (Callloway). One can define *War Novel* as one that portrays human life and condition in wartime when people's ideals and perspectives undergo drastic shifts. This type of novel came into existence during the Second World War. In Iran, war literature (including war novel) starts with the Iran-Iraq War. The Islamic regime in Iran and the writers who endorse its ideological and cultural agenda have called the literary works they have written on the war *The Holy Defense Literature*. This is an array of literary works in Persian that promote, *inter alia*, ideals such as martyrdom and seeking martyrdom. The Islamic government usually published, distributed, and promoted these works (Shahnehpur 2). The Holy Defense, as the Islamic regime in Iran perceives and promulgates it had its theological dimension enmeshed with its political dimension (conversely, the Iraqi regime was a secular one furthering an ultra-nationalist, pan-Arab agenda. Whether or how the Iraqi regime's agenda affected its literature falls outside the domain of this dissertation). However, other Iranian writers have written literary works (including novels) portraying the war differently. As I pointed out earlier, the first Persian novels dealing with the war came out in 1981. By 1991, some 1600 short stories in journals and short story collections and 46 novels dealing with the same subject had come out. Hardly any Iranian writer remained

indifferent to the war and its consequences (Mir'ābedini 889). Alirezā Shuhāni believes these novels and short stories contain three views or perspectives on the war: 1- Pros 2- Cons 3- Neutral/ Third Look.

The first group are mainly young writers who started their careers after the 1979 revolution. They primarily aim at boosting the morale of and encouraging the Iranian armed forces, paying homage to defenders of the country, and safeguarding religious and revolutionary values. *Nakhlha-ye Bisar* [*The Headless Palms]* (1983) by Qāsem'ali Farāsat is a case in point. Cons, however, are the writers who oppose the war. They are usually experienced and old writers who started their careers (way) before the war. The setting of their novels is usually not the fronts; instead, they mostly portray urban life during the war. *Zemestan-e 62* [*The Winter of 84]* (1987) by Esma'il Fasih is an example. Finally, a relatively small group of writers wrote in the 1980s who just reported the war without taking sides. *Zamin-e Sukhteh* [*The Scorched Earth*] (1999) by Ahmad Mahmud and Bāgh-e *Bolur* [*The Garden of Crystal*] (1998) by Mohsen Makhmalbāf are outstanding examples of this category.

The common denominator between the first group is under the influence of 'Ashura/Shiite culture (e.g., Farāsat 's novel). Lack of artistic development also renders the novels like reports. There is also a lack of suspense and conflict, repetitive models and examples, confusion, and commotion arising from the 1979 revolution. Another trait is invisible, divine aids (Shuhāni 154). Hasan Mir'ābedini, however, defines a much narrower field as war literature. In fact, the area he focuses on is the same as Shuhāni's first category: In the 1980s, the writers of war novels used to send reports from the fronts or, towards the end of the same decade, used to remember war experiences or how their comrades-in-arm lost their lives. They turned the war experience into the theme of their stories. In the 1990s, when the war ended, however, a large

portion of this type of literature is dedicated to the return of fighters and soldiers from the fronts. However, these injured people, who carry injuries on their bodies that reflect their traumas, face a world different from what they used to imagine. They flee to an inner world, hide their faces from everybody, go through an inner crisis, and end up being unsure of themselves. When they meet the principled" hero of the story, however, they find their true selves and do not hide their faces anymore. Moreover, they make others come to terms with their wounds (Mir'ābedini 1281).

Ahmad Mahmud's *The Scorched Earth* is an example of what (Mir'ābedini thinks of the 1980s war novel, even though the setting is not exactly the war fronts; rather, it is the war zone (i.e., Ahvaz city). In this novel, the narrator witnesses how the fighters and ordinary people die under the Iraqi forces' bombardments and shelling. Moreover, (Mir'ābedini considers *Golāb Khānom* (1995) by Qāsem'ali Farāsat as an instance of the 1990s war novel. In this work, an Iranian Basiji fighter, Musā, does not show up at his wedding party. He has not returned from the combat zone. His father named Mirzā, heads for the war zone to find his son. Iranian forces are preparing themselves to embark on an offensive. Mirzā makes acquaintance with a Basiji fighter who is also a painter. This new friend helps Mirzā to feel the fighters' inner passion. He ends up joining Iranian forces in the battle. On the other hand, disfigured by a bullet, Musa does not reveal who he is to his family. However, after meeting a blind war veteran named Karim overcomes his fears and hesitations, embraces himself as he is, and returns to his family (1283).

Mir'ābedini also contends that there are two motifs in war stories. The first one is confrontation, that is, a confrontation between believing and hesitant soldiers, which results in a dramatic conflict. The same conflict attracts the readers' attention to pursuing the story. In most

of these stories, however, it is already clear how the contradictions between characters are resolved. This is because they are not free to choose; instead, it is the writer who, considering his ideological aims, has chosen for them (Mir'abedini 1282). In these stories, it is always the pro-regime or so-called "Hezbollahi" part of the discussion or conflict that gets the upper hand. It is s/he who manages to convince or, more importantly, serve as a role model for the non-believing opponent. This person's voice is the voice of the author. There is no orchestration of various voices, that is, polyphony. The second motif is called relearning, in which the individuals who represent a particular type go through psychological changes moving from lack of awareness to awareness and from passivity to activity (e.g., *Golāb Khānum*) (Mir'ābedini 1282). Both patterns seem to be at the service of the story's prevailing Islamic outlook. Mir'ābedini's account of these two motifs does not touch upon or recognize the other categories of war literature, assuming every pattern is out there to strengthen ideological thinking. It seems that Mir'ābedini has equated "Persian war novel" with a Holy Defense novel" whereas the latter merely signifies the ideologized and Islamic regime's sanctioned version of war literature:

Religious thought enjoys a unique status in the [Persian] war literature, so much so that the motive behind the actions and thoughts of characters are not their current life incidents. However, it is religious and mystic beliefs that provide them with motives. In most cases, "war is nothing but performing religious duties." Hence, the writers try to establish firm and organic connections between the war incidents with those of Karbala. A war-literature writer uses art's influential power for propaganda and didactic purposes; as a result, s/he pursues a particular narrative tradition. They write stories in which characters' actions aim at justifying the writers' ideals. This renders them types devoid of individualism and puppets under the control of the writer. Writing based on the patterns that form the literary system of war stories homogenizes

those works so much that reading another story of the same genre would not lead to grasping a new dimension of the war or the characters' consciousness.

There is another trend in the war stories, which pays more attention to literary techniques without specifying them. This, sometimes, happens at the expense of the lived experience, which might not even be there sufficiently (Mir'ābedini 1293). He probably means that the said technically rich stories might be written by those who have yet to experience the Iran-Iraq war sufficiently. On the other hand, he does not elaborate what he means by technique, whether it is the handheld camera, the Olympian view, or anything else. In contrast to Mir'ābedini, I argue that literary technique does not necessarily go against lived experience if by the latter, one would mean the reality of a literary work. On the contrary, employing literary techniques and moving beyond the conventional ways of representation of reality may provide the writer with broader and more innovative ways of representing reality, even if that means going beyond the fuzzy and ever-changing borders and conventions of realism as a literary school or style the more writers with the tendency to stay away from cliches and ideological norms dominate the literary production scene.

Mir'abedini also believes that "many war writers try to offer testimonies on a particular subject. They report the general characteristics of the time. That is, they do not care much about creating a personal narrative. Hence, one can consider them as writers of chronicle who care less about formal [and technical] innovations" (1302). Those works fail to offer an objective and neutral view of life, which is why one can rarely find an exciting novel among them; a claim that I find true in connection with the writers of the *Holy Defense* novels, in other words, those who fall in Shuhāni's first category. The point is that Mir'ābedini denies the existence of the writers who fall into Shuhāni's second and third categories. Not that Mir'ābedini thinks that Iranian

heterodox writers do not exist. It is just that he does not believe they have produced literature about the war: "On the other hand, heterodox intellectuals' [that is, intellectuals who do ally themselves with the regime] lack of participation in war moved it out of the Iranian intelligentsia's spotlight and *this is still being the case* [emphasis added]. War and war literature are still the monopoly of Islamist…Professional writers have deal with the war from the viewpoint of its disastrous results for the country (1302)."As my analysis of works by, amongst others, Hosein Mortezāiān Ābkenār and Habib Ahmadzādeh, will demonstrate, writers who do not support the regime (in a sense intended by Mir'ābedini above, that is, writers who do not ally themselves with the regime and its political and ideological guidelines, write about the Iran-Iraq war ignoring the guidelines in questions (i.e., a series of red lines as well as recommendations issued by the Ministry of Culture & Islamic Guidance, the Organization For Islamic Propaganda, and a number of other institutions within or affiliated with the regime). Through indefinite interplays between a series of binary oppositions, Hosein Mortezāiān Ābkenār's Aqrab *Ruye Pelleh-hāye Rāhāhan-e Andimeshk Yā Az In Qatār Khun Michekeh, Qourbān!* [*The Scorpion on the Platform of Andimeshk Railroad or Blood's Dripping from This Train, Sir!]* (2012) invites the reader to cast doubt on the realities of war with which everybody has become accustomed. He does this through various techniques circular structure/vicious cycle, that is, through juxtaposing apparently disconnected chapters (i.e., having different viewpoints), the writer goes against reducing the plurality of spaces to a single geometric (i.e., linear) space. There is also an indefinite interplay between a series of binary oppositions.

Conversely, some writers adhere to the idea of the producing works that hover between novel and memoir. There are some works, such as *The Scorched Earth* by Ahmad Mahmud in which the narrator acts like a camcorder. Although this novel, at times, demonstrates allegiances

with those who represent the regime, for example, when he offers laudatory remarks about Razmandegān-e Islām (Fighters for the Path of Islam meaning Iranian armed forces), he does so as a matter of reporting, not as a form of allegiance to the regime. Like Shuhāni and Mir'ābedini, Rouqayeh Vahāby-e Daryvākenāri believes that the Persian war literature started in 1980, that is, at the inception of the Iran-Iraq war. Vahāby-e Daryākenāri, however, outlines yet another categorization for war literature/novels: here are the writers who started their careers around 1979 revolution had written those books. That is, before 1979, they either had not begun writing in earnest or if they were published, they did not have any claim to fame. They commenced their writing career under conditions conducive to writing about revolution, war, and Islamic resistance, primarily through the nascent Islamic regime promulgated ideological framework. When the war started, they created realist works dealing with the war. In their novels, the message and content are of primary significance. These works boosted the morale of Iranian fighters [i.e., soldiers, IRGC members, and Basij paramilitary]; therefore, they were there for propaganda purposes. These writers deal more with the message and content than the artistic and technical sides. Here is one possible question: is technical change necessary to convey a critique of the status quo? While I do not refute such a possibility in principle, I emphasize that those technically superior writers were the ones active years, even decades before the revolution, so they had enough time to learn and practice. Besides, they were not impervious to the influx of new literary techniques and currents. This second group is the more established and older writers with no first-hand experience of and exposure to the war. It seems that Vahāby-e Daryākenāri considers realism as a straightforward, memoir-like, and photographic rendering of the war events that are there to give readers a straightforward and clear message. There seems to be another instance that may defy Vahāby-e Daryākenāri's dichotomy: Ābkenār's and

Ahmadzādeh's novels (to be elaborated and analyzed in this dissertation) deal strictly with the war fronts. Considering the age and the era in which they started writing their works, it is possible to conclude that they are among the writers formed within and by the war. Their works, however, are not propaganda for the regime or boosting the armed forces' morale. On the contrary, they attach great importance to story writing techniques, which makes their novels stand in sharp contrast with the plain and chronicle-like stories.

Gholāmrezā Piruz highlights the significance of the holy defense novel in Persian literature as Some of the committed writers of the holy defense have adopted a realist approach and offered an objective picture of the Iran-Iraq war creating straightforward works that are devoid of complexities. Studies surmise that a majority of the relist writers writing about the Holy Defense have included elements in their works such as objective characterizations, linear storyline, single point of view (first or third person), a plot based on causation, a real and clear time and space so that their works would have as verisimilitude and plausibility as possible (57).

This suggests a simple understanding of realism and that art is the only medium that is able to record and immortalize the truth of war and further that the novel is best suited and enjoys the highest potential to perform the above task (58). Moreover, they posit that the novels written during the war are mostly realist, i.e., simple and sympathetic accounts of the events in war-time Iran.

Reality and realism in the context of Wars in general and the Iran-Iraq War

Due to its magnitude, one may consider the Iran-Iraq war as a prism through which it is possible to observe different ways writers have opted to record and narrate reality. In other words, each of these novels lays claim to reality in its way. In his essay titled "Tolstoy's Poetic

Realism in *War and Peace"* (2009), E. B. Greenwood claims that "Tolstoy's realism is the exact opposite of realism in the vulgar sense of the word in that it rests upon a persistent awareness that it is ontologically impossible to confront the reader with reality" (221). It is possible to say the same about all novels I analyze in this dissertation. In other words, the reality of all wars, in general, and the Iran-Iraq war, in particular, is so grand and horrifying that no writer and no reader can approach it directly. It is impossible to consider any of the six novels an escape from reality. As Qāsem'ali Farāsat writes in the beginning of his novel *Headless Palms*, "This writing [novel] is a 'truth' in search of 'reality.'" This presumably means there is no single version of reality, especially regarding realities such as war. No single novel would offer a panoramic view of reality. I want to underscore war's complexity and [perhaps] fuzziness (Marlowe 109). I can use this to prove that it would be a facile argument to say this novel or that it is (not) a realist as it does (not) reflect the reality of war. Whether realism, in its conventional sense and not in all its shades and dimensions, could do justice to portraying war is up for debate. By conventional, I mean a novel, which is supposed to offer a precise scan of external realities or reduce all conceptual and technical complexities to offer a straightforward reality in allegiance with an ideological commitment. Subsequently, I explain why I have chosen the Persian novels dealing with the Iran-Iraq war as the context or conduit through which I elaborate on the relationship between reality and realism. The point is valid with many other genres and literary works. So, why the Iran-Iraq war novel? First, this type of novel, or war novel, best demonstrates what E B. Greenwood, in their analysis of *War and Peace* (1869) by Leon Tolstoy describes as "the 'striving' underlying all forms of life and becoming conscious of life only in human life" (225). In other words, a "willing" or "striving" is at the very center of Tolstoy's world, as of Schopenhauer's. Every 'monad' or individual within that world is subject to this "striving."

Tolstoy is concerned with process and growth, not with fixities and definities…. I have said that the "striving" underlying all forms of life and becoming conscious of life only in human life is, according to Pierre and Andrew, incapable of being formulated in the abstract and is shown by Tolstoy as masking itself in the multifarious and particular "interests" which dominate human lives (Greenwood 225 & 227). Hence, it is possible to say that not only does Tolstoy's novel but also the war novel, in general, portray, possibly better than any other genre and vehicle, the striving of the human spirit.

Chapter 1

***The Scorched Earth* and *Sorayyā in a Coma*: The Initial Steps of an Historical Process**

This chapter intends to examine two Persian novels of the Iran-Iraq War, *The Scorched Earth* by Ahmad Mahmud, and *Sorraya in a Coma* by Esmail Fasih, with the second one published at the heels of the first one resonating with it. The reader's perception is the lynchpin to all my critical analyses here. This is a single reader's perception of the novel. That is, I embark upon a close reading of the novel by Mahmud, another by Fasih, or a critical commentary on either. Another single reader's perspective of the novel is a critical commentary on either of the novels by a literary critic. A selected number of the critical essays in question will unearth the changes of the critical perception of the said novels over time. On a bigger scale and as I move from each chapter to the next one, I will demonstrate that the more time has gone by, the more complex and nuanced understandings and critical commentaries on the Persian Iran-Iraq novels have been.

As I said above, one could consider each of the two novels I study in this chapter as having its own place in the reader's perception. I will also specify what I mean by reader and reader's perspective. The proximity of their first editions' dates has been my criterion for juxtaposing the two novels. Hence, the first stage could be studying how the two novels interact or overlap from the reader's perspective. Whereas the common or similar variables between the two novels provide them with the possibility of interactions from the reader's perspective, the tensions between the different or contradictory variables at the same time shape each one of the novels and maintain their independence. On another level, one can observe here in the case of Fasih's work, the same second layer of reality or realities created as the result of the interactions between

The Scorched Earth with critical essays on the same. Then, the reader would perceive a bigger overlap resulting from the interactions between each critical essay with the novel.

Here is the roadmap of what I intend to do in the present chapter: I will start the chapter with an account of the critical perceptions of *The Scorched Earth*. I will demonstrate how the critical perception of the work has changed not only through time but also because of time. I will further elucidate that the critical commentaries in question have become my central theoretical touchstone. This is partly because, apart from their analytical precision, they are well-recorded and cover a succession of historical moments and periods. The following subsection will endeavor to offer a close reading of the novel, considering it an autonomous entity. Furthermore, my explanation and analysis would divulge my nuanced reading of the novels I have selected for this chapter which would then help the reader understand what the critics have missed in each, why the reading is in a particular way, and what you one brig to it. As I move from each chapter to the next one, I will demonstrate that the time has gone by, there are more complex, nuanced understandings. As the reader grows more distant from the Iran-Iraq War, those representations change, considering things that earlier generations missed.

While performing a close reading of the novel, to determine what is realistic, I will focus on whether a particular incident or conversation comports with the internal logic of the novel as an autonomous world. In other words, I will tend to disregard whether the incident or conversation in question tallies with outside sources. This is because my close reading of the text transpires in an incomplete historical moment. If the present moment passes, a new version of the reader or me should turn back and read the text in a historical moment which is past and gone. Hence, a recuperative reading of the text in the present moment seems out of the question. As a result, I tend to confine myself to a reading of the text that deems it as an independent and

autonomous entity. Here, the work's internal logic acts as the benchmark for being either close to or far from reality. This inner logic may alter what the text *prima facie* would mean while the critic examines it within the paratextual perimeter.

The close reading and critical study embrace my understanding of the text as well as an array of critical theories and ideas that may seem relevant. Subsequently, from the reader's perspective, as an autonomous entity, the text of each one of the novels interacts with an array of critical commentaries penned on them. There are two points here: first, the critical commentaries sorted based on their first publication dates tend to demonstrate a shift on their stances and understandings of the novel. All this, then, transforms against the bigger backdrop of the readers' shared and collective experiences and perspectives. So far, I have drawn the roadmap for the first half of the chapter that deals with *The Scorched Earth* by Ahmad Mahmud. The second half tackling *Sorayya in a Coma* by Esmail Fasih mirrors the first one with some qualifications. It is possible to observe overlaps and interconnections not only between the novel and an array of critical commentaries written on them but also between the two novels I have selected for this chapter. This is because as the second one is published at the heels of the first one, and they are thematically very close. Then, I will endeavor to shed light on the fact that in addition to interconnections between the two novels, the reader may perceive that there are interconnections between each novel and an array of critical commentaries penned on it. It is neither an individual text nor its interactions with others that the reader perceives as the reality of the Iran-Iraq War.

Subsequently, in the final part of the present chapter, I will endeavor to demonstrate that all this will come as the beginning part of a much bigger chain, an integrated current of experiences, the study of which I will continue in the following chapters. My overall contention, as I mentioned in the introduction, is to prove that what comes as the result of the said

interactions subsumes and goes above and beyond various, and at times contradictory, epistemological approaches to each one of these novels as well as the critical commentaries written on them.

The first novel that I have intended for this chapter is *The Scorched Earth* by (1981) Ahmad Mahmud. I will offer a very brief introduction of the novel to be followed by the literary critics' responses to the novel and how all this has changed over time as well as what I have found possibly missing in their critical analyses of Mahmud's story. Subsequently, I will give a brief albeit panoramic view of the reception of the Iran-Iraq War literary works. My approach in selecting and sorting the critical views on this novel has been to consider them as parts of a historical trajectory commencing from the earlier 1980s ending in 2012. This historical trajectory, additionally, goes through a turning point.

The Scorched Earth contains incidents that transpired in the first year of the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988) in Ahvaz shortly after the Islamic regime came to power. Mahmud's detailed portrayal and recording of a significant incident such as the Iran-Iraq War stems from his presence in and first-hand experience of the war-stricken city of Ahvaz, very close to the battlefield (Barāhani 145). The mayhem he experienced and depicted in the first months of the war was incomparable with any other period of the same war (Golestān 157) and presumably with any other postrevolutionary period in Iran. This work is generally famous for being the first Persian novel of the Iran-Iraq War.

It will be prudent to focus on the literary critics' responses to the novel and how all this has changed over time. That is, I will lay the stress on the critics' responses only, responses which are documented and verifiable. A fact that presumably sheds light upon the reception of the Iran-Iraq War literary works is that many war stories penned between 1980-1988 are the

creations of amateur writers. These writers had a first-hand experience of the war, especially what transpired on the fronts. Mostly devoid of literary and artistic merits, the works in question could serve as raw materials as well as sources of inspiration for the more professional and skillful writers who might choose the same subject after the termination of the war. To that end, The Bureau for the Perseveration of Art & Literature of Resistance (with resistance being an equivalent for The Holy Defense) was established in 1988 (Mir'ābedini 909-910). The conclusion one can draw here is that the literary (i.e., both creative and critical) responses to the Iran-Iraq War were negligible at the beginning of the War but then, increased over time. Some scholars regard The War of Cities stories as a subcategory of the Iran-Iraq War Literature (Mir'ābedini 910), which started after the Iraqi forces bombarded Iranian cities. However, *The Scorched Earth* which, certainly falls in the category of War of Cities, came out in 1981. That is, at the onset of the war and surely prior to the commencement of the War of Cities the stories of which mostly deal with the effects of war on the cities that were far from the fronts and not a city such as Ahvaz, the setting of Mahmud's novel. Upon its first edition, *The Scorched Earth* enjoyed a considerable critical response. As for what literary critics wrote upon and after the first edition of the novel, one should distinguish between critical response and critical approval. Unlike The Holy Defense stories by the novice Islamic writers of the time that drew an almost negligible critical (especially professional) response at the beginning of the 1980s, Mahmud's novel elicited a significant albeit primarily negative critical response. In this dissertation, I will endeavor to demonstrate how the critical responses to *The Scorched Earth* have changed in recent decades. This is a change from an out-and-out condemnation on political and ideological as well as technical grounds to an out-and-out approval deeming the work as a prism portraying the true essence and spirit of the reality of the Iran-Iraq War.

Literary critics have appraised Mahmud's works, including *The Scorched Earth*, from a wide variety of angles. My approach in selecting and sorting the critical views on this novel has been to consider them as parts of a historical trajectory commencing from the earlier 1980s through 2012. In other words, I have advanced a chronological arrangement of the critical essays on Mahmud's works that would divulge how the perception of his works has changed not only over time but also because of time. In 1981, the first edition of *The Scorched Earth* elicited a plethora of mainly negative critical responses (Golestān 195), the most outstanding of which were those of Reza Barāhani and Hushang Golshiri. These two took a somewhat similar stance on Mahmud's trilogy (*The Neighbors*, *The Tale of a City*, and *The Scorched Earth*), especially the latter. Both critics purport that due to the alleged Marxist and Socialist-Realist approach the novel has adopted in portraying the incidents as well as Mahmud's allegiance with the Tudeh Communist Party, the work has failed to portray the realities of Iran at the time, especially those of the Iran-Iraq War.

Here is my critique of both critiques: Interestingly, Barāhani uses the terms and ideas salient to Marxist literary criticism. That is, the ones by Friedrich Engels's letters in *Marxists on Literature* (1975) by David Craig in as well as some of Georg Lukács's ideas in *Writers and Critics* (1978)). In comport with Golshiri's critical stance, Barāhani implies that Mahmud should have done a better job of writing a socialist-realist novel instead of what appears to be the case at first, that is, criticizing Mahmud for having an ideological filter that impedes him to create a thorough realist work.

In his critique of *The Scorched Earth*, Barāhani contends that great historical incidents not only create new literary forms [genres?], but also shed a new light on the previous ones. As a result, the said incidents not only either destroy or create the literary forms but also develop

them. He stipulates that novel as a literary genre and its historical development as a case in point. Barāhani also entertains that this literary genre does not have deep roots in Persian literature. Nevertheless, incidents such as the 1979 revolution in Iran and the Iran-Iraq War have assisted the Persian novel to develop. On the other hand, he posits that it is a tremendous advantage for Ahmad Mahmud to live near the war zone, as this is very important for writing a realist work even though it is not an absolute precondition. More importantly, Barāhani holds that since each new historical experience *either develop* the past methods or creates new ones, it, *ipso facto*, demands great courage to write a realist story. He holds that when *realism i*n its conventional sense is outdated, writing a realist story could demand as much courage as trying new forms and subjects. Barāhani then quotes Friedrich Engels and Georg Lukács.

The passage by Engels contends that in writing socialist novels the faithful depiction of social relations is of paramount importance (152-3). Additionally, according to Barāhani, realism encompasses a truthful portrayal of typical characters in typical situations. While a writer focuses on depicting social relations, nobody or nothing can impose any artistic or literary commitments on them from without. Lukács entertains that a type is a person who reflects the most important social, moral, and psychological contradictions of age (153). Based on all this, Barāhani claims that Mahmud failed to represent Iran's realities at the time of the Iran-Iraq war, especially the incidents happening in Khuzestan. It is as though the novel was written based on a Tudeh Communist Party's agenda, forgetting about external realities like the dominant religious nature of the revolution, war, and Islamic regime. The point with Barāhani's critical approach is that his definitions of novel, realism, and realist novel stem from Marxist thinkers such as Engels and Lukacs. Drawing upon these thinkers' ideas and writings, Barāhani criticizes *The Scorched Earth,* claiming that this work has failed to portray the reality of war due to his ideological filter.

He also purports that in writing a literary work, the writer may strive to achieve innovation in content and form. Mahmud has pioneered writing about a new and vital subject by merely paying attention to a turning point in Iranian history. It remains to be seen, however, if the creator of *The Scorched Earth* manages to obtain a level of technicality on par with the novelty of the subject. In the end, Barāhani holds that *The Scorched Earth* leaves a lot to be desired as it fails to achieve both ends.

As I mentioned earlier, Barāhani condemns Mahmud's novel considering it not realistic enough due to its ideological commitments and filter. Yet, to prove that the essay employs Marxist ideas and concepts. For example, Barāhani contends that, in the novel, Mohammad, the Mechanic, who represents the progressive working class (159-160), encourages the mourning people in the cemetery to join the Iranian forces deployed on the battlefields. Meanwhile, he stays in Ahvaz and dies under bombardment in his home. Barāhani further underscores the fact that Mahmud could have decided for Mohammad, the Mechanic, where to die. Instead of dying on a battlefield, a factory, or a prison, he dies at home, when he is asleep. Barāhani then quotes Mahmoud as saying, "In my view, realism means a faithful portrayal of typical characters in typical situations" (160). Suppose a representative of the progressive working class dies in his house under bombardment while asleep; this will undercut the said definition of realism as "a faithful portrayal of typical relations" (160). This is because, as an enlightened and revolutionary working-class member, Mohammad, the Mechanic is to be in the frontline fighting Iraqi forces, even losing his life there only if the narrative proceeds as per Mahmud's definition of realism. Barāhani, however, postulates another definition for realism that counters that of Mahmud. This is Georg Lukacs's idea of realism which also obviously falls in the category of Marxist criticism. Barāhani draws upon Lukacs's dynamic unity whereby life in a society involved with class

struggle is one of an unrhythmic hfbistorical growth. This unity is alive and paradoxical as it is unrhythmic. Barāhani, then, quotes Lukacs as saying that a type is a person who reflects the most important social, moral, and psychological conflicts and contradictions of age (161).

Thus far, I have gestured toward demonstrating that Barāhani draws upon the same theoretical and ideological frameworks as Mahmud. Therefore, it is as if he implicitly accuses Mahmud of not being a strict socialist realist in writing the novel. Now, in harmony with Barāhani's critique, Hushang Golshiri traces the development of Mahmud's writing through the three novels and analyzes different aspects of his writings. He then claims that Mahmud's allegiance with the Tudeh Communist party has made him alter the realities in his novels, especially *The Scorched Earth*. In the latter, the writer has turned a blind eye to the Islamic character of the war with Iraq, giving a Marxist and Communist hue to what people say (slogans, talks, and poems) and do (the way they organize themselves as well as their political orientations and background). Golshiri also purports that the same socialist realist stance has made Mahmud create flat, generic, and predictable characters that, especially in the case of *The Scorched Earth*, do not match historical reality (67).

Distinctly different from Barāhani's and Golshiri's stances are Javad Omid's, and Parviz Hoseini's essays. The common denominator between the latter (1992) and the former (1994) is that both believe the novel has represented the realities of the time, especially the Iran-Iraq War. More importantly, the essays' stance is somewhat the organic result of their partial success in structural analyses, close readings of the novel, and relative abstaining from the ideological and value systems outside the text. Omid's essay focuses on *The Scorched Earth* considering it together with *The Neighbors* and *The Scorched Earth* as a trilogy which, he deems as the acme of Persian social-political novel. Omid regards Khāled as the heart of the novel through whom

the reader experiences both external and internal spaces and incidents. He holds that Khāled's thoughts, emotions, and experiences faithfully reflect the realities of Iranian society, even though he criticizes Mahmud for rendering an overly dark version of the outer world. Omid entertains that Mahmud should have emphasized more over people's revolutionary idealism than their pain and misery. On the other hand, it is interesting that for Hoseini who read *The Scorched Earth* upon publication but wrote the essay almost twelve years later (i.e., after the war came to an end, and Iranians had time to digest what came to pass) most of the problems the critics [presumably, he implies Barāhani and Golshiri] raised concerning *The Scorched Earth* seem beside the point (113). He evaluates the novel as a faithful, necessary, and successful account of what happened in the Iran-Iraq war. While one can observe adept structural analyses in both Omid's and Hoseini's essays, something somewhat innovative at that juncture, it is not readily possible to ascertain how the structural analyses in question come as points of departure for their non-textual observations and conclusions. Moreover, it is not abundantly clear that how Hoseini establishes a correspondence between *The Scorched Earth*'s alleged popular success and the fact that, more than a decade after the novel's first edition, he considers most of the previous negative critical comments on the novel as weak-kneed. My contention, to be more precise, is that how could have he deemed his own critical stance as the benchmark for the novel's success in particular period without any recourse to any his contemporary critical reactions? Furthermore, if by success, he means widespread approval, he has not managed to back his claim up drawing upon mechanisms that are there to demonstrate a literary work's popular success or lack thereof.

Drawing upon a source other than those of Baāhani, Golshiri, Omid, and Hoseini, Abdul'ali Dastgheyb contends that it is almost three decades after the first edition of the book that critics commence meditating how the collective memory of Iranians as a prism through which they can

see the Iran-Iraq war as it transpired has recorded the literary work. He also analyzes *The Scorched Earth,* published in 2009*,* as a case in point. In his critical commentary, Dastgheyb entertains that Mahmud's work is more a quasi-novel (i.e., a mélange of story and reportage) because the war continued long after the publication of the novel's first edition. As a result, Mahmud did not have a deep insight into what transpired, and, at the time of the novel's publication, Iranians' collective memory needed some time for incidents of this kind to sink in (146). As mentioned earlier, this is just the beginning of the critics focusing on how the novel will go down in the collective memory of Iranians without them having any certainty regarding the outcome of this historical process. The said incidents, however, were quite tangible for critics like Hoseini and Omid, who wrote almost a decade after.

Dastgheyb also entertains that for a writer to write a war novel, they are to wait until after the end of war so that its upshot will be clear, and they gain access to all relevant facts and documents. Then, remembering all those facts and reports and thinking deeply about them, the writer could decide which incidents to keep and which to discard, finally creating either a tragedy or an epic.

He also contends that there is one question that both novelists and philosophers tend to answer after the termination of each war. That is the philosophical reasons and essential grounds for the outbreak the same.

> Heraclitus held that the world is the arena for the battle between the opposites. He then added that Homer prayed to gods for the end of all wars, not knowing that this would mean the end of the world. This philosopher held that humans reside in an ever-changing world where opposite forces are at war. These opposite forces generate incidents one can talk about (149).

Dastgheyb then concludes that Mahmud's premature writing about the Iran-Iraq War robbed him of the opportunity to ponder the above questions. In other words, this prematurity made him remain on the surface, failing to find the *raison d'être* behind the incidents.

He also criticizes Mahmud's novel for neglecting the Islamic and ideological characteristics of the War that enabled Iranians to fight off the Iraqi aggression without adequate resources and weaponry (156). This presumably means that for Dastgheyb the novel is not an autonomous entity having its view of the world; instead, it is there to reflect and portray the reality as perceived by outside sources.

The critical essays and stances on *The Scorched Earth* in the twenty-first century may oppose the critical responses to the same novel at the beginning of the 1980s and 1990s. What comes as the lynchpin among the majority of the critical investigations in question is the reader's (that is, the literary critic's) perception or approval (that is, widespread approval which occasionally manifests itself in the form of literary awards), especially as some time as perceived by outside sources.

In 2015, Sa'eed Rezāie and Maryam Seyedān underscored the literary awards Ahmad Mahmud received for his career, including *The Scorched Earth.* They consider those awards a sign of how well Iranian intelligentsia and literary critics received the story attributing his success to the realist portrayal of the Iran-Iraq War. These two critics contend that the novel's successful realist depiction of the war has been possible due to Mahmud's craftsmanship and his skillful employment of literary techniques. Amongst those techniques are "Following a linear timeline," employing "a simple narration style akin to journalistic reporting," "the presence of an unknown narrator who intervenes in the events is also a unique technique used by Mahmud in many of his works," and "his cinematic interest" (Rezāie & Seyedān). An example of the latter

could be recording the incidents through a handy wandering cam little intervention or interpretation) (Golestān 81). Moreover, Iranian literary critic and translator Lili Golestān, explains the changes in her perception of the work upon publication (i.e., the first edition in 1981) and twelve years later at the time of her interview with Ahmad Mahmud (157). She contends that her second reading has impressed her more than the first one. Mahmud himself entertained that his novel is a realist one based on the events of the time, but it is not a diary; it is a story. He further believes that the more time passes, the more its report-like characteristics will decrease (Golestān 165). In harmony with my comments on Hoseini's and Omid's analyses of Mahmud's work, it is possible to criticize the rest of the above critical stances since they have hardly unveiled any methodological and theoretical underpinning for the terms and concepts they employ. What further vitiates these critical appraisals is that they fail to offer detailed statistics and facts, such as the conditions and "dynamics of production and circulation of literary works in Iran, revealing the forms, structures, and functions of Iranian literature within Iranian society" (Nanquette 4). It is merely within these perimeters and the statistical universe and only relying upon a meticulous methodology and field (Nanquette 8-10) that details such as the number of copies in each edition or literary awards could gain full significance, counting as a touchstone. This would be a touchstone evincing the degree of readers' perception reliably as well as how the perception in question went down in their collective memory. More importantly, as I previously argued, these essays usually start with an attempt at structural analysis. This attempt somehow leads to an account of the successful and popular perception of the novel. Just how the above transition has transpired calls for much more meticulous elaboration.

The account of critical stances on Mahmud's works precedes my close reading of the novel, in which I deem the novel as a large framework containing several minuscule realities

juxtaposed next to one another. This close reading and critical study tend to embrace my understanding of the text and an array of critical theories and ideas that may seem relevant. Here, I tend to advance a reading that hinges upon considering the novel's text as an autonomous world. My explanation and analysis, in other words, would divulge my nuanced reading of the book, which would then help the reader understand what the critics have missed in each, why the reading is in a particular way and what you bring to it. Finally, I contend that my close reading comprises two parts: a part that deals with characters, incidents, and how they propel the plot forward. Another factor, mostly borrowed from Gholāmrezā Piruz and Sarvenāz Malek, closely focuses on the text's stylistic dissecting its linguistic and textual components. These stylistic features are composed of two subcategories, that is, linguistic features as well as literary characteristics.

The Scorched Earth contains incidents that transpired in the first year of the Iran-Iraq war that continued for eight years. This is the first Persian novel of the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) published in Iran. The narrator's close-up-like cum slow motion-like description of his mother's house (his father is already dead) gives an accurate inventory of everybody and everything that makes his mother's house a home: a tiny garden with sparrows, fish swimming in a small water fountain, flowers, which his sister Minā is watering, and his brother Sāber drinking tea. It is a lazy afternoon toward the end of the summer of 1980. The narrator, who remains nameless for reasons I will investigate later, has awakened from a long afternoon nap and is lethargically drinking tea while watching and recording the area around him through his eyes. I say recording because he does not interact with what happens around him. He lacks agency, retains a disengaged observational position, and remains a passive observer of his surroundings, as understood within the following passage:

Farther, some young men are standing next to the sidewalk talking to one another. I walk past them hearing their words in dribs and drabs.

> Iraq will be damned if…
>
> This is just a slogan…an empty talk.
>
> This is not a slogan!
>
> Whenever they'd attack, then…

Lighting a cigarette is my excuse to stop and continue listening to what they say.

> We would have to beat it when they attack, not handing Khuzestan over to them.
>
> How pessimistic you are!
>
> This is not pessimism. The guys who have come from Bostan say that they have even seen their tanks.

I start strolling so I can hear them as long as I am not far away.

> There is nothing they can do!
>
> If we are prepared, of course, but do you see any sign of preparations?

I leave them. It is dark now. There is nobody in the barbershop now (9-10).

The narrator's desire to eavesdrop on the conversation, introduces a sense of detachment while he remains an interested observer.

The news of the outbreak of the Iraqi forces' aggression disrupts he home of its serenity. One of the narrator's brothers, Shāhed, delivers the word of the border skirmishes. Like the narrator's descriptions of his surroundings, his conversations with the family members are concrete and detail-oriented, at least at this stage. They exchange information about the movements of Iraqi forces on the Iran-Iraq border as well as the Iranian government's passivity

in dealing with the situation. Aware of the post-revolutionary anarchy prevailing in Iran, the family members are anxious that imminent Iraqi aggression could crush the nascent Islamic revolution. The talks are all in defense of the revolution and the country as if the two are one.

Folding the newspaper and handing it over to Shāhed, Sāber says:

If you think carefully, you will see that now is the best time for Iraqis to start their aggression.

Minā says:

> Right now? What for?
>
> To crush the revolution…to topple the regime. If they [Iraqis] attack, the whole Khuzestan will suffer. Khuzestan is the land of petroleum! (8-9)

The mother does not chime into the conversation but instead starts saying her prayers. She is a traditional and religious mother: her primary functions are to dote on her family, say her prayers, and serve food (9, 54, 55, 56, & 65). The mother's continued focus on her duties imparts a sense of calm and uninterrupted routine, while the conversation among the siblings undercuts the impression of stability. What transpires next reflects the narrator's struggle to calm down and survey the dimensions of Iraqi incursions.

The narrator leaves home to spend a night out with some friends. Instead, he starts wandering in Ahvaz, the capital city of the oil-rich province of Khuzestan, which gives him an opportunity to overhear and record ordinary people's conversations about and their stances on the ongoing tumultuous situation. Seemingly, everybody, at least the people in the narrator's neighborhood, knows him and talks to him in a friendly manner, albeit without mentioning his name, reinscribing as he is, as mentioned before, a nameless person wandering with other

nameless people recording their accounts. His gives an account of people's resistance against the Iraqi's military invasion and those who take advantage of the situation for personal gain. The people of the novel are the real, suffering citizens of Iran shouldering the heavy load of the calamities of the war. *The Scorched Earth* quite successfully displays the emotional attachments amongst the lower strata of society, especially when they are under pressure (Dastgheyb 163). Barāhani, conversely, postulates that one just hears some people having no identity, no individuality, no character, not even a body. They have a voice that utters sentences in a void. The only exception to this may be Shāhed witnessing the death scene of his brother Khāled. This is a significant exception that could have been an excellent example for the whole story. These characters are not organic parts of the story (163-164).

The narrator's manner of narrating the novel is chronological: there is no flashback, flash forward, stream of consciousness, or any other technique to disrupt this. He usually marks the start of each day with a meticulous description of his surroundings, and, by night, something has happened, something the narrator witnesses or overhears, such as the following two examples

The first example: Blue- and white-collar workers canvas the area trying to build barricades. Gas is in short supply.

> I don't need more than ten liters!
>
> Each liter for one hundred tomans!
>
> One hundred tomans?! A little bit of fairness could go a long way!
>
> Then go and join the gas line until the cows come home.
>
> You might even get shot! (26-27)

And the second example is a cat burglar stealing a rug from a house, the inhabitants of which have fled the city (79). These two examples are at the opposite ends of a spectrum: one

shows collective effort, which cuts across class divides, and the other is a single person's attempt to take advantage of others' fear and predicament (which has led them to flee). Both, however, are the examples of important events the camcorder-like narrator registers. Moreover, even though the incidents gain momentum, and the situation becomes direr and direr, the narrator still retains his objective and camera-like role, hardly showing any sympathy except for when his brother dies under bombardment. If there are any sentiments, slogans, and poems, they are what the narrator hears on the radio (102-103) or from other people such as a young woman wearing a headscarf (not precisely a female cover prescribed by the regime) who writes an emotional-revolutionary slogan on a wall.

The narrator's disengaged observational position throughout the narrative enables him to witness and record some impressions that others voice: "It has always been us, the poor, who have done things like that [e.g., defending the country and sacrificing lives]. The rich just flee never coming back" (70). This narration mode contributes to the novel's perception as a chronicle of war overpowering its fictionality. Apart from the narrator, who acts like a camcorder, a sheer passive observer who sees and linearly narrates everything, one can divide other people into several significant types. That is, revolutionaries cum fighters, profiteers cum businessmen, and ordinary people who merely want to survive or flee. These classifications, however, do not overlook individual characteristics. The characters remain obscure and featureless but that does not mean they are exactly the same. Furthermore, most people fall into the first and third categories: people who carry the burden of the situation. The only downside of this is that, at times, one can see some degree of stereotyping, especially while describing some professions and crafts: shopkeepers and people in business are overgreedy, not caring about the distressed people's plight. University students, workers, and the only medical doctor in the novel are

sincere, noble, and caring. Good people are not only pleasing but also look good. Bad people are not only bad but also pot-bellied and mean-looking.

The narrative's emphasis on the townspeople's near unanimous support for defending the revolution and conflating it with the defense of the nation betrays the narrator's penchant to valorize the local population and, by extension, the nation's dedication to the objectives of the revolution and the newly founded state that finds *the Scorched Earth* under attack by Iraq. This overarching concern sometimes faces challenges by the same featureless people who complain and deviate from the purported common objective of the revolution and nation. *The Scorched Earth* attempts to contain the reality of war by creating a large frame composed of various miniscule pictures, each containing their own reality (152).

The reality depicted in the novel encompasses the whole city of Ahvaz: "As if the invasion of the Iraqi fighters has rendered people closer. Everybody, without already knowing each other, welcome one another warmly talking about the war excitedly and about defending [the country] and pounding the enemy" (21). One of the factors for the townspeople's uniform response is that they see themselves pitted against the Iraqi leader: "He [Saddam Hussein] had to attack. Our revolution has startled Iraq!

[It] has startled the region!" (21)

In the wake of the above aggression, the rhythm of life in Ahvaz gains momentum. Some people prepare themselves for guerilla warfare, others plan to flee. There is talk of the Iraqi's fifth column and the government's procrastination in defending the city. People start losing their loved ones under bombardments.

The narrator's family, although nameless, appear to be more visible and better delineated. However, the lack of an omniscient narrator somewhat limits what one may wish to understand and know about any given character's private thoughts. Furthermore, the author makes use of symbolic names to create three-dimensional characters, which may or may not be helpful. For example, Khāled (meaning immortal) is the one who attains martyrdom and thus becomes immortal. Shāhed (meaning *inter alia* witness), however, is the one who witnesses Khāled's martyrdom. Additionally, 'Ādel" meaning just is the person who acts as a judge in a kangaroo court issuing death sentences for two thieves. Sometimes, the narrative does not do this very well. For example, the narrator and his brothers speak with each other. One of the brothers named Sāber (meaning patient) introduces his brothers' professions within the same conversation. This looks somewhat implausible: "No brother…We are on the same boat. We are either white- or blue-collar workers. You know that I've been working for twenty years. Shahāb is with the agriculture sector and Shāhed is with the Gas Company" (39). This monologue is presumably there because there is no omniscient narrator who could directly introduce the characters and their professions. In other words, the narrative structure does not allow a direct introduction of this kind. Hence, this is how the novel has to introduce the above characters, which one interprets as an aberration from the inner logic of the novel as it is an unnecessary action. I posit this because, as members of a family, they already know one another's jobs.

Then, the narrator comes to the point that he does not even feel the need to have direct quotes from face faceless people. Instead, he gushes out a trail of sentences on the war as if he is reading a newspaper:

> There is heavy dust hanging in the air. People pour out of their houses. There is a chaos. Everybody is in a hurry…*Rumor has it that* [emphasis added] the authorities have opened

> the dam to Dasht-e Azādegān [Plain] and, as such, the [Iraqi] tanks have stuck. *Rumor has it that* [emphasis added] the [Iranian] 92nd Armored Division is resisting the widespread Iraqi invasion, and, in some places, it has even embarked upon attacks…*Rumor has it that* [emphasis added] the Esfahan Artillery Unit is on the way (50).

One way of perceiving this journalistic style is that as various faces merge, the various monologues and dialogues are mixed into one to form a journalistic piece. As I mentioned earlier, there is diversity within unity concerning the nameless people. That is, different faces become one. Now, one should see whether different voices in different monologues and dialogue become one polyphonic text or if there is just a single voice. More importantly, which one is more in line with the internal logic of the work? This, in turn, helps determine whether this novel is a realist.

Furthermore, regarding the style of the novel, Ānāhid Ojākiāns contends that like Mahmud's previous two novels, that is, *The Neighbors* and *The Tale of a City*, *The Scorched Earth' style* consists of a simple and visual language describing of the incidents and people. The novel's style focuses on the consequences of the war and its impacts on the ordinary people living in Ahvaz within the first three months of the war. A simple language here may be the one devoid of verbal and technical complexities (114).

Gholāmrezā Piruz and Sarvenāz Malek offer a more detailed and technical view of the stylistic features of Mahmud's stories, including *The Scorched Earth*. These stylistic features are composed of two subcategories: linguistic features (including syntax, words, and sounds) and literary characteristics (including the frequency of the words the changes of which can cause a new meaning). The significance of both subcategories is in direct proportion to the frequency of the repetitions of a particular linguistic or literary element. Since the linguistic level is

extensively broad, it is possible to further divide it into three subcategories (i.e., syntactic, word choice, and phonologic) (170). The writers of the essay also quote Rezā Barāhani's classification of the novel's language as centrifugal, in which language is merely a means to transfer meanings and concepts. This is opposite to centripetal, where the inner characteristic of language takes precedence over others. As a result, a specific pattern is imposed from without on the language. The language of poetry is a case in point. Finally, there could be a mixture of the two: a two-way movement between mundane and prosaic language on the one hand, and poetic use of language, on the other.

Piruz and Malek then, hasten to appraise the stylistic features of Mahmud' major novels (*The Scorched Earth* included), concluding that Mahmud has managed to create his style within the broader context of contemporary Persian literature. They contend that Mahmud's distinct style has stemmed from his innovations on three levels (i.e., sentence and discourse texture, word choice, and figures of speech) (183). The high-frequency motifs unique to Khuzestan, the verbal texture of the southern (Khuzestani) dialect, short and straightforward sentences devoid of ambiguity, and vast arrays of similes and metaphors, especially synesthesia, are cases in point.

Earlier, I explained how the narrative portrayed the people of Ahvaz as one entity formed and defined in the face of the Iraqis' aggression. I also mentioned why, according to the novel, the invasion happened. In this novel, there is another crucial force to be reckoned with: the Iranian government, the armed forces, and the post-revolutionary confusion that influences people's lives. This combination of the forces as well as the anarchy is partly because of the Iranian regime's and armed forces' confrontation with the Iraqi forces and also how they deal with Iranians, especially people of Ahvaz. Regarding the former, there are complaints by some people about the armed forces' delayed and weak reaction to the Iraqi aggression (8), even

though there are others who refute these accusations (15). The latter hold that although the regular army was almost disbanded in the aftermath of the 1979 revolution, the volunteer militia forces compensate for their relative weakness (57). Various passages throughout the novel suggest that ordinary people from lower walks of life, including the narrator, complain about the lack of support from the government and fellow citizens living in other cities (88-89). They need the support to fend for their lives and ward off the Iraqi onslaught. This complaint, however, would not proceed to the level of an out-and-out political critique because it is not supposed to.

The novel also depicts how death mobilizes some residents to flee the town and others to join the war effort. There are three crucial deaths in the novel, each playing its part in the furtherance of the plot: the first one is Khāled's death (131-134), who is the narrator's brother. His death mobilizes the family in two different directions. Part of the family becomes more motivated to fight the enemy, and another part, including women and children, decides to leave the city. The second death is that of Bārān (250). He is a young university student who joins Iranian fighters and gets killed on the war front. His death leads to a big funeral in the town's cemetery. There are revolutionary slogans and fiery speeches. This time more people get mobilized to fight the Iraqi forces. The third death transpires at the very end of the novel. The narrator remains more or less self-restrained, if not passive, retaining his camcorder-like position, except when Khāled's body is delivered, he passes out (148). These three essential deaths subsume many other deaths in the novel as the narrator portrays them briefly (138).

This novel is the story of a people and a land becoming one, a people with their heroism, harmless complaints, and fears of the situation. It creates an autonomous world that is not supposed to mirror the outside realities as expected from an established realist writer. This claim to realism stems from his *oeuvre* or, more importantly, the definitions of realism prevalent at the

time, namely, the expectation of positioning *the Scorched Earth* for or against the regime or being pro- or anti-Marxist.

At some point, Mohammad, the Mechanic says something that concerns his arrest because of holding the kangaroo court in which the cat burglars stealing from the houses in the war-stricken Ahvaz receive death sentences. More importantly, it strikes a possible note of how *The Scorched Earth* has become an autonomous work with its internal logic: "-What seems, in a revolution, like anarchy is the very logic of revolution!" (292). Presumably, this draws upon the same logic that dictates how one is supposed to read even the implausible events depicted by the novel. For example, near the morgue in Ahvaz, whence the narrator is supposed to receive the bloody body of Khāled, there are two young women wearing head scarves and bullet cartridge belts with guns in their hands (145). This scene may seem *prima facie* plausible according to the external sources and what one can see in the novel, as women significantly contributed to defending the country. I, however, find this scene implausible within the logic of the narrative as even inside the novel, the dominance of the Islamic regime in Iran and its cultural, social, and political values is quite apparent. The same dominance and associated normative values do not allow women to have an incomplete cover (with *chādor* being the most complete and the most prescribed one). In other words, they are not free to look and act like Latin American guerilla fighters in a war zone filled with male fanatic members of IRGC and Basij militia. If I have paused over this scene, it does not necessarily mean that I have found discrepancies between the novel's world and historical documents. It simply means that incidents of this kind do not concur with the novel's internal logic as an autonomous world. For example, in the wake of the second important death in the novel, the death of Bārān, there are two fiery speeches by Mohammad, the

Mechanic and a young man. The very augmented presence of these two at the center of a funeral and the rhetoric they use merit a careful analysis:

> The crowd has gathered around the coffins. Everybody is looking up at Mohammad, the Mechanic. A cold wind has just started, and the cacophonous rustling of branches and leaves mixes with a vague humming. Somebody fixes a bullhorn under Mohammad, the Mechanic's chin. The corner of his keffiyeh has been disentangled and fallen on his shoulder. Naneh Bārān is staring up at Mohammad, the Mechanic's sweat-stained face. Her eyes look like those of an eagle. It is as if her brow and cheeks are made of bronze. Silence. An ominous murmur. Cold wind. A cacophonous rustling. An explosive detonator has been initiated and…Mohammad, the Mechanic's voice goes off:
>
> "The enemy's efforts are in vain."
>
> "History is the witness."
>
> Mohammad, the Mechanic's voice, gushes out of the bullhorn.
>
> "In every corner of this bereaved land."
>
> "So much pure blood has been shed."
>
> Mohammad, the Mechanic's right-hand goes up. The second knuckle of his pinkie has been cut by a bolt cutter.
>
> "Here is the final trap for Genghis-like people."
>
> "A graveyard for Mongols."
>
> Mohammad, the Mechanic's voice, goes far.

"Let them dig their graves."

"With their own hands."

At times, the sound of cannons mixes with Mohammad, the Mechanic's sonorous voice.

"Let them say their final prayers."

"Upon their graves."

"However."

The roars of anti-aircraft guns are stifled under Mohammad, the Mechanic's soaring voice.

"However."

"We have no fear as our Tahminehs."

"Are impregnated with Sohrābs." (255-256).

While readers tend to assume that Mohammad, the Mechanic is the poem's author, they may discover in a footnote that this is a poem by the contemporary Iranian poet Ahmad Azizi, who was a poet propagating Islamic ideology in his works. This knowledge could signal that the reader should take Mohammad, the Mechanic's self-representation with a grain of salt. In other words, the problem here is that a non-religious revolutionary like Mohammad, the Mechanic recites a poem by a religious poet known to support the Islamic regime. Here is another case of contradiction between what *prima facie* seems plausible and the internal logic of the novel:

> An armed young man of middle stature, wrapped in a bullet cartridge belt, jumps over the pick-up and grabs the microphone from Mohammad, the Mechanic, who stands back. The young man is sweat-stained. His hair is disheveled. His voice soars through the bullhorn:

> “Friends! Brothers! Comrades!”
>
> Everybody turns around. The middle-stature man’s gun goes up and along with that, his voice.
>
> “We will defend our revolution, our country, our honor, and our beliefs to the best of our abilities” (256).

Traditionally, the Muslim clergymen (a.k.a. mullahs) deliver speeches and homilies and perform ceremonies when a Muslim passes away, especially if the funeral is in a graveyard. This used to be the case even before the 1979 revolution. The abrogation of the role of the clergy at a funeral, particularly in the context of a revolution that embraced Islam, introduces a note of incongruity. One can also observe a similar incongruity when, in a kangaroo court, Mohammad, the Mechanic issues the death sentence for the two cat burglars. As a result, he himself lands in jail for a short while and then, starts an intense debate with a representative of the Government (Hāj Eftekhār). Even inside the novel, the hegemony of the Islamic regime and its rhetoric and people is palpable. Therefore, Mohamad the Mechanic’s spontaneous act seems like a gross ignorance of the said dominance. It is not just the question of who Mohammad, the Mechanic is but also what he says in his speech which does not draw upon the dominant Islamic discourse. Instead, he recites a poem making several allusions to the Persian epic masterpiece, The *Shahnameh* (circa 1010 AD). What the young man, who grabs the bullhorn from Mohammad, the Mechanic, says makes the situation even more complex as he addresses the crowd by saying brothers, comrades, and friends! Here, friend is a neutral word. Conversely, both comrades and brothers are politically charged. The former belongs to the Marxist terminology whereas the latter belongs to the Islamist one. The juxtaposition of comrades and brothers may suggest that they are of equal weight regarding their political connotations. However, what one can see in the novel's world

purports otherwise. Even if persons like Mohammad, the Mechanic and the young man who speaks after him get to talk on an occasion of this kind, they must use another language to provoke the crowd and mobilize them to rush toward the fronts as transpires on the same page. So, one can see that what transpires hardly makes sense, even per the novel's internal logic.

As I pointed out earlier, in determining what is realistic in this novel, I have focused on whether a particular incident or conversation comports with the internal logic of the novel as an autonomous world. In other words, at this stage, I disregard whether the incident or conversation in question tallies with outside sources and facts such as historical and political incidents or how historical and political books portray them. I also intend to advance the argument that, being the main benchmark for realism, internal logic trumps both opposing Lukácsian and Brechtian definitions of realism in literature. As I previously mentioned, it is possible to embark upon two different Marxist readings of this novel. That is, what I may *inter alia* call "Soviet" or "orthodox Marxist" reading of realism the examples of which one can find in the writings by Adorno and Benjamin. The opposite side, however, has come to be known as Western Marxism (Stahl) of which outstanding representatives are Georg Lukács and Antonio Gramsci.

Hence, and as I previously pointed out, Barāhani and like-minded critics criticize Mahmud's novel's ideological filter, which has jeopardized its realist portrayal of the War. On the other hand, their critiques fall in another subcategory of Marxism, namely, Western Marxism. In other words, there is a contrast here between the structuralist reading of Marxism as opposed to a version of Marxism "which stresses the role of human consciousness and action in social life and base their thoughts upon a conception of history in which the idea of progress is implicit" (Bottomore 528). Hence, it is possible to conclude that both novel and some of the eminent critical essays analyzing it fall in the category of Marxist (i.e., ideological) literature.

The above two versions of realism notwithstanding, nobody can claim that *The Scorched Earth* is free from a certain ideology. As Mahmud himself purports, "a writer cannot do without ideology. They should know the world around them and the society. All this is related to their ideology. I mean all these add up to form a writer's ideology" (Maqsudlu). I believe this is, *inter alia*, the case with *The Scorched Earth*. Here, I tend to advance the idea that the novel's inherent and true ideology might be the same as its internal logic. That is, these are elements such as style, tone, point of view, and structure that add up to form a literary work's unique internal logic. The same unique internal logic provides the work's unique way of perceiving and understanding the world, that is, what one can stipulate as the work's ideology.

In the very last scene of *The Scorched Earth*, the narrator sees a severed and blood-stained hand of which the pinkie is cut (329). This must be the hand of Mohammad the Mechanic as, at several points, the novel portrays him with a pinkie missing, that is, cut in a work-related accident (163 & 255). The narrator then says that the index finger of the same hand "has targeted my heart like a pain, an accusation, and a trident" (329). I believe this is not only the final scene but also the novel's *grand finale,* as it indicts the narrator of something that might not be aware of at first. If the index finger belongs to Mohammad, the Mechanic, what does he accuse the narrator of? What reality has remained untold or, even worse, trampled? Regarding the final scene where Mohammad, the Mechanic's finger has targeted the narrator Dastgheyb holds that it would be farfetched to assume this finger is accusing the whole of humanity because, otherwise one would be an oversimplification of a complex reality. In other words, this finger points at ordinary people who are victims ignoring those who are at fault, such as global capitalism and its agents who imposed the war on Iranians. Dastgheyb further believes that Mohammad, the Mechanic's finger, to whom the writer attributes a class consciousness of some sort, is a symbol

but one without an historical content. As such, it has turned into the opposite of what the writer has intended (161). My contention, however, is that as the final point of the novel, or its acme, this scene invites the reader to mull over a reality the narrator has failed to relate. Throughout the novel, Mohammad, the Mechanic is portrayed as a positive person, a real revolutionary who has been fighting against the Shah's regime since the pre-revolution days. He is polite, wise, reticent, and probably the closest person to the narrator. So, when he (his finger) accuses the narrator, it might be because the narrator has gone wrong or ignored something important. Presumably, the world of this novel has not been equitable for Mohammad, the Mechanic and the like-minded people. Maybe he and his comrades who played a significant role in the triumph of the revolution more than a year earlier have been wrongly displaced by people like Tājerzādeh, Kal Sh'abān, and Hāj Eftekhār whose contributions to the revolution are, at best questionable. Tājerzādeh turns out to be an anti-revolutionary who misuses his position within the revolutionary government to make a great deal of illicit money. Moreover, as his family name symbolically suggests, he comes from a merchant family with an anti-proletariat and bourgeois background. Kal Sh'abān talks about his endeavors for the triumph of the revolution, including having heated debates with what he calls the heretic Marxists. The same Kal Sh'abān owns a grocery shop where he hoards people's necessary commodities and increases their prices daily. He claims that he has backed the revolution. This signifies Kal Sh'abān's hypocrisy in denouncing communists as a means for siding with Islamists. Finally, Hāj Eftekhār, who used to be a well-known and trusted Bāzāri (i.e., merchant) prior to the 1979 revolution, is now in charge of a branch of the Islamic Revolution Committees based in the local mosque. The common denominator between all three is their (petite) bourgeois background, even though the latter becomes an Islamic regime official warning Kal Sh'abān about his profiteering. He also enters an

argument with Mohammad the Mechanic; an argument which may suggest a schism or a struggle over power between the two major stakeholders in the 1979 revolution: Islamists and Marxists. Because Hāj Efetekhār issues an arrest warrant for Mohammad, the Mechanic symbolically demonstrates who, in this fictitious world, gets the upper hand. Finally, another possible accusation by Mohammad, the Mechanic could be tweaking the reality in the funeral scene: he and his friend could have never gotten a chance to address the crowd in the first place. Even if this happened, he and the young man should have used another type of rhetoric to excite and encourage the mourners so that they would enlist for the war fronts. Hence, the exact point of accusation could be hiding or distorting what happened to the likes of Mohammad, the Mechanic, by putting them on stages to which they have no entitlement.

As the above examples demonstrate, there are seeds of the people's clash with the regime where Ādel and Naneh Bārān (i.e., Bārān mother) get arrested for executing two thieves. Mohammad, the Mechanic, and some other people stay outside the mosque, which is an Islamic Revolution Committees operation center demanding that the authorities release them. The most intense encounter between Mohammad, the Mechanic and his friends with the local authority and representative of the regime, Hāj Eftekhār is a heated argument, which at some point, as mentioned earlier, focuses on the nature of revolution and its governing logic. Here is part of the conversation between the two men:

" Hāj Eftekhār raises his voice:

Revolution does not mean anarchy!

Mohammad, the Mechanic also raises his voice:

What in a revolution seems like anarchy is the very logic of revolution which is not compatible with softly-softly movements" [emphasis added] (292).

Finally, the two prisoners are released on bail. One might interpret the accusing finger of Mohammad, the Mechanic as a sign of the narrator's glossing over some important facts and realities. These facts and realities unfold not in a manner that tallies with the sources and criteria existing outside the novel as an autonomous world, but according to the internal logic of the novel. One possible objection could be that I have already claimed that the narrator acts like a camcorder recording whatever he sees in an objective and detailed manner. If that is the case, how could he possibly be accused of ignoring anything? I believe that he has recorded everything that he has opted to record and done it carefully and objectively. However, there are scenes or incidents that he has opted not to record. The finger-pointing, in the end, may be a way to acknowledge this loss as a tongue-in-cheek testimony that even if one evaluates a literary work as an autonomous world, there may still be forces that exert influences from without on its formation. This could be either the direct impact of censorship or implied albeit strong vicissitudes convincing a writer to censor their work even prior to submitting it to a censorship apparatus. As a result, it is conceivable that the study of this novel may evince the existence of several layers: the first layer is what one can see through a close reading of the novel only: an extensive framework containing several minuscule realities juxtaposed next to one another. This is the text of the novel as an autonomous world. The ensuing second layer results from the interaction between the novel and the outside world. In other words, how factors such as historical and biographical conditions, the vicissitudes explained above as well as the critical commentaries written on the work influence the reader's perception of the realities that the novel creates. The reality created out of the overlap or interactions of the text with the related critical commentaries changes through time. Still, one might consider a second factor: the reality created as the result of the said interactions or overlap is not unchanging; instead, it changes over time.

Here, on can see a chain or trajectory of critical commentaries on Mahmud's work which ends with my close reading of the same. The essays at the beginning of the chain lay the stress upon the faithful representation of the outside reality, with faithful indicating something that concurs with an implicit or explicit ideological underpinning. Gradually, one may observe progress toward a technical analysis of the components of the novel, considering it as an autonomous world. Far from the ideological obligations in faithful representations of the outside reality, in this world, the internal logic of literary work counts as the criterion for realism. This is due mainly to the technical, structural, and stylistic craftsmanship employed in writing the novel, which has created and harbored a unique reality which concurs with the internal logic of the story.

After a detailed analysis of Mahmud's novel, I commence the second half of the chapter that examines Fasih's *Sorayya in a Coma.* This part of the chapter starts with a general yet brief introduction of the work. I will then proceed to offer critical commentaries penned on the story and a trajectory of their changes over time. It will be prudent to appraise the common points amongst the following critical commentaries on *Sorayya in a Coma* published between the 1980s and the 1990s, on the one hand, and the 1990s onwards, on the other. I will continue by my close reading of *Sorayya in a Coma*. What I will do in this close reading is deeming the novel as an autonomous entity, I endeavor to read and understand the text as it is without external influences and interactions such as the related critical commentaries. As a result, at this stage, if I criticize anything, it simply means that that aspect or part of the novel introduces a note of incongruity with its internal logic.

Six of the stories Fasih penned deal by and large with the Iran-Iraq War, including the two novels that one can deem properly as War Novel: *Sorayya in a Coma* and *The Winter of 84.*

The common denominator between the two war novels in question and what distinguishes them from other Persian novels is that "they both grappled with the impacts of the Iran–Iraq War on the lives of Iranian intellectuals and the upper class (Shahnehpur 45). On one level, *Sorayya in a Coma* is the story of Jalāl Āryān (the narrator cum protagonist of most of Fasih's novels). He flees the war-stricken city of Abadan to leave Iran for France to take care of his niece named Soraya, who falls into a coma due to a bike riding accident and subsequently dies. On another level, this novel registers events happening in Iran, especially at the beginning of the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988). On yet another level, it is the story of the Iranian Lost Generation in Paris and other parts of Europe. They are also in a coma. In general, it is the whole world that is in a coma. During his stay in Paris, Jalāl meets several Persian writers and intellectuals who have migrated to the West from Iran because of the Iranian Revolution and subsequent Iran-Iraq War in a café called *De La Sanction* who have migrated to the West from Iran because of the Iranian Revolution and subsequent Iran-Iraq War. Jalāl learns about their political and intellectual orientations and thoughts in conversations with them. Throughout the story, scenes from the war, which portray the devastating effects of the bombing and killing of innocent people, flash through Jalāl's mind (Shahnehpur 45-46).

The following are some of the most relevant and prominent critical commentaries on *Sorayya in a Coma* that I have arranged in chronological order to compare and contrast them. As I mentioned earlier, it will be prudent to appraise the common points among the following critical commentaries on *Sorayya in a Coma* published between the 1980s and the 1990s, on the one hand, and the 1990s onwards, on the other. Here, I will endeavor to demonstrate that what comes as the lynchpin between the developments that transpired during the 1980s-1990s and the 1990s onwards could be boiled down to what I call Politics of Presentation. These developments

count as the second layer ensuing from the interaction between the novel and the outside world. In other words, this layer is the result of how writers, readers, and literary critics' historical-biographical conditions and their critical commentaries influence the reader's perception of the realities that the novel creates and a diachronic study of their changes. This is, in fact, part and parcel of the historical and political conditions of the period in which the novel first came out (i.e., earlier in the 1980s). This is when the Shah's rampant censorship returned with a vengeance under the newly established Islamic regime. Not only did this affect the publication of literary works, but it also propelled many members of the Iranian intelligentsia, including writers and poets, to seek refuge in other countries, especially France (Karimi-Hakkāk 255). One could observe both facts in relation to Fasih's novel, that is, the impact of (self)censorship on literary production and, as depicted in the narrative, why Paris became the hub for the Iranian intellectuals who chose exile after the 1979 revolution. It is noteworthy that Karimi-Hakkāk stipulates that *Sorayya in a Coma* is amongst the politically neutral works that apparently brush past the Iranian censorship (256). I, however, would like to argue that the incoherent plot and the narrative's tongue-in-cheek criticism of the status of publishing in Iran was the root cause that distorted the published works. Rajabi also elaborates on the impact of censorship on *Sorayya in a Coma* and *The Winter of 84* (which I discuss in the next chapter). He purports that the censors stopped the first two editions of the latter, and the subsequent editions were published outside Iran. This presumably means that the text of the novel has remained intact, whereas *Sorayya in a Coma* has never been stopped in Iran, having more than ten editions. If one juxtaposes this with the novel's incoherency of the plot and structural flaws, it is possible to conclude that censorship was responsible for the mutilation of the work.

This failure mainly stems from the suppression of intellectuals and writers by the established Islamic regime and its censorship apparatus or the sheer fear of its iron fist, which may render the writer embark upon self-censorship. Moreover, it would be noteworthy to see if Jalāl Āryān truly represents Esmail Fasih and his ideals and ideas about the Iran-Iraq War. Additionally, whether there is an antagonism between Iranians who remain in Iran to defend the homeland and the Iranian émigré in France living a life of lethargy and nonchalance merits a thorough analysis. Finally, these critiques' take on the novel's structure mirrors their contention that the task of a novel is the objective representation of external realities. Hence, if the plot is exceptionally incoherent, that is merely a way to demonstrate a significant contrast, if not antagonism, between the West and Iran as the two worlds that are poles apart. My contention is that it is possible to boil down all the points mentioned above, into what I call politics of presentation. As in Mahmud's novel, one can observe the novel and the critical commentaries written on it together. It is also possible to observe the novel and each one of the critical comments changing against the bigger backdrop of time. It would be worthwhile to see how this transform from the reader's perspective not only through time but also because of time. It is also possible to distinguish the critical essays on the Fasih's novel published in the 1980s from those published in the 1990s and onward. One could make these distinctions in terms of the points of departure. They could be either the historical, biographical, and political conditions surrounding the text (i.e., mainly in the 1980s) or the text of the novel (i.e., primarily in the 1990s and onward). In other words, in the 1980s, the essays analyzing the novel demonstrate a movement from the external historical-biographical conditions, especially (self)censorship, to an examination of the novel's technical details and structural dimensions. The narrator-writer relationship and if the former serves as a persona for the latter are cases in point. Finally, one last

piece that one may add to all this is my close reading of the novel, which chronologically comes as the last piece. A more delicate point, however, could be that to examine this latest part added to the previous ones, it is possible to focus solely on the internal logic of the work as the governing principle. That is, as the reader perceives the novel, the degree of proximity of the perceived component to the internal logic will determine if and to what extent that component is realistic [earlier in the chapter, I discussed by reader, I mean either the single critic or I as the writer of this dissertation. The readers' collective response, however, is impossible to determine]. Another way of observing the same reading is that it disregards historical data and conditions. This is because my close reading of the text transpires in an incomplete historical moment. If the present moment passes, a new version of the reader should turn back and read the text from a past historical moment. Hence, a recuperative reading of the text in the present moment seems out of the question. As a result, any single reader, e.g., either me, each of the critic who analyzed the story, should confine themselves to a reading of the text that deems it as an independent and autonomous entity with its own internal logic coming as the benchmark for being either close to or far from reality.

The essays by Nāser Irani (1984), Rezā Navvābpur (1985), and Ahmad Karimi-Hakkāk (1986) are among the outstanding critical commentaries published in the 1980s. These essays mostly tackle whether Fasih's novel has managed to faithfully and completely reflect the realities of Iran in the earlier 1980s, especially those of the Iran-Iraq War, its impact on the lives of Iranians living in cities near and far from the fronts as well as the Iranian émigré living in Europe, especially France. The relations between the narrator and the writer and if the former serves as a persona for the latter in representing the realities is of utmost importance in this regard. It is also important to note if the relation in question or lack thereof has been caused or, at

least, affected by the restrictions the factors lying outside the text such as (self)censorship have caused.

Nāser Irani calls Fasih's novel a "travelogue." This may, *inter alia*, impart the understanding that the narrator and protagonist, Jalāl Aryān mirrors Fasih himself. Somebody may object that not all travelogues reflect the outside realities with Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) being a case. I believe even Swift's work is a caricature-like, exaggerated, and comic reflection of his own time. Hence, it is possible to think that other characters in the novel have real alter egos. In other words, this is presumably a *roman* à *clef*. The significance of this lies in the fact that even as a work containing an autonomous and independent world, one could come up with a critique of it based on the criteria and realities of the outside world. Irani, on the contrary, believes that narrator is not the same as writer. He is not expressing his own thoughts and feelings. This critic argues that this is because of the sarcastic comments that Fasih makes about Jalāl Āryān.This may well indicate paratextual vicissitudes such as (self)censorship confining the text and forcing the writer to have a persona other than his real self. It is noteworthy that I do not deem self-censorship as an independent category, that is, something different from censorship as there is always something out there (e.g., a censorship apparatus) that makes a writer filter their own writing. Either way, my contention is that, Like the other essays published in the 1980s on this work by Fasih, representing the outside world, or its absence has become the basis for evaluating the novel. I raise this point not only to impart the dominant critical view of the time but also possibly as a critique. In other words, one should always bring to the fore the textual considerations if they have the contention to embark upon what is properly called literary criticism.

Irani also focuses on the contradictions between Iran (especially its war-stricken areas) and France as well as on Iranians living in Iran (again, especially in war-stricken areas) and Iranians living in France. He entertains that these contradictions are the axese of the novel.

Like Irani, in his essay published in 1985, Reza Navvābpur appraises the relation between the narrator and protagonist, and whether Jalāl Āryān represents Fasih's ideas and ideals (431). He believes that the plot suffers from a drastic incoherence, and this is on purpose: "The plot is thus a combination of several fictive planes none of which is coherent. The world of the novel is a world of distortion, of unreality and ambiguity. This unreality and ambiguity are nonetheless purposeful and deliberate" (428) which again may strike a note of the outside limiting forces such as (self)censorship which were particularly ruthless and vetted literary works for any note of dissidence and incongruity with Islamic standards and ideals. This best serves to depict a major contrast between the realities of Iran under a newly established Islamic regime involved in an atrocious war with Iraq, on the one hand, and Iranian émigré and intellectuals living an idle life in France, on the other. The dreamlike events of the novel transpire in something of a stream of consciousness. These are isolated incidents pertaining to war, post-revolutionary Iran, and Iranian émigré in Paris (427-428). This confusion and distortion, Navvābpur contends, serves to render the novel as an allegory containing extended and interrelated symbols. In other words, the fuzzy and ambiguous atmosphere of the novel provides the possibility of each real scene to acquire an allegorical dimension as well. The events are not linked together chronologically. The novel is not dealing with the war as a major incident or even a subplot. The horrifying pictures of the war are there only as one extreme of Iranian society, against which the other extreme, i.e., the Iranian elite in Paris, is magnified (428). This allegorical novel, according to Navvābpur, is composed of interrelated symbols of which

Sorayya is the most important one. Being both an Iranian female given name as well as the name of a star, Sorayya is the name of a woman who is in a coma and as such does not play a role in the novel. Symbolically, she connects all various planes of the novel together making it a meaningful whole (429).

Ahmad Karimi-Hakkāk also deals with what one may deem as "politics of presentation" focusing on Fasih's novel. He holds that shortly after 1979 when the Islamic regime took over, they started stifling what he calls "the intellectual community." Therefore, they merely allowed publication of literary works that did not directly speak to the political situation of the time or criticize the Islamic regime. Karimi-Hakkāk furthermore postulates *Sorayya in a Coma* as the most outstanding example of works of this kind. The point is that the "common denominator in all these works [including *Sorayya in a Coma*] is the writer's full realization of the relevance of past experiences to present circumstances and the courageous portrayal of the essential continuity of mechanisms of repression and despotic rule" (256). Karimi-Hakkāk's last point tends to give me a solid ground to disagree with him. My critique of his stance is that although avoiding a head-on confrontation with the dominant political system, *Sorayya in a Coma* is inherently a political novel. As a result, neglecting the novel's political context and significance will be a flagrant oversight. This is in spite of the fact that the commonality of foregrounding the political dimension of the contemporary Persian literary works has elicited some literary scholars' condemnation. Furthermore, as I stated earlier, focusing on the political-historical context should not be at the cost of not bringing the textual considerations to the fore.

The beginning of the 1990s marks a turning point in the critical commentaries on and critical perception of *Sorayya in a Coma*. These commentaries exhibit a gradual shift toward the technical details and structural dimensions of the novel as the point of departure from which the

essays reach understanding and analyses of the external conditions surrounding the novel. In other words, although one still can see the Politics of Presentation at work, there is a new direction to it. For example, Mohammad Rezā Ghānoonparvar's point of departure is the structural and conceptual oppositions in the novel which leads the reader into perception of a number of external to the novel oppositions and contrasts. His book titled *In a Persian Mirror: Images of the West and Westerners in Iranian Fiction* (1993) deals, *inter alia*, with the fact that "the clash between tradition and modernity is in one sense the clash between the Self and the Other. Fasih's *Sorayya in a Coma*, according to Ghānoonparvar, is a case in point. Ghānoonparvar argues that most Iranian writers advanced the idea that the Western Other has attacked the Iranian self or tradition. Some Iranian writers, however, held a more moderate position. They sought the root of the problem not in occidental sources but in the Iranian Self. Fasih's novel evinces such a view. This is a novel of contrasts, such as a Western-educated intellectual who loves Iran. Another contrast is Jalāl Aryān's remembers the death and destruction caused by the Iran-Iraq War in the peace and comfort of Paris and in the company of the affluent Iranian émigré. The most significant contrast, in fact, predicament, well displayed by the text of the novel is the one from which Iranian intellectuals, and by extension all Iranians, suffer. That is, on an abstract level, West means pure evil. This is especially true if the said Iranians are revolutionaries. In this case, they are supposed to blame the West, as an entity, for everything. This is an "abstract political West, and the one they admire is the West of technological and scientific…" (127). Ghānoonparvar regards this as a dilemma or even a schizophrenia that has been there. That is, ever since Iranians came into contact with the West. Another essay published in the 1990s is Atā'ollh Mohājerāni's, which lacks a theoretical undergird and confines itself to quasi-poetic comparisons and contrasts. In general, his critique

does not seem to be on par with other essays written on the novel. Still, concurring with Ghānoonparvar, his point of departure is somewhere inside the text, moving toward what lies outside: a categorization of the story's characters is where Mohājerāni reaches a criterion for contemporary Iranians as they have such a contradictory relationship with the West.

The later critical works emphasize the technicalities of *Sorayya in a Coma* as the point of departure to determine the novel's critical and popular acclaim. This serves as the common denominator between Rajabi's, Shohāni's, Ferdowsi's, Hasanbeygi's, and M'asumniā's essays. Whether one is a proponent of Behrang Rajabi's approach to Fasih's novel or supports the critics whose ideas he tends to refute in his 2009 essay, the point of departure of all of them is the technicalities of story writing. For example, the existence of a coherent plot or being the literary equivalents of high art and pop art all lead into a deep insight into the contemporary human's soul. That is, something that lies outside the text. These commentaries attribute this success to the novel's sound technique and its deep insight to human plight. Among the critical essays I have studied here, these are the first ones in which the technical aspects of novel writing come to the fore. There are also connections with the novel's noticeable acclaim, based on the work's number of editions and how the readers, including readers of serious literary work and critics, received it over time. Rajabi, then makes another claim which can be the final leg of turning mentioned above. He contends that until the 1980s, contemporary Persian literary criticism focused on either social and political considerations or formalistic and aesthetic dimensions of texts. Rajabi holds that the critical commentaries on *Sorayya in a Coma* were the first ones on a Persian novel that went beyond this critical dichotomy common at the time. Instead, the readers' approval and reception came to the fore going above and beyond the impasse once faced by literary critics. Although Rajabi's stance on the significance of the novel's reception marks a

development in critical stances *on Sorayya in a Coma*, it is possible to reiterate here the same critique that I leveled at Dastgheyb's analysis of *The Scorched Earth*. Drawing upon Nanquette's methodology, I proceed to criticize Rajabi's stance as it fails to offer detailed, convincing statistics and detailed facts. The conditions and "dynamics of production and circulation of literary works in Iran, revealing the forms, structures, and functions of Iranian literature within Iranian society" (Nanquette 4) are cases in point. It is merely within these perimeters and the statistical universe and only relying upon a meticulous methodology and field (Nanquette 8-10) that one can precisely gauge the success and reception of a literary work. Alirezā Shohāni's essay (2010) exhibits the same movement from the textual and stylistic features of the work to what lies outside. Based on how the narrative portrays Iranian cities under the bombardments and Iranians suffering from wartime conditions, he decides that Fasih's work belongs to the coterie of Persian literary works adopting a critical view of the Iran-Iraq War. That is, usually, experienced writers who started their careers prior to the war penned those stories. According to Shohāni, real incidents, not the writers' imagination, have been inspired for the Persian war novels of the 1980s. Therefore, realism (I take it that Shohāni defines *realism* as the faithful representation of external and objective realities) is the dominant genre of the said novels. Another important point is that these novels are incident-based, which means they focus less on character development. Furthermore, some of the works in this period have come under the influence of the Shiite branch of Islam, particularly 'Āshura, emphasizing the Islamic and ideological character of the war against Iraq. Another significant stylistic feature of the works in question is that lacking suspense and conflict; they read more as reports and memoirs because they have failed to create a unique and fictitious version of the realities of the time. Furthermore, these stories are not objective. They simplify the world's complexities to offer specific patterns for human behavior.

As I stated, Shohāni endeavors to categorize the novel's stance on a social and political issue based on the above textual characteristics. Concurring with Shohāni's essay, Ali Ferdowsi (2011) contends that the novel does not properly fall into the war novel category as the narrative deals more with how the war affected cities and civilians. As such, one can view it as a prism through which it would be possible to divide Iranians according to their stances on and responses to the revolution and the ensuing war with Iraq. Hence, again, the text serves as the point of departure to illustrate some crucial paratextual facts. In her 2018 essay, Mahbubeh M'asumniā's stance that the novel's popular acclaim has also come from a place above and beyond critical approval. Regardless, she entertains that the novel's influence over Persian story writing within the last decade is undeniable. Furthermore, *War and Its Novels: Introduction, Synopsis, and Short Analysis* (2013) by Ebrāhim Hasanbegi may count as another attempt to categorize Fasih's novel. He entertains the idea that *Sorayy*a *in a Coma* belongs more to the exile literature genre than war literature. Structurally, Hasanbeygi believes that Fasih creates many incidents without managing to attach them logically and organically so that one tends to forget the major incidents readily. He seems to base his other points about the novel on this structural deficiency. Presumably the novel's choppy and incoherent style has elicited his negative critical comment. He also entertains that the narrator has represented both Iranian intelligentsia and émigré living in France in not so favorable a light. Furthermore, Hasanbeygi purports that the novel has a symbolic dimension. For example, Sorayya's coma symbolizes the unconsciousness and lethargy of the Iranian émigré. Moreover, in her seminal work *Writing War in Contemporary Iran: The Case of Esmail Fasih's Zemestan*-e *62* (2019), S'aeedeh Shahnehpur holds that *Sorayya in a Coma* deals with the Iran-Iraq War marginally. The war is not the setting of the novel, either. Instead, the story portrays the war through a series of flashbacks. What comes into focus, instead, is how the

war affects the ordinary people living in cities near and far from the fronts. Likewise, I am inclined to argue that this has given rise to the popularity of the novel as the very people affected by the war tended to read the work eagerly. Additionally, one may observe a movement from the textual components, such as the settings and characters, to what lies outside the text. This movement that causes and determines the paratextual factors.

Here is my critique of the second critical trend where the point of departure is textual (i.e., structural and stylistic). Considering textual features as the point of departure ushers a more advanced stage of literary criticism than the previous stage in which the paratextual characteristics came as a point of departure. Nevertheless, I contend that no matter which one of the two comes as the point of departure, the idea of points of departure and destination indicates distance, a distance between form and content. I highly doubt such a distance exists as no content is independent of formalistic or textual features. Therefore, one cannot advance ideas such as the priority of either content or historical-political context over the formalistic, that is, stylistic and structural considerations, or vice versa.

Against this backdrop, I offer a close reading of *Sorayya in a Coma*. My explanation and analysis would unveil my nuanced reading of the novels I have selected for this chapter. I would then help the reader understand what the critics have missed in each, why the reading is in a particular way and what one brings to it.

The novel seems to be a *Roman à clef*. It describes Iranian emigre and intellectuals residing in Paris, London, and other parts of Europe in a way that indicates real persons. This contrasts with the announcement at the novel's beginning that purports: "All characters and events depicted in this novel are entirely fictitious. Any similarity to actual events or persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental." This could suggest either that the disclaimer is merely a

convention and not related to the fact that this is a *roman à clef* or that the disclaimer serves as an invitation extended to the reader to look for real persons and events behind the fictitious ones[1].

Another critical aspect of the novel is that the sentences are usually short and unadorned under the influence of Hemingway's writing style. That is, the sentences have a minimum number of modifiers. The text, especially toward the novel's beginning, appears as a juxtaposition of minuscule photos, with each photo evoked by a short sentence. One can compare this with the sentences in *The Scorched Earth* that look like small photos taken by a neutral camcorder. Behrang Rajabi also entertains that being influenced by the American detective novels of the 1930s, especially those by Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett, and James M. Cain, *Sorayya in a Coma* is a realist novel with a first-person male narrator, namely Jalāl Āryān. He narrates linearly with short flashbacks, at times doing some characterization by providing information about other characters. The characters' retorts and repartees measure their intelligence. Rajabi further maintains that some critiques have observed similarities between this novel and Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* (1926). Although *Sorayya in a Coma* and *The Winter of 84* have been more successful and critically acclaimed than Fasih's other works, Rajabi concludes that this acclaim stems not from their structure and stylistic features. Rather, it stems from the novel's subject and the fact that *Sorayya in a Coma* was published towards the beginning of the war and was amongst the first stories that dealt with the Iran-Iraq War. As I mentioned above, one major difference between the narrator in *The Scorched Earth* and Jalāl Āryān is that the latter retains some degree of agency while acting and interacting with people. In

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[1] I owe this to Nāser Zerāati's critical essay on Rezā Barāhani's novel *titled Az Chāh Be Chāh Ya Az Chāleh be Chāh*" ["From Bad to Bad or From Bad to Worse"]. In this essay, Zerāati' focuses on the American-style disclaimer in the beginning of the novel and how it may be an invitation to question the randomness of some names and relations in the work he analyzes.
Zerāati, Nāser. "Az Chāh Be Chāh Ya Az Chāleh be Chāh" ["From Bad to Bad or From Bad to Worse"]. *Naqd-e* Agah: Dar Barrasi Ārā va Āsār (Majmueh-ye Maqālāt) *[Vol.2*], Nashr-e Āgah,1983, 129-148.

contrast, Mahmud's protagonist is almost entirely invisible. As for the similarities between Fasih's writing and Hemingway's, not all Fasih's sentences are Hemingwayesque. Some are long and convoluted, whereas others are not objective recordings of reality and portray the narrator's dreams and nightmares.

Moreover, some of the sentences in the novel seem to be literal translations from English, exhibiting anomalies in word choice and sentence structure. The following sentences are cases in point. Two Persian equivalents flank each one of these sentences. I have taken the Persian sentences on the right from Fasih's novel. The English sentences seem to be the original source for the literal translation. Finally, the Persian sentences on the left are a more natural rendering of the same in Persian.

"شما بهترین سعی خود را کرده اید." (202) "You have done your best." "شما نهایت سعی خود را کرده اید."

- "پرستارِ تسخیر کننده" (308) "The captivating nurse." "پرستار جذاب/فریبنده."

-"متشکرم. شما خیلی شیرین هستی. اما...چیزی نیست." (302). "Thanks. You are so sweet but…this is nothing." "متشکرم. خیلی لطف دارید."

More importantly:

"به سوال وصف حال غیرقابل ترجمه اش می خندم." (302) "I laugh at the question on her untranslatable mood."

"به سوالش دربارهٔ حال وصف ناپذیرش می خندم."

One can interpret the existence of the above sentences and others in the text in two, possibly interrelated, ways: Fasih did not know how to write proper Persian. Being a US graduate and fond of American and British literature (especially Hemingway's works), he could not write or did not care to render Persian sentences more fluently. This is presumably the most obvious

interpretation. Another possibility is that the incessant chain of crushing events, such as war, bombardments, displacement, and his niece's uncurable coma, to name a few, are too much for the narrator to take in. Therefore, he acts as if he is a translator dealing with events narrated or experienced by somebody else, that is, in a mediated manner. This may act like a shock absorber wreaking less havoc on Jalāl Āryān's mental health.

To continue the close reading of Fasih's work and, as I previously mentioned, the novel is under the influence of Hemingway's lost generation (or as one of the characters in Fasih's novel calls it Nasl-e Tun Be Tun Shodeh meaning"Wandering Generation) (91). Fasih's work has tried to create an alternate lost generation of Iranian exiles and immigrants, especially Iranian intellectuals as well as the related literary and art scenes in Paris, lost and aimless people, whose drinking and merry-making are abortive efforts to heal or at least ignore their wounds. It is possible to deem Ernest Hemingway's works, specifically *A Farewell to Arms* (1929), as sources of inspiration for Fasih's novel. In the former, the narrator's beloved, Catherine Barkley, dies during childbirth. The narrator then leaves the hospital and returns to his hotel in the rain. In Fasih's novel, the narrator's niece, Sorayya, falls into a long coma after a biking accident. When Jalāl Āryān arrives in Paris, he stays at a hotel and pays regular visits to Sorayyā in the hospital. *Sorayya in a Coma* ends with Sorayya's death and with Āryān's apparent apathy, which reminds the reader of Fredric Henry's apathy at Catherine's deathbed.

Another attempt to closely read the novel could be analyzing its constituting binary oppositions: Iran/France, surreal/real, and sunny/overcast. It is the interplay between these binaries that propels the plot forward. The result of this interplay is a universal and placeless truth that belongs neither to Iran, nor to France, nor to any other place in the world. At the same time, it is a truth that belongs to Iran, France, and everywhere else in the world. In other words,

the story tries to portray a human situation in which the humanity is in a coma. The scene in which Jalāl Āryān is walking along the Seine River in Paris (287-288) is particularly emblematic. Āryān's experience of walking comes under the influence of his memories of the Karun River in the war-stricken Khuzestan Province. Moreover, the novel merges different times and eras to relate the commotion with the coma. Additionally, the writer mixes different people and jobs to indicate universal commotion. It is debatable if the narrative conveys the same in its entirety or through the passages that the writer has inserted that lack an organic connection with the rest of the novel.

Just as one can attribute Soraya and her state of coma to the whole world and Iran (160), it is possible to associate this placelessness, timelessness, and commotion to both the whole world and Iran. In the latter case, it could act as a self-destructive mechanism that tends to destroy the façade that the novel has created of Iran. The journalistic pieces that offer heroic yet flat pictures of the Iranian army and especially the IRGC are a case in point. One could also interpret the segments in which he writes about the proponents of the regime whom he addresses as brother in the same way. Not to mention his treatment of the atrocities of the Iraqi army (175) and how idle the anti-regime expatriate intelligentsia living in Europe are. Another part (257-258) seems to have this self-destructive characteristic: the scene in which the narrator is waiting in the Iranian Consulate in Paris. First, he offers a positive picture of the personnel (brothers and sisters, as he calls them) working there. He thumbs through a magazine published in Iran that contains the regime's propaganda and viewpoints on political and international affairs. Afterwards, he reads a short story in the same magazine, supposedly a harbinger of a new era or literary style that promulgates the Islamic regime's ideals. Here, one can discern a slight mocking and doubting tone and attitude. This inserts an element of doubt about the façade

projected of Iran in other parts of the novel. Moreover, the narrator's tone concerning other characters is the most crucial fictional element that his view of the characters describes. At times, he expresses his view of the characters explicitly. This is hardly acceptable as it would be the narrator-cum-writer abusing his status and imposing his personal belief on the reader. Nevertheless, Fasih's sympathetic tone while writing about the people of Abadan *ipso facto* divulges that, if anything, he approves of the fighters defending the country (Irani 59) even if he makes veiled and sarcastic comments about the regime. Also, another part that may serve as an example of the same self-destructive mechanism is a poem that Jalāl finds in Sorayya's diry, apparently penned by her. It talks about Iran's grim and desperate situation. The poem is not an integrated part of the narrative Jalal narrates. This is because it is a very sloppy poem, which Fasih preferred to attribute to an imaginary poet (i.e., Sorayya) who is not to be a professional or because he did not want to represent Jalāl Āryān as the author of the negative comments about Iran. Yet, such narrative segments are not strong, expansive, and coherent enough to contribute to an understanding of the novel. Instead, they appear as components of a façade that introduces a note of incongruity and does not accord with the internal logic of the novel and the overall atmosphere it creates. Here, one may take into consideration as the cause of the incongruity an outside-the-text factor that exerts pressure on the text or the writer's preemptive attempt at (self)censorship. Since, however, these factors and forces lie outside the text, and I have already examined them in detail, I do not tend to include them in the close reading of the novel.

Now, I intend to make a differential study of the two novels, that is, what renders them occupy two different places in the reader's perception. In the meantime, certain overlaps make these two independent works parts of a continuum. The overlaps may possess several patterns. One tentative way of considering the order in question is that the two novels overlap from the

reader's perspective. Another possibility is that each of the novels interacts and overlaps with their related critical commentaries also from the reader's perspective. Finally, the critical commentaries on each novel form a chain that evinces a process of transformation through time. That is, the critical essays on the novel go through a particular pattern of changes that have transpired not only through time but because of it. It might be worthwhile to compare and contrast the two trajectories to see how they have changed against the bigger backdrop of experiences, that is, through time.

Read along with *The Scorched Earth, Sorayya in a Coma* also starts by depicting what happened at the beginning of the Iran-Iraq War, even though the setting is Abadan instead of Ahvaz. *The Scorched Earth* portrays incidents and people that are quite palpable. No single person in the novel counts as the protagonist, not even a group of people. It is the whole of *The Scorched Earth* and its characters that are the heroes of the novel. While Mahmud's novel is grounded in the material conditions of the war, Fasih's work, through its title, signals the name of the female character who is in a coma and a celestial body beyond the earthly domain.

In *The Scorched Earth*, the narrator does not pass any judgment. He records what transpires, whereas Jalāl Āryān makes some minimal comments. He has a name, while Mahmud's narrator does not. *The Scorched Earth* employs war to depict the story of a land and its people. However, *Sorayya in a Coma* employs the same as a springboard to think through the commotion of the whole world.

In Mahmud's novel, the narrator is merely a recorder. He has no agency; instead, he gets carried away by the turn of events. He does not, however, neglect to register whatever he sees and happens to him and the people around him. However, in Fasih's novel, the narrator manifests

a degree of agency that interferes, at times and to some extent, in the turn of events, even though he too, acts like a camcorder.

The similarities between the two novels also merit a careful analysis of how the narrator records the events around him, usually in his immediate vicinity. The only difference is that Jalāl Āryān retains some degree of agency in acting and interacting with people, whereas Mahmud's protagonist is almost entirely invisible. However, not all Fasih's sentences are Hemingwayesque. Some are long and convoluted, and others are not objective recordings of outside reality; on the contrary, they portray the narrator's dreams and nightmares.

Passivity is another common denominator between the two novels. Both narrators are there to record and portray what happens around them. In The *Scorched Earth*, this passivity is so glaring that the reader does not even discover the narrator's name. Jalāl Āryān is also a primarily passive man who gets carried away by the turn of events. The only exceptions are his visits to the hospital, where his unconscious niece is bedridden, and his efforts to collect money to pay her hospital bills.

Finally, both novels seem to focus more on a city, a nation, or even the whole world, displaying a collective attitude rather than focusing on any individual. Additionally, the title of Fasih's novel contains a feminine given name that is also the given name of the narrator's niece, who is in an uncurable coma. This name, however, has a symbolic dimension; that is, it symbolizes the whole universe that has fallen into an abyss rather than simply an individual. The same generality and universality are true in Mahmud's novel.

It is also noteworthy that there are similarities in the critical commentaries on *the Scorched Earth* and *Sorayya in a Coma. The* two interacting or overlapping entities emphasize

the relationship between the writer and the narrator. They also tackle the political conditions of the time and whether the same has shaped the narrative. One of the common points is that in both trajectories, that is, toward the beginning of the 1990s, by and large, the critics start focusing more on the technical side of literary criticism and less on its non-textual dimensions. Considering the critical commentaries on the two novels, one can see a similarity between the beginning parts. That is, both entirely depend upon the common political classifications of the day, such as anti-Islamic regime/pro-Islamic regime, anti-West/pro-West, and Anti-Marxist/pro-Marxist. This is because of Iran's cultural and literary atmosphere in the 1980s (especially toward its beginning), in which literary critics tended to analyze literary works in the light of the dominant political currents that tend to cut across all other divisions. In other words, they lay the stress upon the novel's components and its technical aspects.

Furthermore, whether Mahmud's novel is a genuinely socialist-realist or Marxist work is one of the contrasts between this work and Fasih. Whereas some of the outstanding critical commentaries on *The Scorched Earth* deal with this issue, none of the critical essays on *Sorayya in a Coma* touches the same. The said comments on Mahmud's work discussed whether his alleged ideological commitments or allegiances have hindered him to portray a complete and thorough picture of the realities of the Iran-Iraq War. This is especially obvious in the essays written toward the beginning of the 1980s. Fasih's novel, on the other hand, has not elicited a critical response of this kind. There is a belief that until the 1980s, contemporary Persian literary criticism focused on either social and political considerations or formalistic and aesthetic dimensions. Moreover, in terms of receiving critical responses, *Sorayya in a Coma* was the first Persian novel that went beyond this critical dichotomy familiar at the time, that is, social and content-based criticism as opposed to formalistic and technique-based critical essays (Rajabi).

One may also bear in mind that at least some of the critical evaluations of *Sorayya in a Coma* purport that the novel's success stems from its sound structure. In contrast, almost all essays written on *The Scorched Earth* argue that, technically and structurally, the novel looks like a chronicle devoid of any literary techniques or any structural complexities or innovations. Ahmad Karimi-Hakkāk contends that one could divide the Persian novels published toward the beginning of the 1980s into two groups: those who dealt with how the new regime suppressed the intellectual community and those that remained silent on this. He then argues that Fasih's novel falls in the second category. On the other hand, there has been no critical commentary examining any relation or its lack between Mahmud's work and Iranian intellectual community.

I am inclined to conclude this chapter with the belief that a combination of *The Scorched Earth* considered in isolation in reader's perspective, the same after interactions with the related critical commentaries, *Sorayya in a Coma* in isolation, that is, before interactions with the related critical commentaries, and *Sorayya in a Coma* after the said interactions. Finally, the two novels, prior to the mutual interactions and afterward, create a bigger overlap or a bigger variety of viewpoints, when overlapped with the critical commentaries on them. One can also consider this as a continuum from the reader's perspective which changes against the much bigger backdrop of assumptions and attitudes towards the Iran-Iraq war. I also believe that the variety of viewpoints resulting from these interactions and overlaps allows the reader to perceive not only what exists but what could exist. In other words, a variety of viewpoints transforms over time, that is, an entity the perception of which in reader's and critic's perspectives change over time, having the potential to take on a variety of trajectories.

Chapter 2

The Headless Palms and *Winter of 84:* "Two Steps Forward and One Step Back"

My plan in this chapter is to make analyses of as well as comparisons and contrasts between *The Headless Palms* (1983) by Qāsem'ali Farāsat and *Winter of 84* (1984) by Esmail Fasih as the Iran-Iraq War novels I have chosen for this chapter. As in the previous chapter, the reader's perspective is the lynchpin to all critical analyses. This perspective could be either a single reader's perception of the novel (e.g., my close reading of the novel by Farāsat) or a critical commentary on either of the novels by a literary critic).

In this chapter, I offer a concise history of the reception of Farāsat's novel. As in the novels I analyzed in the previous chapter, I will anchor my analysis in the work's critical reception, considering whether they have undergone any changes over time. Then, I embark upon a close reading of the same novel, considering it as an autonomous entity. Furthermore, in my analysis and close reading of *The Headless Palms*, I draw upon Althusser's concept of ideology. I contend that, in so far as *The Headless Palms,* as well as each one of the critical commentaries written on it fall in the category of the Holy Defense, it is possible to establish correspondences between them and Althusser's notions of ideology in general and ideology in particular.

Additionally, the internal logic of the novel may count as the governing principle determining whether and to what extent the work is a realist one. I contend that in this novel, the Islamic and ideological characteristics are the dominant components of the novel that affect how its various other components connect, rendering a shift in the internal logic of the work. Finally, I venture to prove that due to its prescriptive and inflexible nature, the critical perception of the

novel does not readily change through time or because of it. *Winter of 84*, conversely, does not fall in the category of Holy Defense even though it tackles the Iran-Iraq War. I will also juxtapose *The Headless Palms* and *Winter of 84* as the two novels interact and overlap in the reader's perspective in what one may consider a second stage in the development of war novels. It is also possible to see how, from the reader's perspective, each novel merges with the related critical commentaries. Subsequently, one can investigate how the overlaps and fusions of each novel with the related critical commentaries transform against the larger backdrop of time in *Winter of 84*. Moreover, it is also possible to investigate how, to a greater extent, it fails to change as much due to the ideological sediments that constitute the Holy Defense used by many critics to describe Farāsat's novel.

What follows is a history of the critical reception of *The Headless Palms*, which critics have analyzed from various angles. Some of these angles are acting as an apology for Islamic and ideological values, playing an exhortatory role in encouraging Iranians to defend their country, and focusing on the presence and role of Iranian women on the war fronts. Last but not least, the novel's setting is unique. That is, it is the only novel that deals with Khorramshar, its fall, and its subsequent liberation by Iranian forces. By putting critical commentaries together chronologically, I will endeavor to discover whether there have been any historical changes. Moreover, two interrelated facts warrant in-depth discussion: an Iranian publisher published the novel in 1983. However, the first critical commentary on it appeared in 2006. Secondly, from the very beginning, there has been some focus on the technicalities of story writing. This attention slightly increases in the later essays. However, the adherence to Islamic values, as crystalized in the Holy Defense doctrine, has remained the quintessence of the critical commentaries in question as well as Farāsat's novel.

What comes as the lynchpin among the critical essays examining the Iran-Iraq War stories is that one can hardly find any critical commentary on a so called Holy Defense literary works, including *The Headless Palms*, which itself does not fall in the same category (one can *ipso facto* say that non-Islamic, so-called "intellectual" side of contemporary Persian literature mostly turned a blind eye on the war and the literary works depicting it until the bombardments of major cities, especially Tehran, started). It is noteworthy that for those of the essays in question published toward the beginning of the 1980s, serving as an apology has occupied a central place. This transpired at the expense of analyses of the technical, structural, and stylistic dimensions. As one moves towards the end of the 2010s, however, it is possible to observe an increasing degree of attention to the technicalities. However, in almost all cases, the ideological component comes to the fore.

Central to this Islamic ideological component is the attention that these essays pay to the exhortatory role of the Holy Defense literary works. One could observe the same in the specific case of Farāsat's novel and the critical commentaries on it. In his essay titled "*The Headless Palms* Is the Beginning of Writing on the War" (2010), after a brief introduction of Farāsat and his works, Mohammad Javād Jazini focuses on the exhortatory role of the novel in boosting the national and Islamic morale. This is, in return, necessary for encountering the Iraqi forces and the fact that it has its roots in Islamic ideology as the Islamic regime promoted them. He deals with other aspects and components of the novel only to demonstrate that they also stem from or are inspired by the Islamic values as crystalized as the Holy defense. For example, in 2010, Jazini (153) and in 2006, Shishehgarān postulate that the novel is among the first Persian novels dealing with the Iran-Iraq War without even mentioning three other ones, including a highly acclaimed novel by the well-known writer (i.e., *The Scorched Earth* by Ahmad Mahmud)

presumably because Mahmud's work did not entirely fall into the category of Holy Defense (Hanif). Shishehgarān considers *The Headless Palms* as the very first one of the Holy Defense novels). This is because of the same status as the forerunner as well as the emphasis on the Holy Defense values that Jazini turns a blind eye to technical issues such as hovering between omniscient and limited omniscient viewpoints as well hovering between formal and colloquial tones of narration. As one moves toward the latter essays, it is possible to discern a slightly lower degree of tolerance concerning technical defects, still highly prioritizing the exhortatory role of the novel stemming from the Holy Defense values.

Another case that unveils a vital point not only regarding Farāsat's novel but also regarding the critical essays dealing with the work's adherence to Islamic values is the novel's treatment of women. For instance, critics such as Jazini endorse the novel's depiction of women. This demonstrates that the story and the essay analyzing it strictly adhere to the codes of the Holy Defense. As such, these writings chiefly confine women's participation in the Iran-Iraq War to supporting roles: preparing food in the mosques and treatment of the injured fighters, to name a few. Concurring with Jazini, in her essay published in 2017, Ensieh Behbudi highlights the agency, valor, and self-sacrifice of Iranian women during the Iran-Iraq War. She also examines the role of women in the six of the Iran-Iraq War novels, including *The Headless Palms:*

> On a general level, the book abounds with memoirs, chronicles, dairies, documents, and facts demonstrating women's braveries on the war fronts, behind the fronts, and as POWs in Iraqi camps. This is how the writer elaborates on the significance of Iranian women in the Iran-Iraq War:

> In the wake of the triumph of the Islamic revolution in Iran, the imposed eight-year war with Iraq provided Iranian women with a conduit through which they could activate their

> potential that otherwise would not have blossomed. The war elevated the [Iranian] society from mundaneness, driving it toward safeguarding the [Islamic revolutionary] values. This, in turn, led to the creation of outstanding literary works.
>
> The women who, in a variety of ways, took part in the Holy Defense felt responsible and developed into the generation of the revolution. They believe in the Islamic worldview, which posits death, not as a terminal point in life, rather as the beginning of life on another plain. Therefore, Iranian women welcomed *the martyrdom of their children and spouses* [emphasis added] as the commencement of their eternal lives. This helped them endure hardship. The portrayal of such women in stories could lead to safeguarding and creating lofty values for Iranian women (82).

One may observe that the most critical value for Iranian women is enduring the loss of husbands and sons. Hence, although Behbudi holds forth about the bravery and values of Iranian women, she reduces their roles to supporting men, robbing them to a great extent of their agency.

Behbudi, then focuses on the female characters and the role they play in the Holy Defense novels she has selected for her research, including *The Headless Palms*, which she labels as "the six select novels of the Holy Defense" (82). Then, she purports that *The Headless Palms* hinges on a true story: what happened to Hāji Shāh family in Khorramshahr. The beginning of the war marks the beginning of the story. The novel, on the other hand, ends when Iranian forces set Khorramshahr free. She considers the novel as one about having a positive attitude toward the war. It is brimming with light, hope, and self-sacrifice. The people living in cities far from the fronts may seem confused and careless about the war, but they sincerely wish for the victory of Iranian forces.

She then divides the characters into men and women, postulating that the protagonist, Naser, and some other men are soldiers of Islam considering martyrdom as the biggest reward. Conversely, some other men are thieves, hoarders, and profiteers. Behbudi implies that men play the leading roles in the story. On the other hand, one may perceive the main female character, Kobrā, as a dynamic character as, at the beginning of the story, she is an ordinary woman without any motives. However, after her son dies on the battlefield, she gains strength and becomes aware of the ideals of the revolution and war. Hence, although Behbudi claims that Kobrā is a dynamic character, this is the extent of her dynamism: to be the mother of a martyr and feel content about it which introduces a note of passivity. One can compare this with the active role that the male characters such as Jahānārā and Hosein play. Furthermore, Malek ʻAbdi and Parvin Khalili (2018) compare another Farāsat's work, *Faqat Āsheq Zabān Āsheq Rā Mifahmad* [*Only a Lover Understands Another Lover*] with *Ardhh Alborteqāl Alhazin* [*The Land of the Sad Orange*] by Ghasan Kanfani. They hold that both works focus on women who usually play positive and outstanding roles. These women are mostly oppressed and hardworking, and after ["only after"] their husbands' martyrdom, they act the family's breadwinner. My critique here is that the cases and examples such as the ones discussed above do not warrant the claim that Iranian women have performed notable roles in the Iran-Iraq War. This could imply two alternatives: either the role of Iranian women has not been sufficiently significant as purported by this book or, which is more likely, due to the ideological restraints, she has shifted her focus from braveries of Iranian women in captivity and front lines to their roles as a supporting one.

Another distinguishing feature that I attribute, as my critique, to the dominance of the Islamic values and ideological outlook in the Holy defense essays written on the novels belonging to the same category is that the same values push the technical, structural, and stylistic

considerations to a side. This is especially the case with the earlier essays with piecemeal progress toward the technical evaluations acquiring more significant status that one may observe in an essay such as "Nakhhlhā-ye Bisar: Talāsh-e Sotudani Dar Ravāyat-e Moqāvemat-e Khorramshahr" ["The Headless Palms: a Commendable Endeavor in Narrating Khorramshahr's Resistance"] (2012), Hamid Nurshamsi contends that despite problems with the narrative's structure and plot, given the period in which Farāsat penned the novel, one may deem it a praiseworthy endeavor to create a narrative of the eight years of the Holy Defense. Nurshamsi also purports that, after three decades after the outbreak of the war and subsequently the dawn of story writing about it, his approach to the novel would be a mixture of an analytical view of its flaws and considering the affordances of writing it.

According to Nurshamsi, the literary critics analyzing the Holy Defense works are of two different viewpoints: the one that examines the text and its structure and another which appraises the time and place in which the writer has created the story. He further believes that it is possible to analyze Farāsat's novel from both viewpoints as it is amongst a few first noticeable works in the field of literature of resistance [i.e., Holy Defense]. It is noteworthy that even in his 2019 report as the reporter for arts and culture at Khabargozāri-ye Def'ā-e Moqaddas [The Holy Defense Press,] Hoseinipur maintains that the literary works akin to Holy Defense are still nascent. This is because they have stemmed from the experience of the Iran-Iraq War and, as such, they have so much room for development. This is especially the case with the novels and short stories that depict the Iran-Iraq War. Furthermore, Hoseinipur entertains that Islam, and the Islamic Revolution are Farāsat's gravest concerns focusing on these two in his stories. It is also noteworthy that as time passed, the subject of his stories switched from a direct portrayal of the war to depicting the lives of the veterans.

The same adherence to the ideological Islamic values, according to Nurshamsi, exerts an impression on how the novel reflects and represents reality. He further stipulates that although the novel's main task has been to narrate how oppressed had been the people and defenders of Khorramshahr, it has also included other issues. The ousted President Banisadr's [alleged] treason and international petroleum market, are amongst those issues. The narrative's capacity and capability to include these in a highly tactless manner notwithstanding, one should commend the writer's audacity in this regard. The point with Nurshamsi's appraisal is that it focuses on the content, but unlike the earlier essays on the novel, this is not at the expense of the technical aspects. Nurhshamsi's essay might be the turning point of a trajectory that commenced in 2006 with a critical essay by Parviz Shishehgarān. The latter purports that the novel offers a full-scale apology of Islamic values: the city, its earth, and its people turn into a Promised Land, a land that everybody remembers with chagrin, and many attain martyrdom to set it free. In fact, this novel is the story of a city, a city that can be none other than Khorramshahr. He further holds that *The Headless Palms* falls in the category of chronicles. Shishehgarān also claims that in today's world, defining and representing reality in an objective manner is out of the question. Hence, nobody can claim that it has created an out-and-out realist work. The objective reality here is the outbreak of the war and Khorramshahris' defense of their city. The writer has chosen this historical reality and has fictionalized it. In *The Headless Palms,* the historical background is there. What is absent, however, is the fictitious world and fictitious characters. Unfortunately, this major weakness has impeded its permanent presence in various historical places and times. *Although the writer has no commitment to objective realities, he commits the story's world as it is* [emphasis added]. What one may deduce here is Shishehgarān's approval of the novel's adherence to Islamic values. The same adherence affects the novel's portrayal of external

realities. In fact, the novel's objective points of departure are the facts, such as the Iraqi invasion of Iran and the almost unique significance of Khorramshahr (Jazini & Shishehgarān). The said objective points of departure, however, lead to a full-blown apology of Islamic values, an apology so strong that it suppresses the fictionality of the story turning it into a chronicle of some sort (Shishehgarān).

Mohammad Hanif's essay (2011) is another critical commentary in which the point of departure is content-based, Islamic, and sociological observations. That is, the fact that Farāsat has created a society composed of two opposing poles: there are war, blood, fire, resistance, displacement, and desperation, on the one hand, and indifference, carelessness, and even taking advantage of the situation, on the other. He claims that Farāsat's perspective on society is realistic. My critique here is that this essay is published in a website that has been dedicated to promoting the culture of [Islamic] self-sacrifice and martyrdom tends to undercut any comprehensive, non-ideological analysis of the novel. Hanif, then, draws upon Rezā Rahgozar's critique of the work's viewpoint, postulating that it hovers between omniscient and limited omniscient. Furthermore, the characters have no identities, and the reader does not get to know them. Rahgozar, furthermore, criticizes, amongst other things, the poor and artificial quality of the prose as well as some crude personifications of objects and natural phenomena. My critique here is that this essay is composed of two parts: Hanif's comments that err on the side of general and ideological comments as well as Rahgozar's that tend to be more technical and detailed-oriented. The point is that, despite some progress toward expounding technicalities, the critiques by both Hanif and Rahgozar still fall in the category of Islamic and ideological writing. Malek 'Abdi and Parvin Khalili purport that Farāsat's work has taken the economic traumas ensuing the Iran-Iraq War very seriously. Concurring with Hanif's sociological stance, the two critics hold

that Farāsat adopts a critical realist stance demonstrating the related social and historical conditions. The status of martyr and martyrdom as well as belief in religion and spirituality are of prime importance here. It seems that ‘Abdi and Khalili are of the opinion that martyrdom and economic traumas have been Farāsat’s points of departure partly determining the structure and style of his work.

I view A. Kh. Farāhang’s “Nakhlhā-ye Bisar; Ravāyat-e Derakhshān Az Korramshahr” [“The Headless Palms; A Brilliant Narrative of Khorramshahr”] (2018) as similarly exhortatory. Moreover, the reason behind the novel’s lingering success, according to the writer, is its [structural and stylistic] accuracy and strength. Presumably, the work’s linear plot causes its [structural and stylistic] accuracy and strength. That is, instead of having a complex or twisted plot conducive to a thoughtful analysis of characters and their development, a linear plot having a fast pace helps yield a firmer structure and a more authentic style.

Moreover, as Farāhang stipulates, there are two views on *Headless Palms*: some classify it as a novel and others as a memoir. He is personally of the opinion that the narrative is primarily imaginative. Those imaginative elements, however, reflect and resonate with the objective realities of the war in those years. Here, considering the essay’s overall stance, by objective realities of the war, the writer presumably means the Holy Defense values and how imaginative (i.e., fictitious) elements have given rise to the said values. Despite all this, Islamic and ideological values still hold the upper hand compared with the technical aspects of story writing: the essay purports that *The Headless Palms* does not judge on its own. Instead, it leaves the final judgment to its readers. That is why it is possible to easily ignore too long and detailed a narrative having characters that do nothing to propel the plot forward. Ditto, that is why it is

possible to believe that Farāsat's novel is one of the outstanding works of the Holy Defense literature.

As I mentioned, two interrelated facts warrant an in-depth discussion here: the novel first appeared in 1983. However, the first critical commentary on it appeared in 2006. Moreover, it is true that since the very beginning, there has been some degree of attention to the technicalities of story writing. This attention slightly increases in the later essays. Still, adherence to Islamic values, as crystalized in the Holy Defense doctrine, has remained the quintessence of the critical commentaries on Farāsat's novel as well as the novel itself. Here, I would like to make some points by comparing the first publication dates of *The Scorched Earth* and *The Headless Palms,* which are 1982 and 1983, respectively as well as the dates for the first critical commentary on *The Scorched Earth* and *The Headless Palms* which are 1982 and 2006, respectively. Now, one may compare and contrast the critical essays on *The Headless Palms* as a trajectory with the ones on the novels analyzed in the first chapter. Then, it would be possible to observe the latter commence with an out-and-out focus on the content free from textual and technical considerations. Ideological commitments or their absence, particularly as crystalized in the allegiance with the Islamic regime or Marxism, comes as the lynchpin to these critical examinations. There is, then, a very gradual progress toward emphasizing the technical side of story writing. The former also commences with stressing Islamic and ideological values. This time, however, this is interrelated with structural and stylistic considerations.

Furthermore, a vital fact is that *The Headless Palms* came out in 1983. However, the first critical commentary I have included here has been published long after. This is because there might have been some worthwhile critical commentaries on the novel, published between 1983 and 2006, which I did not manage to find even though I did a thorough search. The second

possibility is that there had been some essays on the novel published in those years. However, they had mostly been rereading of the story instead of hashing out the details or conducting in-depth analyses. Still another possibility is that, as in Farāsat's novel, the above critical commentaries mostly fall into the category of Holy Defense Literature. that is, they are apologies for the novel and the values it upholds. This would mean the critical commentaries are there to praise the novel's commitment to Islamic and ideological values ignoring the technicalities of story writing altogether. Even if they point out anything in the way of criticism, they prioritize the ideological part.

Just as The Holy Defense literature is a relatively new phenomenon, its related literary criticism is even more nascent, presumably something which started toward the beginning of the 21st century. It is noteworthy that the eminent literary critics who, around the 1980s and 1990s, commented on the Persian literary works, including those of Mahmud and Fasih, have abstained from criticizing the literary works that fall into the category of the Holy Defense. This could be due to either the fact that this category was impermeable to the critics standing outside it or the said critics refrained from touching the subject due to their own political and ideological differences.

After reading these chronologically arranged critical commentaries on Farāsat's novel, there are two overall conclusions. The first one could be that the critical commentaries on Farāsat's novel fall, by and large, in the category of Holy Defense Literature the way the novel itself does. In this type of criticism, commitment to the Islamic and revolutionary values is of prime significance. Whereas some of these commentaries have just focused on the novel's Islamic and ideological stance and values, praising its exhortatory role while Iran was still in war with Iraq, there has been a second critical camp. This camp acknowledges technical and structural issues

in *The Headless Palms* while still foregrounding the ideological part. Critiques of this kind have justified the technical, structural, and stylistic flaws by purporting a number of points, such as being arguably the first novel of the Holy Defense or the Iran-Iraq War.

The common denominator among all the above commentaries is that they have embraced a mixture of analyses of thematic as well as technical dimensions of Farāsat's novel. In other words, unlike the earlier analyses of Mahumd's work which demonstrate a trajectory starting from out-and-out attention to the thematic and ideological considerations to a complete focus on technicalities, the essays dealing with *The Headless Palms* consider both dimensions. The latter attaches more importance to the components that constitute the Holy Defense character of the story. Furthermore, one can postulate two points regarding the timeline's starting point and duration for the critical commentaries on *The Headless Palms*. Whereas the first edition of the novel appeared in 1983, 2006 marks the starting point of the timeline containing various essays on the novel. There is a long interval here, especially if one compares with *The Scorched Earth's* first edition and the first critical essays on it, both happening in 1981.

As the subsection dealing with the critical commentaries on *The Headless Palms* comes to an end, I tend to embark upon a close reading of the novel. Then, drawing upon the Althusserian concept of ideology[2], I will offer my own analysis of Farāsat's work.

Prior to the close reading of the text, it will be prudent to focus on two epigraphs that come before the main body of the text. According to the first epigraph, the writer dedicates the novel to "The brave member of IRGC and the friendly people of Khorramshahr." Even before the reader starts the novel, this epigraph suggests the novel's stance on the Iran-Iraq War as a Holy Defense

[2]- What has come between parts I and II is a summary of *On* Ideology by Louis Althusser, 1- 58.

work. That is, by juxtaposing IRGC and the people of Khorramshahr, he equates defending the country (of which Khorramshahr is a part) with a religious and ideological task IRGC performed.

The second epigraph states that "This text [novel] is a reality in search of truth." I do not plan here to search for the possible philosophical meanings of reality and truth. Instead, I will endeavor to observe whether the narrative and structure of the novel will support such a claim for truth through having the capacity for multiple approaches to truth or, conversely, if the novel's internal logic is not open to a variety of interpretations.

The narrative is about a family who lives in Khorramshahr, near the Iraqi border. The incidents and dialogues of the opening pages indicate the beginning of Iraqi forces' aggression and the necessity of families retreating to safer areas and young men preparing themselves for war. The first chapter is straightforward and concise, introducing the family and the city. The second chapter starts with a description of dawn, introducing an overt symbolic overtone. The family's religiosity is evident in the performance of their prayers. They decide to leave the town, believing that they will return soon. The family leaves except for the two sons, who decide to stay and defend the city. The story portrays the farewell scene between the sons and the rest of the family in simple yet captivating sentences. These descriptions contain a verse from the Quran and a line from a religious poem. *Death to America* is a significant slogan people chant in demonstrations and mobilizations for war. The two brothers look down on a friend fleeing the town with his family. The barricades remind the two brothers of the days of the revolution. One can see in the narrative that the war is the continuation of the Islamic Revolution, which triumphed over a year earlier. The narrative's viewpoint is limited omniscient; the narrator focuses on Naser (one of the two brothers), who describes the city and its inhabitants. But he is not a passive observer. Rather, he has his own agency. For example, bravely and single-handedly, he takes captive several Iraqi soldiers (37). The

novel describes some people, especially shopkeepers, drivers, and businessmen taking advantage of the war-stricken people's plight (40).

In this work, the clergy have a special status and play positive roles: they are there not only to solve problems and show the way but also to give people hope and attract them with their charismatic features. This is so exaggerated and intense that, at times, it borders on eroticism. A mullah has been dispatched from one of the rural areas of Lorestan province. Here is how Naser reacts when he first meets the mullah: "Naser can't take his eyes off the Sheikh's tall and lean body. Sheikh comes forward lightly and quickly dragging Naser's amorous eyes after him" (58). Above all, this is the Imam (a.k.a. Khomeini), who counts as the commander-in-chief, and everybody should obey him. In other words, defending the country is enmeshed with defending the Islamic regime (65). As the reader proceeds, symbolism becomes increasingly overt. For example, the headless palms remind the reader too quickly of the Khorramshahr people who lost their lives in the battle. Equally symbolic are descriptions of sunset: "it surrenders itself to the enemy's trenches and everywhere is blood-stained; the blood of Iranians…" (43).

There is a scene in which a group of young Iranian men who, except for one, are unarmed and quickly captured a group of fully armed Iraqi soldiers. Then, they order the captured soldiers to teach them how to use their weapons (47-49). This is hardly plausible. Even the novel's very heroic atmosphere and the previous laudatory descriptions of the Iranian soldiers and volunteers do not render this sufficiently plausible. In a word, this does not comport with the internal logic of the story's internal logic. As such, one could appraise this part as unrealistic per the coordinates of the world the novel depicts.

The novel draws sympathy while glossing over the deeper realities of war. In other words, the way Nasser and the people around him react to what happens to them is a mixture of

affective responses mingled with religious and patriotic feelings. Neither narrator nor the characters offer any in-depth analysis of the situation and the reasons behind the war. They merely purport that the country is fresh from a revolution, the army is disorganized. Also, president Banisadr is a traitor, and, as a result, Sadam Husein opportunistically decided to start a war with Iran. Up to page Seventy, there have been implicit accusations against the then president (namely, Abolhasan Banisadr whose name nobody mentions), considering him as a traitor. On page ninety-one, this accusation becomes explicit.

The language that Farāsat uses in the beginning of *The Headless Palms* seems natural, organic, and detail-oriented except for the overtly symbolic patches (i.e., the title itself).

> Hearing the news and seeing a seething crowd, the family's mother has lost composure. She is now at home and now in the alley. When she remembers Naser said that on that day he had a business in the whereabouts of Shalamcheh, she feels even more anxious. Should she bump into, or trip over, or be asked any question that weren't just particular to her ease, she would start hollering so that her pent-up pain would be vented for sure (9).

As the reader moves along, however, the novel contains more exhortatory language advertising what appears to be the regime's agenda:

> -What did he [Commander Jahānārā] say?
>
> - There was nothing new in his words, but they were encouraging as always. He said: "God protects us; that is why we will win the war for sure. It doesn't matter if our guys are attaining martyrdom; what matters is the survival of our School of Thought [i.e., Islamic Ideology]. If the School survives, we will have everything… (119).

The nove abounds with actual figures, such as the famous IRGC commander, Mohammad Jahānārā" who lost his life defending Khorramshahr. The appearance of these real figures in the narrative is one of the reasons that make me attribute the slogans and exhortatory language to the regime's agenda. Another interesting feature of this novel is that it portrays Iraqi soldiers. This portrayal is at times a close-up of them fighting or surrendering to Iranian forces. Of the six novels I have selected for this research, Farāsat's work is the only one that directly portrays Iraqi soldiers. Yet, like the novel's other characters, they are flat types. Presumably, the same flat portrayal of Iraqi soldiers as coward and mean individuals bestows the story to portray them freely and unequivocally. In other words, there is no point in the novel being weary of censorship. However, other novels selected for the present dissertation do not seem to manifest the same degree of allegiance with the Holy Defense values. As such, they tend to shun the portrayal of Iraqi soldiers because otherwise, they may face the hazard of the censors' blue pen.

As the reader moves along, *The Headless Palms*'s symbolism becomes more and more artificial. This sentence is a case in point: "…Atash engar rouye qalb-e Naser ast ke zabnaneh mikeshad…" ["…as if the fire is flaming from Naser's heart…] (87). This is when the writer talks about the fire in the battlefield right after Naser's sister gets killed. It is possible to appraise this overt, not-so-organic symbolism as a manifestation of the exhortatory language employed to propagate the Holy Defense" ideals.

After performing bravely in the war front, Naser gets shot. He receives instructions to leave the war zone. He, then stays in Tehran for a while. He, however, returns without his injury has healed. After some time, he again leaves the war zone for Tehran to inform his parents of his brother's death. Naser experiences an idle life in Tehran. He feels upset by some people's apathy

toward the war. Finally, he returns to the battlefield, where he meets the famous IRGC commander, Mohammad Jahanara.

My critical analysis of Farāsat's work, especially in terms of style, is that there is an incongruency between high and low or literary and colloquial registers employed in writing the novel. For example, one can compare a cannonball "asemān-e siāh-e shab rā jer [a colloquial word] midahad" which means "tears down the dark tapestry of the sky" (151), and the symbolic and quasi-poetic descriptions of sunrise and sunset (Ibid.).

Naser stays on the battlefield but loses his physical and mental health. After a while, he is dispatched to Tehran to be hospitalized but leaves his treatment incomplete, returning to Khorramshahr. Finally, his mother receives the news of his death on the phone.

Here is a chunk of the novel that unveils the degree of its allegiance with the guidelines and conventions of the Holy Defense Novel: Someplace in the novel, a mullah (i.e., a clergyman) asks Naser about the name of the guerilla group to which he is a member. Naser says the name is Scorpion. The clergyman then encourages Naser to change the name to something on par with Islamic values: "Later, Nasser runs into his own sister who, along with other women, dissembles guns in a mosque (57)." This could mean two things at the same time. Either the novel's world allows women to mix with men dealing with a gun in a country where otherwise sexual segregation, especially in mosques, is strictly enforced or the war conditions make the presence of armed women plausible. As one can see, the ideological nature of the novel, as crystalized in the concept of the Holy Defense, affects the reader's perception of reality at every turn. Hence, it will be prudent to focus on the concept of ideology first to see whether the novel fulfills it its initial premise or promise that "this text [novel] is a reality in search of the truth."

Althusser defines ideology as “a representation of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence” (36). Building upon a historical background, he divides the same into particular and general.” My contention is that, in so far as *The Headless Palms,* as well as each one of the critical commentaries written on it, fall in the category of the Holy Defense, it is possible to establish correspondences between them and Althusserian notions of ideology in general and ideology in particular. He starts by drawing upon the second volume of *Capital* in which Carl Marx holds that to survive, capitalism should reproduce not only its required material conditions but also the means of its reproduction, including the reproduction of labor power. This mainly transpires outside firms, that is, in and by education systems such as schools, churches, and army. These institutions provide the labor force with know-how aiming at not only reproduction of skills but also reproduction of the subjection to the ruling class. This would be practicing an ideology or what Althusser later calls ideology in particular. In other words, each society is composed of two specific determinants: an infrastructure (that is, economy) and a superstructure composed of two levels or instances, politico-legal, and ideology (15). That is, what immediately surrounds the novel and each of the critical commentaries is the prescriptions and guidelines that the Islamic regime's cultural, propaganda, and educational institutions in Iran have issued. Chief among these institutions is the Ministry of Culture & Islamic Guidance, Howzeh-ye Honari-ye Sazman-e Tablighat-e Eslami [The Arts Bureau of The Organization for the Islamic Propaganda,] and IRGC. The guidelines and instructions in question give shape to the way one perceives the world of the story. As I pointed out in the previous chapter, a novel’s inherent and true ideology might be the same as its internal logic. That is, there are elements such as style, tone, point of view, and structure that add up to form a literary work’s unique internal logic. It is the same unique internal logic that provides the work’s unique way of

perceiving and understanding the world, that is, what one can stipulate as the work's ideology. In a novel such as *The Headless Palms*, as in other works of the Holy Defense, the same guidelines propel writers to choose the components of the story. The writer is to choose style, tone, point of view, and structure in a fashion that would comport with the Holy Defense values. The choice of characters is a case in point: the clergymen and commanders of IRGC are good and benevolent but also good-looking and charismatic. Another case is the choices of setting: the local mosques are not only places for worship but also hubs for recruiting and training people for the armed resistance and places in which the Islamic regime makes its power felt (Farāsat 39- 40). Diametrically opposed to those are areas in Tehran, the capital of the country, which is far from the war fronts and is brimming with citizens whose stance on the war and war veterans, as well as their dress code, do not mainly concur with or even counters the values the regime prescribes vigorously practices in the war zones (Farāsat 139-140 & 178). In both cases, the ideological novel or ideological critique written on it stands at a center surrounded by an ideology, which in turn, is surrounded by the ideology in general.

Similarly, one can argue that *The Headless Palms* or any Islamic or ideological commentaries written on it is surrounded by and changes against the ideology in particular. It is easily possible to correspond what a reader sees in *The Headless Palms* (i.e., mosques as well as IRGC and Basij militia) with the cultural and educational institutions that Althusser deems as in charge of the reproduction of labor power, that is, church and army. This, in turn, changes against the more immense backdrop of experiences. He holds that it is possible to attribute a number of realities to ideology. These realities are distinct and specialized institutions immediately recognizable to an observer, including religious, educational, cultural, and family

institutions. Moreover, there is an interplay between a Repressive State Apparatus and Ideological State Apparatus.

As stated above, ideology is "a representation of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence. The question is why this transposition of the actual conditions should be an imaginary one so that "they represent to themselves their real conditions of existence" (Althusser 37)? Hence, "what is represented in ideology, therefore, is not the system of the real relations which govern the existence of individuals, but the imaginary relations of those individuals to the real relations in which they live" (Althusser 39)[3].

One may employ the above points to analyze *The Headless Palms* and the related critical essays. Here, the novel is there to assert allegiance with the values that render it a work that belongs to the category of the Holy Defense. Hence, on the one hand, the cultural branch or institutions of the Islamic regime could be "ideology in particular." On the other, although there is an ideology in particular that lends shape and direction to the literary work, there is a bigger background that one may refer to as ideology in general. This is what exists for every work of literature and critical essays written about them, even though they do not give allegiance to any ideology in particular. I believe that these two types of ideology exert two different, if not contradictory, effects on reader's perception of the reality of the novel. Whereas what immediately surrounds the literary work or its related critical commentary, ideology in particular,

[3]- What has come between parts I and II is a summary of *On* Ideology by Louis Althusser, 1-58.

tends to solidify and give a particular direction to one's understanding of reality as per the agenda of the ideology manifested as the Holy Defense, ideology in general" grants each reader the possibility and potential of "the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence" (Althusser 36). It is this *imaginary* relationship that provides each individual with the possibility of connection with "*the real conditions of their existence."* The same endorses the individuality and uniqueness of each reader's understanding of the world even though they read it initially through an ideological (i.e., the Holy Defense) literary work and commentary. The note at the beginning of the novel presumably speaks to the same: "This writing [novel] is a reality in search of truth" (Farāsat 7). Here, one may consider "reality" as the individual and imaginary relation that each reader (i.e., literary critic or ordinary reader) establishes with the conditions of their existence, with an overall truth, that each one of them understands differently and subjectively through their imagination. In other words, it is possible to discern two forces in this story, of which one is centripetal and the other one is centrifugal. In other words, it is possible to discern two forces in this story, one centripetal and the other centrifugal.

Conversely, there is a centrifugal force here akin to the concept of the ideology in general, which provides the possibility of the individual understanding of reality. I contend that a compromise between the two forces provides the reader with an ultimate perception of the fictional world at hand. Whether these two forces exert (un)equal forces on each other, in the context of the novel, merits a careful analysis. While the sentence in the beginning of the novel promises an individual understanding of the world the novel creates, the rest of the novel hardly offers any details and clues to support the claim. Hence, the resultant vector tilts more toward a predetermined and ideologically controlled version of the truth. Since, due to its ideological nature, the against the backdrop, which is immediately around it, this combination of the novel

with what immediately surrounds it also transforms against the backdrop of the bigger experiences, that is, ideology in general. This movement must also be slow due to the abundant potential of individuals and their imaginative relations to the truth that that more immense backdrop presumably provides. It is probably because of the same reason that one can see little differences or changes through time in the critical commentaries written on *the Headless Palms*. It stands to reason that if a literary work or a critical essay does not fall into the category of the ideological in particular, the ideological entity that would immediately surround the work and, due to its ideological nature will least evolve against the bigger backdrop. Therefore, the work of fiction or criticism goes through more fundamental changes against the bigger backdrop of unfiltered and unchanneled experiences that only correspondence with ideology in general.

Then, all these interactions and overlaps change through time and against the bigger backdrop of experiences. However, since both the novel and the related commentaries fall in the category of the Holy Defense, the sheer existence of an ideology in particular immediately surrounding all the above components renders changes slow, so much so that their individual and collective transformations against the backdrop of time will be slower. Furthermore, the individual differences between the critical commentaries and their stances on the novel will be less distinct.

The third level results from the interactions and overlaps of a much homogenized second level with a bigger and more varied backdrop of experiences. This bigger backdrop embraces more variety than the first level but still evinces more homogeneity compared to cases with no intermediate ideological surroundings.

Similar to the critical commentaries on *The Headless Palms*, the ones on *Winter of 84* I selected for this study seemed to commence in 2010, that is, more than two decades after the first

edition of the novel in 1984. This is on the grounds that I have chosen essays that contain milestones and turning points in analyzing the novel. These essays also encapsulate other, at times contradictory, critical stances employed as the review of the related literature or as the ideas up for debate and possibly rebuttal. Alirezā Shohāni's essay in 2010, which includes comments by Jamāl Mirsādeqi and Mohammad Rezā Sarshār may be a case in point. In the same manner, Ferdowsi's essay is an amalgam of his views as well as others whose writings he has drawn upon, such as Ehsan Yarshater, Azar Nafisi, Sāsān Shāyesteh, and a Mirzābenevis [sic]. Moreover, one may see a trajectory of changes (2010-2019) here whereby the starting point is anchored in the contradiction between external historical-biographical realities versus formalistic and textual consideration as well as whether the novel has been faithful to those external facts. Then, there is progress toward what lies above and beyond the principal distinction in question to see how the technical and structural capacities and characteristics of *Winter of 84* provide it with the potential for exhibiting the realities of the time without merely reflecting the simple external facts. In a word, one may roughly divide the commentaries in question into two kinds, whereby the earlier ones evince a gradual movement from the exterior (i.e., historical and biographical conditions surrounding the work) toward the interior (i.e., structural and stylistic components) of the novel. At the same time, the latter exhibits a reverse movement.

The point of departure for earlier essays dealing with Fasih's novel is how external realities such as the Iran-Iraq War affect the main characters in the novel and give shape to their world. That is, these essays mostly tend to ascertain how the work reacts to issues such as the legitimacy of the Iran-Iraq War and, by extension, the Islamic regime. In his essay published in 2010, Alirezā Shohāni attributes *Winter of 84* to the second category he has devised to classify the Persian novels of the Iran-Iraq War, that is, the works adopting a hostile stance toward the

war. Moreover, in a way, the critic's point of departure is paratextual factors and how they affect the way the components of the novel connect, creating the structural and stylistic characteristics of the story. Shohāni also classifies stories such as *Winter of 84* as the ones that usually refrain from depicting the war and war fronts directly; rather, they tend to focus on the repercussions of the war and its impacts on the people's social and individual lives. The said works [e.g., *Winter of 84*] are the creations of the writers who started their careers prior to the 1979 revolution. In these stories, one can consider the protagonist as the writer's representative. *"Winter of 84* is the most impressive and the most powerful of his [Fasih's] stories in terms of fictional elements" Shohāni quotes the contemporary writer, Jamāl Mirsādeqi, who contends that "What gives credit to this novel is its critical and revealing character. A criticism now implicit and now explicit of the catastrophic dimensions of the war, massacres, and social conditions (60)." In this respect, Shohāni contends that *Winter of 84* differs from the novels that fall in the first category, usually defending the Islamic regime as well as a positive view of the war. He entertains that it is Fasih that condemns all destructions and losses. However, he is very sympathetic to the young men who lose their lives in the battlefields as well as civilians going through difficulties. He thinks all the problems in Iranian society stem from the Iran-Iraq War. In a word, as in the two previous critics, Shohāni's point of departure is the historical and political conditions surrounding the novel affecting the configuration of the structural and stylistic components of the story.

Furthermore, Fasih's stance, as *Winter of* 84 reflects it, has elicited Mohammad Rezā Sarshār's response, as quoted in this essay: he purports that Fasih's view of the revolution and the war has pleased outside Iran, anti-revolutionary journals and collections. The writer has done this by entering the story, which has made the characters leave the same story. Again, the novel's political stance is its point of departure, leading to the same results.

Ali Ferdowsi postulates that Fasih’s most outstanding achievement is being a chronicler of the incidents of his lifetime. He further believes that, in general, Fasih’s works, including *Winter of 84*, speak to the protagonist’s death and subsequently being absorbed and shaped into the entirety of his nation. This renders “the double unity of historical and biographical in his fiction. Also, in the novel, the enigmatic relationship between the world of the text and the world outside is part of a bigger whole that includes almost all Fasih’s work. There is a protagonist-cum- narrator in the text who is the same as Fasih in the world outside the text. This protagonist-cum-narrator shares the writer’s worldview with the reader, including his view on the notions of fate and death.

Structurally speaking, Ferdowsi presumes that the sentences in the novel demonstrate a full use of narrative techniques. He quotes Ehsan Yarshater as saying the sentences in the novel rest upon spoken language, meaning they could be incomplete, grammatically incorrect, and morally ambiguous. Drawing upon the statements she posited earlier, Ferdowsi concludes that “his [Fasih’s] approach to fiction and its relations to biography and history mark a turning point in the path modern fiction has taken in Iran.” Presumably, Ferdowsi’s essay itself is emblematic of a turn in critical comments on Fasih’s novels: He, along with some of the scholars he quotes, such as Yarshater, determine the latitude and longitude of the world that this novel creates with minimum recourse to the crude biographical and historical conditions surrounding the text or its author, primarily drawing upon the structural and stylistic components that make up a novel. The point is that the story has internalized history and biography, demonstrating them through its technical capabilities and features. Hence, it might be safe to assume that Ferdowsi’s essay is the first time an Iranian critic writing on the Iran-Iraq novels goes above and beyond the prevalent dichotomy of historical-biographical versus formalistic and technical analysis. The critic tackles

the latter focusing on structural components emblematic of historical and biographical realities. More importantly, these analyses evince a trajectory in the direction which is opposite to the earlier ones. That is progress from textual considerations such as structural and stylistic dimensions and how all these determine the way the work depicts incidents and characters. For example, in "A Comparative Study of the Prototypes in *the Scorched Earth* and *Winter of 84*," published in 2017, Roqyyeh Vahābi Daryākenāri, Ali Akbar 'Atrafi, and Hosein Feqhi examine the real-life prototypes that one can find in either of the above novels moving toward finding instances. Drawing upon these instruments, raw materials, and the power of imagination, Fasih and Mahmud embark upon creating their characters. To that end, the essay's writers, first, determine the major and minor characters in each of the novels analyzing them structurally. Then, they specify the prototypes making comparisons and contrasts between the two novels. They contend that in *Winter of 84,* Esmail Fasih has used class prototypes as well as the private life prototypes. Here, class means Iranian intellectuals, a prototype vulnerable to the Iran-Iraq war. Fasih has endeavored to portray the social, political, psychological, and economic characteristics of the groups to which these prototypes belong. My overall critique of all the above critical commentaries, that is, both groups that I discussed above, is that they unconsciously assume that there is a distance between form and content or the external conditions. This distance supposedly shapes a story, such as historical, biographical, political, and social conditions surrounding the text on the one hand and internal textual features, on the other. My contention is that there is no distance here, that is, external components of the story emanate through its structural and stylistic features. The key word here is again the internal logic," which acts as a hub where the external conditions and internal features and components interact.

Now I would like to offer a close reading of *Winter of 84*. I commence my close reading with a number of quick commentaries by other critics. Prominent among them is Shahnehpur. These commentaries give a factual, schematic view of Fasih's work. Then, I will start my reading by refuting Shahnehpur's idea of passivity when she discusses the themes such as deliverance.

The Iran-Iraq War has been amongst the subjects Fasih dealt with in six of his post-revolutionary novels. Each of the six works tackles this subject to a different degree. Among the said novels *Sorayya in a Comma* and *Winter of* 84 almost entirely focus on the war. This noticeable preoccupation is "his close encounter with the war" (Shahnehpur 45). What distinguishes these two novels is that they portray the impact of the war on the Iranian upper classes and intellectuals.

The incidents of *Winter of 84* transpire between 12/21/84 and 03/21/1985. Thematically speaking, the novel has two axes: the first one portrays the war of the cities as a means to demonstrate death is the only possible solution to the plight of Iranians. The second one is although every human must live, they should go through fearful incidents from which they have no way to run (Shahnehpur). Moreover, the plot has two significant strands or characters: "Edris Āl-e Maṭrud, an Iranian Arab who has vanished on the war front, and Manṣur Farjām, a US-educated Iranian computer scientist and an avatar of Fasih, who returns to Iran to annihilate himself by going to the fronts." (Ferdowsi quoting Mirzābenevis). Subsequently, what is noteworthy is the novel's allusion to *Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Beckett, which speaks to the theme of waiting and the associated passivity. She further holds that the lives of the characters in this novel are similar to those in Beckett's play: they are waiting for a savior to save them and improve their lives (Shahnehpur 97). Here, I would like to counter Shahnehpur's idea of

passivity, especially if it means absolute passivity in *Winter of 84*. In contrast to *Sorayya in a Coma*, in *Winter of 84*, Jalāl Āryan and other main characters, such as Mansur Farjām, demonstrate degrees of agency and autonomy. For instance, Āryān chooses to take the three trips [which Shahnehpur calls narrative portions (47)] or Farjām decides to go to the war fronts.

The protagonist, Jalāl Āryān, leaves Tehran for Ahvaz, Khuzestan, to find Edris and inform his father, Matrud, about his condition. Edris's whereabouts, due to the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq War, is unknown. It is even possible that he has been killed in the war. Matrud used to be Āryān's servant, and his son, Edris has joined the Iranian forces deployed on the fronts.

Jalāl Āryān has an emotional, albeit somewhat platonic, attachment to a beautiful and classy woman who is, at the time, a widow living under a lot of pressure. He marries the woman to save her from a greedy and obnoxious Abu Ghāleb who wants to force her to marry him. Even then, there is no true intimacy between them. Ferdowsi postulates that Fasih portrays women as fragile, vulnerable, and prone to victimization and suicide. Here, Ferdowsi quotes a critic who believes that "the only good women in Fasih's stories are dead women" (Badiʿ 16; see also Sāsān Shāyesta); a view that Āzar Nafisi refutes.

Fasih uses a direct, linear, and detailed manner of narration. The result is almost a straightforward realist novel. I say almost because, toward the end, the narrative deliberately mixes Mansur Farjām with Farshād. Presumably, the first time the narrative endeavors to introduce a hint of the proximity between the two is where the narrator says: "In the dark, I feel that if Farshād grows a mustache like that of Mansur Farjām, they will be mistakable" (81). Both have lost their lives on the war fronts, and bfallen in love with Lāleh (meaning tulip, which in Persian poetry symbolizes martyrdom). While describing the burial, the narrative mixes the two men and their two mothers, probably to assert the common identity and fate of all innocent

people who lose their lives in the war. Finally, it is Farjām who dies on the fronts, not Farshād. The former replaced Farshad’s documents with his so that Lāleh and Farshād could leave Iran together.

The novel’s central theme seems to be “waiting or expecting, deliverance or eternal bliss and happiness" (127) by passing through the ordeals of the time. On the very last page of the novel, the narrator speaks about a book that he sees among the personal belongings of the deceased Dr. Farjām: *Waiting for Godot* (1953) by Samuel Beckett, a literary work that, *inter alia*, speaks to the theme of deliverance through the hope that a savior named Godot (i.e., God?) would appear. The fact, however, that Jalāl Āryān finds the book among the personal effects of a person who lost his life in the war sounds at the same time ironic and doleful. Another critical theme is the obsession with death. This is true not only with the narrator but also Mansur Farjām and, in a way, all Iranians. Fasih explicitly posits this and even inserts the same in English in the middle of the Persian text: "the obsession with death" (296-297 & 317).

Winter of 84 is composed of three trips, with each trip signaling a new stage in the narrator’s quest. Each trip unfolds a part of an abyss in which Jalāl Āryān, Dr. Farjām, or other Iranians.

The narrator here is Jalāl Āryān, a US-graduate and a retired employee of The National Petroleum Co. He is originally from an old neighborhood in downtown Tehran but has lived in the oil-rich province of Khuzestan for years. In the novel’s beginning, he gives a ride to Dr. Mansur Farjām from Tehran to Ahvaz. The latter is a computer expert who has just come from the US to commence a job at The National Petroleum Co.

Jalāl Āryān leaves Tehran for Ahvaz, Khuzestan, to find Edris and inform his father, Matrud, about his condition. Matrud’s whereabouts, due to the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq War, are

unknown. It is even possible that he died on the war front. Matrud used to be Āryān's servant, and Edris has gone as a volunteer to the war front. This is the first trip. The second trip is Jalāl Āryān taking Edris to Tehran so that the latter could meet his father, Matrud. Aryan finally finds Edris, who is now a disabled war veteran. The third trip is again from Tehran to Abadan via Ahvaz. Jalāl Āryān carries a letter from authorities based in Tehran so that the military authorities release the war-disabled Edris Al Matrud. In this case, he could return to his father, Matrud, who is ill and based in Tehran.

Name symbolism is of significance here. It offers the reader a way to have a deeper grasp of the characters and the role they play in the furtherance of the plot. One can read Jalāl Āryān as Jalāl (i.e., glory or magnificence) and Āryān (i.e., Iran), which together mean the magnificence of Iran. He is the narrator in many of Fasih's works representing his own viewpoints on the story. Mansur means "the one who gets assistance or "the one who has been helped to achieve victory," and Farjām means upshot or result. Hence, Mansur Farjām signifies a helped person or the one helping the story's outcome. According to the Islamic tradition, Edris is the name of a prophet who supports learning and writing. The fact that in this novel, this is the name of a person who is not highly educated and who is also disabled may symbolize the unfortunate situation of intelligence, understanding, or scholarship in the world that this novel portrays. This is especially the case when one deems that Edris is the son of Matrud, which the latter means rejected or outcast, a dying older man who just pines over reuniting with his son. Hence, the name Edris son of Matrud, clearly speaks to the situation of the wisdom and intelligence in our contemporary world or, at least, the version of it that this work endeavors to depict. Now, a pertinent question may be why the narrative should employ a symbolism of this kind to impart a message or messages in lieu of employing more straightforward manners. The response may lie in how the

novel, as an autonomous world, is exposed to the external factors that shape it and exert influences over it. I will elaborate on this in another part of the present chapter that deals with the critical commentaries written on the novel.

As in Soraya *in a Coma*, the protagonist of this novel is Jalāl Āryān. The incidents of *Winter of 84* probably transpire a year after *Soraya in a Coma* because Mansur Farjām tells Jalāl: "You were in Paris last year" (149), an indication of Jalāl Āryān's trip to Paris in *Sorayya in a Coma*. In the latter, Jalāl wants to take care of Soraya, who is in a coma. In the latter, however, he wants t This is especially the case when one deems that Edris is the son of Matrud, which means rejected or outcast, a dying older man who pines over reuniting with his son. He wants.to find Edris and return him to his father, Matrud, in Tehran. Jalāl finally finds Edris, who is missing a leg. This one is even more elaborate:

> All the incidents, scenes, and persons in this novel, including the narrator, are fictitious. There is no department named The Center for Training of Computer Technology at any of [the Iranian] administrations, as far as I know, and this one is also totally fictitious. Any similarity or its possibility between actual incidents, scenes, and people are totally coincidental. E. F. (2).

Comparable to the above, this is what one reads at the beginning of chapter six of the novel:

> I park my car somewhere in the middle of Ayatollah Montazeri Street, right in front of the old, dusty garden of Jondishapur Hospital. Not so long ago, perhaps during Nāseredin Shah's reign, when Hosein'ali Khān Nezām Māfi, the governor of Khuzestan Province, made efforts to make the region safe and secure in the ruins of Ahvaz, he established Nāseri Port for Shushtari tradespeople. He also ordered Dezful to be built on the bank of the Karun River, granting shipping rights to foreigners- back then, this garden was like a

natural garden but not today. Today, here, any resemblance with natural gardens and trees and flowers is totally coincidental (47).

Whereas it is possible to deny any meaningful resemblance between the two paragraphs, it is also possible to think that both are invitations to cast doubt at what counts as reality, thinking of the concept as veiled or, at least, tarnished. Similarly, even admitting that there is a resemblance between reality as it was in a bygone time and some semblance of reality as what is there today could be problematic. That is, one should consider it as coincidental. By referring to the places and incidents as fictitious, the novel intends to ward off any paratextual blows or limitations on the part of the power(s) that exert little tolerance with incidents or characters that do not bow to their value systems to which they adhere.

The novel adopts a progressive approach to themes such as deliverance, death, and the Iran-Iraq War and observes Western novel writing conventions such as the disclaimer discussed above. Still, there are strong traces of Iranian nationalism and anti-Arab agenda here. For example, Abu Ghāleb, the most villainous character in the novel, is an Iranian Arab. Fasih emphasizes that his origin is a mixture of Persian and Arab. Additionally, one may deem the destructive sandstorms coming from Iraq and Saudi Arabia along those lines (*Winter of 84* 180). I believe this refutes the novel's main point, that is, deliverance for not only Iranians but also the whole of humanity. Even if the text focuses on Iran and Iranians only and even if one takes the alleged historical enmity of Arabs and Iranians into account, vilifying Arabs undercuts the humanistic vision that the novel promulgates.

After dealing with the thematic dimensions of the novel, focusing on its stylistic and textual aspects seems in order. One of the stylistic features of *Winter of 84* is that one can read pieces that seem like journalist reports on the Iran-Iraq War. These war reports (354) seem somewhat

real and plausible. This presumably stems from the fact that Jalāl Āryān keeps traveling between different cities and is abreast of various types of news. The same makes him aware of the incidents that transpire far from him, so much so that if he speaks as in a journalistic piece, this does not undercut the novel's internal logic and the way narrative unfolds.

Finally, it is Farjām who dies on the fronts, not Farshād. The former replaced Farshād's documents with his so that Lāleh and Farshād could leave Iran together. My contention is that if a novel imparts a straightforward and linear structure employing a simple and unadorned style that harbors no ambiguity in the plot, a single incident such as the above could count as an anomaly, an anomaly that keeps the reader guessing and confused even if there have already been hints such as that of page 81 as they are not sufficiently and strategically used to accommodate and structurally bolster a measure of this kind.

One may examine how the outside world tends to shape a text or fails to do that. As I explained above, in order to have a close reading of *Winter of 84*, I considered it an autonomous entity. In other words, I endeavored to analyze the work irrespective of surrounding conditions. That, however, does not mean the work exists in a vacuum and is free from outside impressions. As Pierre Macherrey holds, there is a difference between autonomy and independence. Whereas

> the autonomy of the work does not derive from an epistemological break in the familiar sense of the word; but it establishes in its own way a distinct and radical separation which forbids its assimilation into something different….In short, a book never arrives unaccompanied: it is a figure against a background of other formations, depending on them rather than contrasting with them. It is, like all products, *a second reality*, though it

> does have its own laws. As will be seen later, it is this secondariness that truly defines the work of the writer, if it is true that his function is always parodic (60 & 61).

Hence, although I tended to analyze the novel as an autonomous entity, it does not mean that it has been independent of outside forces. This may seem to be in contradiction with my previous statement that I perform the close reading of the work in the present time regardless of the historical context in which Fasih's work evolves. My response is that the outside forces that I intend to appraise here stand outside the historical context that exert gradual influence over the work and gives shape to it. Here is what Shahnehpur postulates to be the influence of outside forces on the text of the novel, withholding it from being published in Iran and finally shaping it into what it is now:

> Additionally, the significance of the novel amplifies by the author's boldness in criticizing the government's war policies and its mismanagement in recruiting the army, which led the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance to ban the novel between 1987 and 2003. While its overall anti-government tenor was a key motivation for the ban,
> the Ministry's primary reason for forbidding it was that the novel does not
> conform to Islamic doctrine regarding martyrdom. Based on Islamic teachings,
> if an individual loses his/her life while on the path of God and Islam, then s/he should be considered a martyr. In addition to this misstep, however, the novel also addresses and criticizes some of the laws enforced in Iranian society during the war, such as obligatory military service for men older than eighteen, the prohibition of female employment, and the requirement that an ideological exam had to be undertaken and passed by those wishing to be employed in government offices.
>
> After banning *Zemestān-e 62 [Winter of 84]* in Iran, the Ministry of Culture and Islamic

> Guidance ordered Fasih to rephrase, remove, or rethink certain passages, sentences, and words that might be interpreted as not conforming with Islamic principles and those of the Revolution. Fasih, however, did not do as the Ministry asked, and the book was suddenly and surprisingly reprinted in 2003 without censorship (48-49).

The above comments and information shed light on why and how apart from analyzing a text as an autonomous entity; one should examine how the outside world tends to shape a text or fails to do that. Shahnehpur also highlights the disclaimer in the beginning of the novel which she believes has been added to the beginning of all Fasih's novels published in Iran ever since 2003 [I disagree with Shahnehpur as the disclaimer was there since the first edition of the novel in 1984]. This disclaimer denies any deliberate similarity between the names and incidents inside the book and in the world outside. Shahnehpur has an unequivocal understanding of the disclaimers: that the novel is purely fictitious. What comes to the mind is that these have been added to the beginnings of the novels to ward off the external forces that mentioned earlier. There is one point, however, that casts doubt on this deduction: in one of the editions of *Winter of 84* that appeared somewhere outside Iran, in a country where censorship must not be posing a problem, hence, the disclaimer must not be there to ward off any external pressure. Apart from the fact that perchance Fasih intended to observe the international or occidental protocols on novel writing, another idea may be that this is a warning to the reader or an endeavor; an endeavor to destabilize their accustomed method of reading whereby there is a one-to-one correspondence between the external reality and the world a literary work portrays; rather, the world that the novel creates contemplates the human situation, in general and in essence, as well as Iranian human's fascination with death and their expectation of deliverance. The novel

performs this through refining and processing the external realities turning them into the structural components of the novel.

As in every other war novel, Fasih's work contains historical incidents. There are also some subthemes such as "the culture of martyrdom." Shahnehpur purports that the novel promulgates this culture and its values. It is also claimed that this was because "*Zemestān-e 62* adopted the government policies over the course of the war" (Shahnehpur 79). My understanding of the novel counters Shahnehpur's: I do not believe that the narrative is totally suppressed under this external force; rather, at times, it had to give a concession or two or exhibit flexibility against the said external pressure. This pressure notwithstanding, the narrative has managed to retain its integrity, coherence, and literary value posing its two main themes. Moreover, somewhere else in her book, Shahhnehpur admits that in publishing *Winter of 84*, Fasih did not comply with the censors' demands. Hence, if he writes anything with a religious hue, that is, to a great extent, the writer's actual observations and feelings. This is contrary to *Sorayya in a Comma* in which the same external pressure seems to have wreaked havoc on the plot, characterization, and other narrative elements. The damage is to the extent that the novel is composed of several incoherent fictive planes.

Shahnehpur believes that Mansur Farjām went to the war front and "attained martyrdom" because of the regime's ideological propaganda (88), a point one can certainly observe in the novel. Still, it seems that Farjām does this because his love for Lāleh demonstrates how love could bestow meaning to human life; a life which constantly faces imminent death. There is no doubt that Mansur Farjām is an idealist. That is why, amongst other things, he leaves the US for the war-stricken Khuzestan. His idealism, however, does not seem to have a religious hue. Furthermore, as time goes by, he gets increasingly frustrated with how his higher-ups and the

government authorities procrastinate so much so that around the time he goes to the war front, little of the initial fervor is left in him.

Shahnehpur, subsequently postulates that "having said that, in many instances in the novel, Fasih ridicules some of the Islamic concepts that he feels Hezbollāhis have misused…" (90). This might contrast with her previous statement on the novel's allegiance with the regime's ideology.

As previously explained, there will be two sets of comparisons and contrasts: one between the two novels I have chosen for this chapter and another one between the two novels, the first of which I analyzed in the previous chapter. My contention of comparing the works by Fasih is to provide the reader of this dissertation with an idea of how far the second chapter (the second step in the historical process) is from the first one and how, at the same time, they speak to each other. These two may provide the reader with two overlapping entities that may merge to form an even bigger overlap. It stands to reason that this overlap or entity as well as its components change against the bigger backdrop of time.

Fasih's second war novel was published on the heels of his first. It is noteworthy that the two novels portray or are, according to some of the critical views, at least related to the Iran-Iraq War. Moreover, the protagonist, Jalāl Aryān, is the narrator of both novels. He primarily acts as the writer's mouthpiece. Travel is another significant point in both novels. Each trip contributes to the protagonist's deeper understanding of the world around him. Hence, one may consider each trip as a quest at the end of which the protagonist seems to have a more profound insight into the related concepts such as love and death. Furthermore, both novels fully sympathize with the poor, the displaced, and those who are in any way affected by the war. Still another point is the symbolic names that exist in both serving to convey the novels' messages and not just as

ornaments. Finally, both works ponder Iranians', and by extension, humanity's situation, their life, and death.

The following are some essential differences between the two novels: *Winter of 84* has a more coherent plot. Different parts and incidents form a logical whole. However, *Sorayya in a Coma* consists of several incoherent fictive planes. At times, it seems an invisible hand has removed parts of the novel and has inserted some others. As explained earlier, I do not believe that some external force has totally suppressed the narrative. Instead, at times, it had to give a concession or two or exhibit flexibility against the said external pressure. This pressure notwithstanding, the narrative has managed to retain its integrity, coherence, and literary value posing its two main themes. Moreover, somewhere else in her book, Shahnehpur admits that in publishing *Winter of 84*, Fasih did not comply with the censors' demands (48). Hence, if he writes anything with a religious hue, that is, to a great extent, the writer's genuine observations and feelings. This is contrary to *Sorayya in a Comma* in which the same external pressure seems to have wreaked havoc on the plot, characterization, and other elements of the narrative so much so that the novel is composed of several incoherent fictive planes. Furthermore, in *Winter of 84,* the narrator is very sympathetic toward the Iranian members of the army and IRGC as well as Basij paramilitary who fight against the Iraqi forces; however, he unequivocally condemns those who caused the war and the ensuing difficulties for the ordinary people. On the other, in *Sorayya in a Coma,* the narrative seems ambivalent, exhibiting mixed signs of approval and disapproval about the status quo. Still another point is that *Sorraya in a Coma* is under the impression of Hemingway's works from a variety of angels. *Winter of 1984*, conversely, does not evince such resemblances and impressions. Finally, in *Soraya in a Coma* Jalāl Āryan seems to have less agency than the same person in *Winter of 1984*. In the former, the most he does is to take a trip

abroad, a trip which is more similar to an escape. All through the way, he merely observes what is happening around him. At last, he reaches France, passively waiting for his niece to die. In the latter, he manifests a greater degree of agency, rushing to find and help people or interfering in events.

One may conclude here that the similarities and common points between the two novels are such that the second novel does not constitute a significant step beyond the first.

As discussed in the previous subsection, the step between Fasih's two novels is not big. In the same manner, due to its ideological restraints, *The Headless Palms* does not demonstrate a noticeable development compared to the novels discussed in the first chapter. The temporal proximity of the first editions of the novels in question also underscores the same point.

One may consider the overlaps and interactions between the reader's perceptions of *The Headless Palms* and *Winter of 84* with the horizons of their respective critical commentaries. Additionally, one may consider the overlaps and interactions between the reader's perceptions of the two novels as the second step of the historical process the first of which I discussed in the first chapter. Whether these two steps are equidistant warrants a careful analysis that I tried to advance in the present chapter. Whereas there is a one-year distance between the first edition of the two novels, the ideological (in the sense of the term) nature of Farāsat's novel tends to decelerate the changes into which the said overlaps and interactions morphed against the bigger backdrop of time and experiences. Furthermore, the very fact that the second novel was published approximately one year after the first one does not provide a considerable space to be bridged by the overlap. This abridgment may transform against the more enormous backdrop of experiences. Hence, if the distance the reader's perception of the two novels I discussed in

chapter one and how they overlap as one full step ahead, it would be possible to consider what happens in the second chapter as two steps forward and one step back.

Chapter 3

Playing Chess with the Scorpion*:* New Horizons in War Literature and Contemporary Persian Literature

In the present chapter, I will focus on *Shatranj Bā Māchin-e Qyāmat* [*Chess with the Doomsday Machine: A Novel*] (2005) by Habib Ahmadzādeh and Hosein Mortezāiān Ābkenār's *Aqrab Ru-ye Pelehā-ye Rāhāhan-e Andimeshk Yā Az In Qatār Khun Michekeh, Qorbān!* [*The Scorpion on the Platform of Andimeshk Railroad or Blood's Dripping from This Train, Sir!]* (2006). What comes as the lynchpin between the two novels is their playfulness in dealing with what in other novels of the Iran-Iraq War considered as sacred.

What distinguishes the two novels is that Ahmadzādeh's work achieves the aforementioned by confronting the protagonist with a series of bizarre people and darkly humorous situations, which help in challenging traditionally established concepts. To that end, he deliberately juxtaposes antithetical people, places, and situations as the plot unravels. In the end, the lack of organic, structural relations makes it possible for the narrative to return to the preexisting Islamic and ideological values endorsed by the regime in Iran of course with a mystical and humorous twist that act similar to a new skin or camouflage. Ābkenār's novel, however, is technically more complex. Throughout the story, one can see an indefinite interplay of binary oppositions rendering a firm belief in any long-established ideology out of the question. The two novels analyzed in this chapter come as the final part of a chain that started in 1981 by *The Scorched Earth.* One observes significant developments between the novels and the related critical commentaries penned at the beginning and at the end of this period (i.e., 1981-2006). This divulges that not only have there been shifts throughout time, but these said shifts

have transpired because of time. I believe, taking all into account, the reader will be able to move past contradictory epistemological approaches to the reality of the Iran-Iraq War, in particular and in general. It is also possible to argue that, unlike the novels such as *The Scorched Earth*, which are report-like narratives without any symbolic dimensions, the two novels I discuss in this chapter are not chronicles. They are not even symbolic in a way one can find symbolism in many other literary works.

The theoretical underpinning that I have employed here is similar to the ones I used in the previous two chapters; that is, one makes use of their own perception as well as those of literary critics whose stances have been mentioned here. I will start the chapter with a recuperative account of the critical perceptions of *Chess with the Doomsday Machine: A Novel by* Habib Ahmadzādeh. I will demonstrate how the critical perception of the work has gone through a trajectory not only through but because of time. It is also possible to demonstrate that this novel, compared to those discussed in the previous chapters, is more structurally and verbally complex and multilayered. Additionally, the text has the capacity for partial extrication of itself from the hegemony of ideological thinking, as manifested in *The Holy Defense* doctrine. Hand in hand with the novel's complexity, it is possible to discern an increasing pattern of employment of critical concepts and theoretical richness in the critical essays written about the novel.

Now I embark upon a recuperative reading of the critical essays on Ahmadzādeh's novel: as it was previously indicated, for the first time, one can see the critics employ terms and concepts that may indicate how the ideological nature of the literary works affect their reader's perception and depiction of reality, especially the reality of Iran-Iraq War, on the one hand, and how Ahmadzādeh's novel endeavors to defy the said ideological hegemony even though it has its limitations. Theoretically, these critics start from various points of departure, reaching similar

conclusions. This is because the said attempt may represent a much bigger trend in contemporary Persian literature. Moreover, the concept of ideology here corresponds mostly with Althusser's "ideology in particular," especially when one foregrounds *Holy Defense*. That is, as Ghaffāri and Sa'eedi put forth, a major part of literary works in each period follows the conditions and relations of the same period mirroring the related political and social requirements. Not unlike other social institutions, Persian fiction played a role propagating the religious discourse and national solidarity during the Iran-Iraq War. To this end, most *Holy Defense* novels revolve around themes such as self-sacrifice, martyrdom, religiosity, and a fearing of God. However, as time passes, one witnesses the creation of different types of literary works that, while remaining faithful to the norms of the novel as a genre, portray a variety of human viewpoints. These works employ the subject of war as a vehicle to tease out the social and philosophical realities humankind deals with. This, I would say, resonates with Kant's idea of war that I expounded in the introduction, which purports the permanence of war in human history and periods of peace coming at mere intervals. Mikhail Bakhtin, deems a majority of the aforenamed literary works as "monologic." Works of this kind appreciate and validate merely a worldview underrating others, expelling them from the arena of the novel [*The Holy Defense* stories are cases in point]. "Polyphonic" novels, however, delete no discourse, view, or opinion from the text even if they undercut the writer's viewpoint. Additionally, these novels, which according to Bakhtin, are very similar to carnivals, embark upon a realistic representation of natural and corporeal lives (Ghaffāri & Sa'eedi 100). Finally, some of the critics have dealt with the extent to which the novel's efforts have been successful and how all this has made the work stand apart from the common, typical *Holy Defense* novel.

The two interrelated concepts critics have taken into consideration in these essays are "ideology" and "hegemony" and how they speak to each other and affect the reader's perception of the reality of the Iran-Iraq War. C*hess with the Doomsday Machine: A Novel* is the first one of the novels chosen for this research that, through a series of technical measures, attempts to remove itself from the grip of "ideology" and the "hegemony" it brings about. Considering this work as philosophically realistic, Behjat-ol-Sādāt Hejāzi posits that, while depicting the realities of the Iran-Iraq War, the novel reveals deep philosophical dialogues between characters. She also underlines that various innovative functions of the novel's language have rendered it interpretable, especially as it moves toward implicit significations. Moreover, debates on chess as a metaphor for human life, the narrator's interior monologues, time changes, philosophical questions on the beginning of Creation with volition, or lack thereof have created a polyphonic novel. Hejazi quotes David Lodge stipulating that what makes a novel polyphonic is not the variety of voices and speaking styles; instead, it is how these voices are juxtaposed. In *the Holy Defense* novels, there is an extremely rigid dichotomy; that is, the authorial voice and the enemy's voice. In Ahmadzādeh's novel, however, and in addition to the narrator's voice and the voices of his martyrdom-seeking friends, there are other voices that undermine the narrator's ideological domination. Guiti and the Engineer are two of the main characters of the story. The former is an ex-sex worker with bursts of anger and aggressive behavior who is too protective of her semi-deranged daughter and the second is an eccentric old man who has worked for decades in the nearby refinery and enjoys himself asking semi-philosophical, semi-insane questions, ridiculing sacred concepts such as "Holy Defense" and "God's Providence," as preconditions for him giving shelter. These two characters and people like them are not exactly "enemy" even though their voices tend to vitiate the said ideological hegemony. Still another important factor is

the juxtaposition of rituals and religions to create contrasts. For example, the narrative introduces a mosque and a church attached to each other (Ahmadzādeh 23), and, in the very beginning of the novel, one can found quotes from the Quran, Bible, and Torah. All this indicates that all religions are equal in value, negating the idea of Islam's superiority. This tends to target the *Holy Defense's* biased consideration of Islam as superior to other religions. Moreover, the narrative employs what Ghaffāri and Saeedi stipulate as "carnivalesque symmetrization," (e.g., it is at the same time humorous and serious). These two purport that the novel achieves this not only in terms of characterization, but also in relation to incidents, images, and concerns (108-113).

Quoting Milan Kundera as writing "a new art of *novelistic counterpoint* (which can blend philosophy, narrative, and dream into one piece of music) (71), Hejāzi contends that the novel does not commend war heroes, nor is it non-committed or indifferent. Furthermore, Hejāzi draws upon two essays that have already tackled the novel from two opposing standpoints. In the essay titled "Analysis of Story Elements in *Chess with Doomsday Machine: A Novel,*" Rāzi and Abdollāhiān (2010) endeavor to analyze the elements of the story, plot formation, the narrative focal point, characterization, and dialogue. On the other hand, Ghaffāri's and Sa'eedi's essay, titled "Carnivalesque in *Chess with Doomsday Machine: A Novel*" (2014), draws upon the Bakhtinian idea of carnival, as presented during the Middle Ages, in which humor was implicitly woven as an indefensible part. They, then, make comparisons and contrasts with parts of Ahmadzādeh's novel. There are some factors behind the carnivalesque feature of the novel. In other words, there are the parameters that breach the formal and divine register of language, which make Ahmadzādeh's novel stand apart from the typical *Holy Defense* novel. In addition, swear words factor in a defiance of the divine and formal language. Guiti's use of language is a case in point. Hence, Bakhtin devised the term "novelized discourse" to indicate a novel that

encompassed a variety of viewpoints (Ghaffāri and Sa'eedi 108). Hejāzi then contends that what distinguishers her essay from the previous two is her philosophical and discursive approach to *Chess with Doomsday Machine: A Novel* as she ascertains the novel to be a deeply philosophical and discursively significant one. Regarding the language, Hejāzi stipulates that the text of the novel is not homogenous, but rather, a combination of referential, emotional, and literary functions of language, as Roman Jacobson states (150). It stands to reason that the referential and emotional functions of the language are weaker and paralinguistic and the literary ones, stronger. Moreover, Hejāzi contends that throughout the novel, the language Ahmadzādeh employs is ambiguous and allusive. This arises from the war setting and its giving rise to connotative language, as well as the writer's imagination. When the function of the language becomes literary, the related significations becomes implied and implicit (150).

Drawing upon Bakhtin's concept of ideology, Shokufeh Ārvin, Abolqāsem Dādvar, and Maryam Hoseini in their essay titled "The War Novel in Iran from the Viewpoint of 'Other' Based on Bakhtin's Theory" (2018) embark upon searching the existence of "Other" or its lack thereof in the context of the Persian novels of the Iran-Iraq War. In other words, the said works fall into one of the three classifications: works in which "Other" exists, but indirectly and in a less eye-catching manner. Another group is the one containing works in which there are numerous instances of "Other" among characters and there exists an authorial voice which has influenced and suppressed them all. The third group consists of works in which, in addition to presence in a variety of characters, the "Other" is on equal standing with the "author." This essay employs three novels as examples with each one representing one of the said categories: *Trip to the of the Bearing of 270 Degrees* (1996) by Ahmad Dehqān, *Winter of 84*, and *Chess with the Doomsday Machine: A Novel (31)*.

Ārvin and her co-authors consider the time of the publication of their essay (2018), which is almost four decades after the commencement of the Iran-Iraq War, a good opportunity to objectively analyze a subject that has occupied a central place in contemporary Iranian culture and Persian literature under the title of *The Holy Defense*. The most fundamental argument in their research is the status of the "Other." To that end, the writers first appraise Bakhtin's ideas revolving around the presence of "Other" in the text, while taking a glance at his two other key concepts: dialogism and polyphony. Subsequently, the critics examine and classify twenty Persian novels of the Iran-Iraq War. Finally, in each group, they come up with a detailed analysis of the said three novels that represent that group (32-33). The writers of the essay draw upon the Bakhtinian idea of "Other" in which there are always two necessary voices. This is why the dialogue emphasizes "Other" and makes it possible to consider it as half of the equation. Furthermore, the dialogues within a literary text reflect the existence of the "Other.

In contrast to "ideology" which rejects the idea of "Other," the latter relates to the concept of "dialogue" in a literary text. Dialogue does not mean that one needs to accept the existence of Other, rather, dialogue means the breaking up of a transcendental role in which Other will be exactly at the same level as a reader's own, without it having to go through a reader's ideological filter. Additionally, Bakhtin deems the novel as the most dialogue-rich of all genres. He contends that the novel calls for speaking individuals to bring into the text their own ideological discourse and particular language. Bakhtin also stresses the fact that the writer's main function is to defamiliarize himself so that he can see through the eyes of the Other (35). This will be in fact the continuation of the same aesthetic procedure in which there are contradictions among various dialogues and various consciousnesses (quoting Patterson 1985: 134) [One of my critiques of Ārvin and her collaborators is that instead of directly drawing upon sources such as

Bakhtin, they use others' readings of Bakhtin which make their analysis problematic and inaccurate. Still, even if the critics would have directly employed Bakhtin's idea, it would not have seemed that they had a correct understanding of his points and how they should have integrated that with their own analysis.] If Bakhtin prefers Dostoyevsky's stories over those by Tolstoy, it is because the characters in Dostoyevsky's novels unveil their ideology in relation, not only to other characters, but also to the reader and even to the writer (quoting Harland 1985: 59). In addition, Tolstoy's stories are devoid of the said characteristic: "The different voices we hear in his stories completely follow the intentions of the writer. In other words, there is but one truth and that is the truth as the writer perceives it" (quoted in Seldon & Widdowson 59:1384) (36). Ārvin additionally entertains that at some point the narrator considers what the Engineer points out, which stands in sharp contrast with his own ideals, as sheer lunacy. It is noteworthy that Bakhtin stipulates lunacy as one of the factors contributing to polyphony in a text as it makes one look at the world from a very different angle (Ārvin 50). Ārvin does not quote anything from the text of the novel to corroborate what she purports. The following dialogue between the narrator and the Engineer, however, may seem pertinent:

> "You fool! Can't you see that I'm looking for the same artillery pieces that destroyed your Excellency's refinery?"
>
> "To destroy them?"
>
> "Yes."
>
> It was a good thing that I hadn't let the word "radar" slip out. I had said as much as I could.

“Dear sir, this is exactly what I mean. So what if you hit that pieces of artillery enemy? What’s going to happen then? They’ll just replace it with a brand new one, right? Yes or no?”

I absentmindedly nodded in agreement, and he let out a deep breath as if a great weight had been lifted from his shoulders. I had been completely taken in.

“The world will go on exactly the same way until eternity. They’ll supply the artillery, and you’ll destroy it. Why not stop the madness?” with that he plucked up the empty tea glass and headed directly to the stairway. The squeaking that his tennis shoes made on the half-built stairs slowly faded. I breathed a sigh of relief, then, just to show him I was still determined as ever, I yelled down, “Hey Uncle you never said what the meaning of ‘what’ was!” (73)

Here is an example of a dialogue between a bizarre, almost deranged character, i.e., the Engineer and the narrator who has to adapt himself to the other character’s level of lunacy by responding to his points and especially returning the semi-derange, semi-philosophical question of “What is the meaning of ‘what?’” with what being said in English within a conversation in Persian. The lunacy here which is the collective product of the conversation between two characters is one of the elements that are constitutive of the polyphony in the novel.

Furthermore, Guiti has a very significant role in the novel, which is quite different from the usual status of women in the Persian novels of the Iran-Iraq War. She is a former sex-worker whose eyes are, according to the narrator, green and her whole existence diffuses sex. She is the exact opposite of Javād’s mother, who is a chaste and religious elderly woman. As such, Guiti’s voice frequently breaches the sanctity of the family and the chaste mother. Toward the end of the

story, the narrator's dream gets reversed. That is, he does not deem of Guiti as an unscrupulous woman whose words and actions go against the grain of religious and family values. This is where the narrator considers Guiti as the Holy Mary asking for her miraculous assistance (50).

The essay then deals with the Iran-Iraq War novels, which recognizes them as the *Holy Defense Works* without offering any definition for the latter (37). It has done this by equating and juxtaposing *The Holy Defense* novels as Ārvin expounds it with the war literature as Hasan Mirā'bedini explains it. *The Holy Defense Works* follows some Islamic and ideological codes the Islamic regime in Iran has prescribed. However, I do not believe all works discussed in this essay fall into the previous category. My contention is that writers of the essay have applied the term too loosely. In the case of the works such as *Chess with the Doomsday Machine: A Novel*, it is possible to say that although the ending, as I will discuss, is somewhat conformist, if not suppressed, the novel, as a whole, does not follow the codes of *The Holy Defense.*

Nevertheless, in the *Holy Defense* works, there have always been Others, as these works depict the confrontations between Iranian and Iraqi forces. Hence, one can consider Iranian soldiers, Basiji paramilitary, and members of IRGC as outsiders. As such, it might seem logical to consider Iraqi soldiers as "Other." The problem is that even as enemy forces or "Other," the Persian novels of war scarcely portray them (38). Most have confined themselves to praising Iranian forces and people offering an entirely positive view. I also challenge Arvin's inclusion of *The Headless Palms* by Qāsemali Farāsat in this category, which as I demonstrated in the second chapter, offers bold and direct portrayal of Iraqi soldiers.

The second category, in terms of the status and significance of "Other," consists of stories in which there are various characters with different voices. The writer's voice, however, overshadows "Otherness." *Sorayya in a Coma* and *Winter of 84* both by Esmā'il Fasih as well as

The Scorched Earth by Ahmad Mahmud are, according to Ārvin, cases in point. *Winter of 84* is an example of a novel in which there are apparently Others, that is, characters who express different ideas from the authorial or the central character's voice. The third category comprises a small group of stories (including Ahmadzādeh's work) in which other voices are at the same level as the authorial voice (44). Ultimately, either the writer or the narrator judges Others so vigorously that they overshadow the latter's voice. My critique of Ārvin's position is that she regards Iranian armed forces as those who are on the protagonist's or narrator's side, and some of the characters in Fasih's *Winter of 84,* such as Dr. Farjām, Abu Ghāleb, Maryam Jazāyeri, and Farshād as Others (46). Whereas Bakhtin's dichotomy seems quite illuminating here, I do not think of the last three characters as Others. In the previous chapter, I explained that while *Winter of 84* bestows genuine praise on Iranian armed forces fighting the Iraqi forces, it adopts a different approach toward people such as Abu Ghāleb, someone who pretends to support the Islamic regime. In addition, the narrative almost explicitly sides with characters such as Maryam Jazāyeri and Farshād, who are good people suffering from unhealthy relations and situations under the Islamic Regime. If their voices are not at the level of the author or protagonist, it is because of paratextual factors. It is also due to the limitations that have influenced the creation of the text. The novel, however, has been resourceful enough to find a way to echo the voices of people whose ideals and lifestyles do not exactly tally with the regime's official guidelines, however, the roles they assume and the way they advance the plot are far from what one can expect of evil people. In other words, here it is the internal logic of the novel that determines who is good and who is bad, not external guidelines. In the case of *Sorayya in a Coma,* the said paratextual limiting factors made the plot almost incoherent. *Winter of 84*, however, has coped with the said factor more successfully by relegating the presence of voices of non-conforming

characters to “insignificant others.’ For instance, Maryam Jazāyeri and Farshād, whose moderate presence, words, and actions do not manage to overshadow the more or less conformist authorial voice.

Chess with the Dooms Day Machine: A Novel, in contrast, well represents the third category in which others enter the scene to represent the Other, opposing the established and official worldviews and values, especially on war and the Iran-Iraq War in particular, which is of equal weight with that of the protagonist and narrator. Here, Ārvin quotes David Lodge as saying that the writer never finishes his job of creating his characters. That is, there is no final value judgment about them; instead, it is always possible to argue for or against the people one can see in the story, and no character is portrayed based on another character’s ill judgment (Lodge 990:64) (47). The said variety of characters and the novel’s representation of realities and situations are something one can hardly observe in mainstream *Holy Defense* novels. This variety and representations are possible due to the novel’s detailed linguistic and textual cartography. Drawing upon Bakhtin’ plurality of languages and viewpoints in a novel, it is possible to argue that the independence and authority of the focal points and viewpoints in the novel account for the realities this work represents and its pluralistic outlook of humanity and human relations (Ghaffāri & S’aeedi 101-102). Here, it is possible to see glaring differences between *Chess with the Doomsday Machine* and those of the *Holy Defense novels* in terms of not only characters, but also language, viewpoint, and frames. It is also possible to elucidate this distinction based on Bakhtin’s concept of the carnivalesque, which stems from his concept of dialogism. According to Ghaffāri and S’aeedi, Bakhtin entertains that dialogical and connective characteristic of language makes it possible for it to be equipped with preexisting meanings and values, while connecting with others, so that it can tease out the contradictions and antagonisms between walks of life and

opinions. In societies in which an ideology or school of thought gains hegemony, the latter tends to stifle the dialogical characteristic of language, thereby creating a homogenous language. This language serves to reinforce the cultural coherence and concentration within the society. Additionally, Bakhtin holds that there would be just one single, correct and literary language that guarantees a profound unity among all walks of life. A language of this kind produces monologue works such as epic and lyric poetry, unlike novels that have polyphonic characteristics (Ghaffāri & S'aeedi 101). Furthermore, there are some other factors behind the carnivalesque feature of the novel. For example, there are the parameters that are there to breach the formal and divine register of language, which make Ahmadzādeh's novel stand apart from the typical *Holy Defense* novel. Swear words are amongst factors that defy the divine and formal register of the language. Guiti's use of language is a case in point, which gives the novel a carnivalesque feature. More importantly, Guiti's swear words turn into prayers (e.g., "Who's the Engineer? This motherfucker?" (Ahmadzādeh 205) turns into, "May God save you like you are my son," (Ahmadzādeh 309). The latter is a formal and accepted register of language resulting in the loss of its carnivalesque features. Moreover, the Other's voice heard through dialogues pave the way for polyphony. This is what distinguishes polyphonic works such as *Chess with the Doomsday Machine: A Novel* from the majority of the *Holy Defense Work*, where the only voice that one can hear until the end is the authorial voice (Ghaffāri and S'aeedi 108).

Ghaffāri and Sa'eedi also explain role reversals as one of the major characteristics of the story, which make it stand apart from the conventional *Holy Defense* novels. For example, the novel challenges the long-established image of the Holy Mother as it attributes her qualities to those of a sex worker, Guiti. This reversal, however, does not endure until the end because the narrator eventually calls her "mother." Hence, Guiti creates distance from her own status and

approaches the traditional concept and role of motherhood (Ghaffāri and Sa'eedi 106-107). Based on this and other reversals in the novel, as well as the juxtapositions of antonymies, I would like to argue that contrary to what Ghaffāri and other critics have purported, there is no completed role reversal nor negation of values, but rather, the end of the novel offers established values. It is as though the narrative has tried to reach an old destination through a new route or has endeavored to create a unique rendering of an old cliché. In other words, there is hardly a fundamental and permanent questioning of the dominant ideological values. The narrative has achieved the teasing out of old clichés by poking fun at them while reestablishing the old values with an added layer of mysticism. A juxtaposition of a mosque and a church is a case in point. In the end of the story, one can perceive that the role reversal and questioning of dominant and ideological values have not been deep and lingering. It is then possible to attribute this deficiency to the factors surrounding the text and its creation. Historical, political, and cultural conditions that adversely affect a text such as Ahmadzādeh's are among those factors; factors that foster penning of works that fall in the encouraged category of the *Holy Defense*. Although my stance certainly comports with this critic's idea of relative failure and the reasoning behind it, I am of the opinion that the said partial lack of success stems from a structural issue. The writer has juxtaposed seemingly antagonizing components and has made intelligent use of dialogue to subvert the dominant values. There is no inherent and spontaneous relation or interplay between the binary oppositions the reader observes in the story. That is, the writer has intently selected and juxtaposed them such as mosque/church and sex worker/chaste woman, to name a few. That is, the writer has purposefully selected and juxtaposed them, but they are not organically related. All this seems to be a one-time effort or attack to the dominant values. Thus, the narrative has failed to come up with a series of binary oppositions, with the constant and natural interplay

between the two parts, as its foundation. The constant interplay in question between the binary oppositions could bestow the story with a weak but permanent potential, a flicker for questioning the status quo, if not its out-and-out reversal. Furthermore, the relation between binary oppositions is one of fixed and unchanging relations of equality, which seems somewhat imposed. That is, neither of the oppositions gets the upper hand. The same lack of organic relations makes it possible for the narrative to return to the preexisting Islamic and ideological values endorsed by the regime in Iran, of course, with a mystical and humorous twist that act similar to a new skin or camouflage.

As in the previous commentaries, n their essay "A Critical Review of the Novel *Chess with the Doomsday Machine,* based on Theodore Adorno's Theory" (2021), Yahyā Tālebiān and Mmoonā Sādāt A̲leseyed hold that the narrator presents a different and sometimes contradictory narrative of the war. This narrative ranges from reporting concrete facts to providing a platform for critical analysis. The two critics argue that,

> in the present encounter with the text, one should endeavor to examine the socio-cultural situation depicted during wartime. One should also consider the entanglement of the narrations and *Chess with Doomsday Machine* as a narrative dealing with sub-narratives. This view of the text is a call to the audience to reflect on the narration of the world by the characters (213).

To that end, Tālebyan and A̲leseyed draw upon Adorno's and Horkheimer's theory, whereby these two thinkers claim that in addition to transforming social, cultural, and economic structures, the speeding trend of technological growth, bring about social changes, resulting in new social conditions. These new conditions called for further revision. The interactions between the statuses of the two cause tension. Drawing upon the said status and the ensuing internal

tension, Horkheimer and Adorno analyze production and consumption in capitalistic societies. All this is based upon the universalization of the goods exchange. Namely, consumption does not depend upon the quality; rather, it depends upon the exchange value. According to this exchange value (216-217), when an object turns into a product, it is no longer a physical phenomenon, but a social one. Under such conditions, a society becomes absolute when mechanisms for social control expand into all aspects of life. Under such circumstances, interpersonal relations are reduced to the relations among objects. As a result, products are not there to meet demands, but instead, to serve as means towards social status. This is how art becomes inseparable from life. As a result, clichés affect the human imagination. Likewise, concepts converted to products cause the illusion that individuals are autonomous. In addition, the media makes use of all resources so that the hegemony and values of capitalism can be continued and guaranteed. As a result, the main function of the culture industry is to serve capitalism's interests. As in other products, losing all variety and distinction, artistic [and literary] texts are manufactured under capitalist systems. Regardless of variety, the process is designed to serve the system. Thus, defying the said hegemony would be unthinkable. The system would devour any opposing narrative. Nevertheless, destroying the subject is out of the question. Subject is reducible, but not destroyable. In fact, even under these circumstances, some level of independent action, even if merely in theory, is conceivable. This could lead into a critical act within the system. The quality of this act has to do with the kind of confrontations it has with the narratives that the homogenizing order creates. This possibility is realized merely by reading the texts, and not based on predetermined and imposed clichés, but rather, based on the space that the text itself creates in relation to the existing thought system. When a critical mind revises an artistic [or literary] text, it is possible to assume a sort of confrontation takes place. This confrontation does

not conform with the hegemony of the said dominant politics, resulting in an opportunity [for the reader] towards free thinking (217-218).

Drawing upon the above theoretical framework, Tālebyān and Āl-e Seyed embark upon analyzing *Chess with the Doomsday Machine: A Novel*. Considering the importance this novel attaches to its unconventional portrayal of realities and how all this relates to paratextual factors, the critics' reading of Ahmadzadeh's novel tends to represent a potential for the existence of a liberating force suppressed under the suffocating structure of the cultural policies of the Islamic regime as manifested in "Holy Defense Novel." This critical confrontation provides the subject with a level of meaning, with a potential which is, on the one hand, not under the hegemony of standard-making politics, nor does it lead into mere disentanglement from the hegemony in question. As a result, reading renders thinking about extricating oneself from the imposed structures, somewhat possible (220-221). Furthermore, Tālebyān and Āl-e Seyed hold that although the Iran-Iraq War is the subject of the novel, it contains elements that hitherto have been almost unprecedented in the *Holy Defense* genre. Grotesque is one of those elements. The writers of the essay contend that attention to the flesh and carnal knowledge is part and parcel of grotesque as opposed to the spiritual and ethereal portrayal of people in, *inter alia*, *the Holy Defense Novels*. Prior to Habibzādeh's novel, there has hardly been any sign of corporeal portrayal and development in the said genre. Another pioneering element in the work is its use of polyphony and its conflicting ideological positioning. The symbols employed within the novel pose questions that lead into polyphony. Posing the said questions, as well as attaching importance to Others' voices, would go against the grain of The *Holy Defense* novel. This is because the texts falling into the latter are based upon a manifestation of monologic discourse, which stops any questioning of the dominant ideological system. Under such a system, the only

opposing voice is that of the enemy; a voice that the all-powerful and dominant ideology destroys in the end. The third innovative element employed in the novel are paratextual features. Drawing upon Ghaffāri's essay titled "The Influence of Paratexts on the Formation or Distortion of the Meaning of Text: An Examination of Duality *in Chess with the Doomsday Machine: A Novel* from the Standpoint of Paratexts," Tālebyān and Āl-e Seyed stipulate that some non-textual elements such as the book title, jacket design, and epigraph that contribute to the production of a book, that is, elements located at the threshold of the text, play a role in controlling the reader's perception. Finally, the man, as portrayed in the story, seems like a whole multi-dimensional man and not an ideological stereotype (221-222). To conclude, the narrator offers a controversial and differing narrative of the Iran-Iraq War in order to provide fodder for an analysis (216).

My critique of this essay is that these two scholars have not so accurately endeavored to explain Horkheimer's and Adorno's theory and how they could be applied to Ahmadzādeh's novel to reveal its resistance to the genre of *the Holy Defense* novel. It remains, however, unclear why these theories are particularly apt for analyzing this novel.

My analysis of *Chess with Doomsday Machine* is based on the same methodology that I have already employed in the works I selected for the previous novels: my scrutiny of the novel aims at whether and, to what extent, the work is realistic. To that end, I will embark upon an appraisal of a specific component, i.e., incident or conversation, to determine if it concurs with the internal logic of the novel as an autonomous world. In other words, I will disregard whether the incident or conversation in question is under the influence of outside sources. This is because my analysis of the text transpires in a historical moment, which is incomplete. If the present moment passes, a new version of the reader or me should turn back and read the text in a

historical moment which is passed and gone. Hence, a recuperative reading of the text in the present moment seems out of the question. As a result, I will tend to confine myself to a reading of the text that deems it as an independent and autonomous entity with its own "internal logic" coming as the benchmark for being either close to or far from reality. This inner logic may alter what the text *prima facie* would mean while the critic is examining it within paratextual perimeter.

The close reading and critical study tend to embrace my own understanding of the text as well as an array of critical theories and ideas that may seem relevant. Subsequently, in the reader's perspective, the text of each one of the novels, as an autonomous entity, interacts with an array of critical commentary penned about them. There are two points here: the critical commentaries, sorted by and based on the first date of publication, tend to demonstrate a shift on the stances and understandings of the novel. I will demonstrate how this is the case with the first novel in this chapter. The second novel is different altogether. The second point is that all this transforms against the bigger backdrop of the readers' shared and collective experiences and perspectives. So far, I have drawn the roadmap for the first half of the chapter that handles *Chess with Doomsday Machine: A Novel* by Habib Ahmadzādeh. The second half tackles *The Scorpion on the Platform of Andimeshk Railroad or Blood's Dripping from This Train, Sir!* by Hosein Mortezāiān Ābkenār and mirrors the first one with some qualification. In my analysis, one will observe overlaps and interconnections, not only between the novels and critical commentaries written on them, but also between the two novels I have selected for this chapter, as the second one is published on the heels of the first one.

Now, a close reading of *Chess with Doomsday Machine*: the incidents of the novel transpire in Abadan. Famous for its refinery and important due to its geostrategic situation, this is

a city in the southwestern part of Iran within the oil-rich Khuzestan province. Toward the beginning of the Iran-Iraq War, the Iraqi forces besieged the city for approximately 321 days. The Iranian military eventually vanquished Iraqi army. The novel, however, does not readily offer a panoramic view of Abadan. Each mission allows the narrator an opportunity to observe more of the city to convey to the reader. As a result, the narrator's map of the city is not just a neutral or objective rendering of the place. Rather, places and buildings have symbolic significance, such as the church and the mosque, which are attached. Based on all this, I venture the to claim that Abadan is mapped out as a cartography of the narrator's conscience and how he perceives the world. In return, it is this cognitive cartography that shapes the time of the story. Here, setting has determined a time that is non-linear, and it does not lead to a closure. As Ghaffāri and Sa'eedi hold, in the *Holy Defense* genre, the twin beliefs that time is linear, as is humanity's deliverance, render the reader a linear plot. This kind of plot usually commences with pre-war stability, expands to the enemy's aggression and the defense against it, and finally leads to a victory. Habibzādeh's novel, however, lacks the certainty of the *Holy Defense* novels. The narrator becomes involved with some incidents lacking causal relations. This jeopardizes the story's time-space continuum. That is, Ghaffāri & Sa'eedi purport that the victorious *finale* that the narrator is seeking does not arrive. Instead, the reader experiences the feeling that they are watching a carnival in which time is circular, not linear. This is based upon the cycle of death and (re)growth in nature (116). I venture to add that even circular movements are unclear and unpredictable.

After analyzing the time and space, it is possible to deal with the characters. The novel rests upon five main characters: the narrator (curious and severe), the Engineer (the Skeptic), the Priest (indifferent), Guiti (an ex-sex worker), and Qāsem (the mystic guru). Minor characters are

Javad's parents (Javad is the narrator's friend who is killed in the war) as well as Mahtāb (Guiti's daughter)" (Hejāzi 147). The narrator and Parveez have both blood type "B" (49), an indication of how close the two characters are. Another important characteristic the two share is a tendency to defy the accepted conventions and values, oftentimes through poking fun at them. Although each one at times resents the other two (i.e., the reader deals with the narrator, Parveez, and the Engineer), they are outright misfits.

Likewise, it is even possible to see the above tendencies among all the main characters. For instance, they try to do something, to help, to struggle, despite all predicaments. A possible exception to these commonalities is that some may not sound so humorous as, say, Parveez and the Engineer. An old ex-sex worker who goes by the name of Guiti (literally meaning "Universe") is a case I point: her spirit of defiance, however, is mainly associated with unbridled and volcanic bursts of anger and swear words. Still, even her tantrums, in the overall context of the novel or at least the way the narrator perceives it, gains comic undertones. She lives in a house in a neighborhood that used to be a den of prostitution. She still lives there (i.e., during wartime). When Parveez gets wounded, Guiti removes her headscarf so that the narrator could use it to stop Parveez's bleeding. By doing so, she defies the mandatory dress code for women, which was particularly strict in the beginning years of the Islamic regime. Moreover, one should keep in mind that Parveez is a Basiji who should, supposedly by the book, be there to uphold Islamic values, including head coverings for women. However, Guiti is not among those who go to mosques to get free food, presumably because of her past. So, Parveez tries to deliver food to her. After Parveez, the narrator continues the food delivery, which is not a completely hazard-free task given Guiti's aggressive behavior, especially when she thinks she is defending her young, beautiful, but half-witted, daughter.

As one can see here, the characters of the novel are a motley crew of people, some of which are usually not portrayed in the conventional *Holy Defense* stories. The main question could be, how it is possible to define the relations between characters or, more specifically, how to define the narrator's relations with characters. I believe that these relations follow a pattern in sync with the time and space patterns of the novel. That is, non-linear and chaotic movements that connect the narrator with the characters; something that mirrors the narrator's mental journey. In fact, this is a type of initiation in which every character the narrator faces poses a riddle he has to answer. For example, at some point, the narrator needs the engineer's help in spotting the enemy's positions. The Engineer asks him "What is 'what?'" with the second "what" being in English in a novel written in Persian. Here, the "what" in English seems to have an ontological status. In fact, the Engineer asks the narrator about his understanding of the whole "being" or "existence." It is the narrator's correct answer and true understanding of the being that enables him to understand how "the universe" or "the existence" has positioned him and other Iranian soldiers against the Iraqi forces or even the Iraqi army. The latter symbolizes the "fate" or "God" whose chess pieces are always white and are always supposed to win. That is why, at some other point, the Engineer asks the narrator about the point of destroying the Iraqi artillery when it is easily possible to substitute it with a new one. This may again indicate the impossibility of tackling the Universe or changing the Fate. More importantly, however, is that one can see how each time the narrator is stopped to answer a question, it allows him an opportunity to have a deeper understanding of the Universe and if it is surmountable as it is symbolized in Iranians' 'endeavors to destroy the Doomsday Machine.

In order to analyze the time, space, and characters, one should cast a deeper look at the plot: in the beginning of the novel, the Cymbeline Radar System, a.k.a. The Dooms Day

Machine seems to be a bizarre French contraption that the Iraqi forces possess. Nobody has any idea about its purpose and capabilities. The way, however, Iranians talk about it makes it sound like an existential threat (45) for the target, that is, themselves. Finally, the narrator comes to know that this is a very advanced radar that makes it impossible for Iranian forces to attack Iraqis' positions because the moment Iranian artillery shelled Iraqis', the Doomsday Machine would detect the location of the Iranian artillery. Based on the same intelligence, the Iraqi forces could completely destroy the Iranian tanks and artillery. At some point, there is a discussion that if Iranian artillery does not shell the Iraqis, the latter's radar system would not be able to detect Iranians, which would mean Iraqis could not harm Iranians (46). On a symbolic level, this indicates the impossibility of vanquishing God, the Universe, or God's will manifesting itself here as the Doomsday Machine or somewhere else in the story as the white pieces on a chessboard that are always supposed to win and always get the first move. Referring to the chessboard, the Engineer tells the narrator something significant:

> His excellency is nothing but a [chess] piece. A piece! And, unfortunately a black one at that!
>
> Am I a black piece? Okay! Done! What about Excellency?
>
> It's been a long time that I've stood away from this mockery of that God of yours (142).

Presumably, the above dialogue stipulates that in this cosmic game of chess, humans are the black pieces doomed to get decimated in their unequal combat with God or Universe that holds white pieces. Since the Engineer is already aware that die is cast and this war could have no result but defeat, he opts to abstain. The narrator, however, thinks otherwise. This, of course implies the whole of humanity or human plight or situation, and not just war or the Iran-Iraq war.

Moreover, the human situation is a struggle against God or fate. This is humanity's situation in general, regardless of the individual differences among people. *Chess with Doomsday Machine: A Novel* may indicate an abortive human struggle against fate or God. Frequently, man is supposed to play chess without having all the pieces (145). In this game of chess, however, black pieces represent humanity (182). They are bound to lose; as per chess manuals and instructions, it is always white that wins. At last, the Engineer comes clean and says, "Dear sir! You are fighting with God! Not with those poor Iraqis!" (182). All of this reads as smoothly and in organic manner. The Engineer has already established himself as an oddball, so when he says the above sentence, there is hardly unusual to it.

On the eve of the Iraqi artillery's imminent shelling of Abadan, and after receiving directions from the "Dooms Day Machine," the narrator forces the Engineer to help him carry food for Guiti and her daughter. In addition, the narrator decides that the mother and daughter should tag along with the Engineer and himself. They go to the seven-storied building where the Engineer usually takes shelter, as it seems safer than other parts of the city. Different members of this motley crew join the narrator at different parts of the city and at different times. The narrator wants to save them all. In fact, the narrator is collecting the black pieces he needs to play chess with God or the Doomsday Machine (197-220). The gathering of these people in the building alludes to Christ's Last Supper. This is where the narrator blames himself for gathering the persons that were following him under a half-destroyed roof in the seven-storied building. He is afraid that people dining with him would lose their lives under the Iraqi shelling. He fancies that this makes the situation similar to the Last Supper with himself playing the role of Judas as he is the one who is the possible cause of everybody's death. It is further possible to compare the narrator with Judas as both have plans to vanquish God that in this novel is manifested as the

Doomsday Machine (222). Rain and ablution under rain are also of significance. All through the group's trip, there is a downpour, which worsens. This symbolizes a purification of some sort resulting from their quest-like journey. Next, there comes the sensitive time of spotting the enemy's positions so that the radar system will be located, accordingly. The narrator is under the weather and is not able to do his job by himself. So, he asks for the Engineer to help him. The latter asks mindboggling half-philosophical, half-comic questions as preconditions for his cooperation. The narrator has no other choice but to accept. What happens next is a very delirious and absurd type of dark humor. For example, the Engineer asks the narrator:

> "…Do you know what the angels said to Satan after he refused to prostrate himself before your forefather? The same goody-goody, equal opportunities said to the poor sap, 'Are you crazy, man? Giving up a sweet, forever deal like this, just over a simple nod of the head?"
>
> With hands raised over his head, the Engineer asked, "By the way, supposing your plan works, what are you going to do with God?"
>
> "We'll have a conversation with Him," he continued. "We'll just put Him in jail- no, we'll say to Him, 'Go away! You've accomplished everything you wanted; that's more than enough, and we still don't know why the universe was created in the first place or why it's going to end." (230)

The narrator has a fever that makes him mix reality with nightmare. He is under the impression that, through his negligence and mistake, his fellow Basijis have been compromised and killed and the Doomsday Machine has worked successfully. In the end, Qāsem comes to take him to a hospital. It becomes clear that the plan for defeating the machine has succeeded, as it has been more elaborate than what the narrator used to think. In other words, the narrator was partially

informed and the plan to defeat the Doomsday Machine had beaten against the odds. The plan, according to the narrator's friend, Qāsem, was adding to God's plan not changing or thwarting it. That is, it was not going against Him. The focus here is on the value of human endeavor and how it can change anything. This counters what, at some point, the Engineer tells the narrator, that is, even if they destroy the radar system, it will be a replaced with a new one. This just causes a great number of casualties. In other words, the Engineer believes that there is no way to change the fate. In the end, one can see that Qāsem's view prevails: man's will is in line with God's and does not go against it, even if it apparently antagonizes it.

The incidents and dialogues are at times narrated, humorously. Among the seven novels selected here, this is the only one that has this quality. This probably means that the novel offers a more panoramic view of mankind, encompassing more sublime human qualities during wartime than the previous ones: people can be quite hilarious even in wartime! Case in point: Parveez introduces the narrator to Engineer. Then, there is a Q and A between them on the meaning of "what," among other things (27). Another possible reason behind the humor is that the text embarks upon a meticulous selection and juxtaposition of elements and components. This is in lieu of a mirror-like reflection of outside realities. Therefore, he juxtaposes contradictory elements in such a way that results in humor. Another essential characteristic found is carnivalesque. This includes the use of swear words, vulgar language, and attention paid to the corporal dimension of humanity. Usually, mainstream stories of the Iran-Iraq War tend to ignore these aspects due to their monophonic language. A language of this kind does not harbor carnivalesque features (Ghaffāri & Sa'eedi 101-102). In Habibzādeh's novel, however, and in addition to the narrator's voice as well as the voices of his martyrdom-seeking friends, Assadollāh and Mohammad, who represent the dominant voice in the *Holy Defense* genre, one

can hear other voices that vitiate the ideological hegemony in question (48). The first and foremost voice that opposes that of the narrator is the Engineer's, who raises an existential question inquiring philosophy of war. Hence, his voice frequently destroys that of the narrator, leaving the novel to revolve around the thoughts and ideas of the characters (49-50).

After analyzing *Chess with Doomsday Machine*, it might be prudent to examine the influence of outside forces on the formation of the novel. As I explained in the previous chapters, this does not discredit any close reading of the novel as an autonomous world. In this world, the relation between a component the critic is analyzing, and the internal logic of work itself determines "reality" and "realism." This, however, does not preclude the influence of the outside forces on the components of the story. In the case of Ahmadzādeh's work, the political affiliations of his publisher, whose mission statement is to publish the premier cultural products that observe the values of the Islamic Revolution [of Iran] ("Bayānieh-ye arzash-e enteshārāt Sooreh-ye Mehr"). The writer himself has a background as an Iran-Iraq War veteran and a member of Basij paramilitia ("Free Culture Invisible"). Another paratextual factor is the governmental supervision over *Holy Defense*, which has stopped the novel one step short of actualizing its potential. Whereas the free, innovative, and humorous flow of the plot impresses the reader, especially the one who has grown accustomed to the vicissitudes of the typical *Holy Defense* novel, the conformist, albeit innovative denouement of *Chess with Doomsday Machine,* causes a reconciliation between a strict *Holy Defense* work such as *The Headless Palms* by Farāsat and a quite groundbreaking work of fiction such as Ābkenār's novel, which I analyze in the second part of the present chapter. I will present a more technical appraisal of the differences between Ahmadzādeh's novel and Ābkenār's story toward the end of this chapter. Suffice to say,

I believe the two novels' unlike reactions to external pressures have led them to adopt differing storytelling techniques and methods to suit their own purposes.

I have dedicated the first half of the chapter to *Chess with Doomsday Machine: A Novel* by Habib Ahmadzādeh, along with the related critical commentaries. The second half of the chapter, which will be tackling *The Scorpion on the Platform of Andimeshk Railroad or Blood's Dripping from This Train, Sir!* by Hosein Mortezāiān Ābkenār, structurally mirrors the first one with some qualification. In my analysis, one will observe overlaps and interconnections not only between the novel and the critical commentaries written on it, but also between the two novels I have selected for this chapter, since the second one is published back to back to the first one and they are thematically related. In other words, my contention here is that it is neither an individual text, nor its interactions with others, that the reader perceives as the reality of the Iran-Iraq War.

Here is my recuperative reading of the critical commentaries on *The Scorpion on the Platform of Andimeshk Railroad or Blood's Dripping from This Train, Sir!* by Hosein Mortezāiān Ābkenār. It is noteworthy that in this part, I tend to consider the text of the novel as autonomous world free from outside influences and impressions. As explained regarding previous novels, in the absence of the external influences, the internal logic of the novel comes as the benchmark for "reality" and renders it realistic. Contrary to the war novels sponsored by the government, the narrator of this story seems a bit relaxed, as far as religious convictions and duties are concerned. For example, he misses his morning prayer (9). This is not typical of the *Holy Defense* novel in which the regime's religious identity has become one with the patriotic dimensions of the people's defense of Iran. In the previous two chapters, the initial part of the chain of published critical commentaries begins with less technical; however, more traditional critical responses move toward sophisticated critical responses. Conversely, the first essay

published here in 2006 by Mahdieh Ā'bedi is a full-blown technical analysis of the work, where the critic argues that more than being a war novel, it is a story of people trapped in a situation in which war acts as a backdrop. Ā'bedi's point of departure is the indeterminacy and antinomies among the elements of the novel. She purports that, due to the same complexities, it is possible to consider this novel modern and, at times, a postmodern work depicting man's contemporary plight. She stipulates other important characteristics in the stylistic maneuvers, such as the objective and camera-like point of view, the omission of a hero, and the use of a stream of consciousness technique. Back to the indeterminacies that render the novel a postmodern one, this critic believes these observations to also make it an underlying narrative on the war, just as there are other similar narratives. In the end, she concludes that the story defies the familiar form of a narrative already established in the readers' mind. Ā'bedi further attributes Ābkenar's portrayal of "blood" and "scorpion" to the use of magical realism, holding the scorpion as a symbol of death and evil (12). The only issue with Ā'bedi's critique is that she considers the humorous tone of the novel as expressed in the regional accents, partly stemming from the fact that some soldiers hail from different areas of the country. I am of the opinion that humor is too dark to stem from the semantic manipulation. Instead, I am of the opinion that how characters respond to their plight in the story can be darkly humorous as they attempt to flee from death and save themselves. This is why, at first glance, they appear so lively and energetic. However, closer observation reveals, it is revealed they are all dead; the more they try to save themselves, the more they immerse themselves into the darkness. As in Ā'bedi's critique, Hosein Nush Āzar's essay published in 2011, adopts an analytical view of the novel employing technical terms abundantly. Nush Āzar adds that the novel's first edition was published in Iran in 2006. The critical reactions to its third edition resulted in the Iranian authorities banning the book. As a

result, the subsequent editions were published outside Iran. Moreover, the critical essays I have drawn upon were published between 2006 and 2020, both inside and outside Iran. One may take note of the full gamut of critical responses written, ranging from a journalistic essay to an academic paper, from a critique that employs complex critical concepts; to one that distinguishes content and form, all of which results in adherence to the content of the novel as being the main component of a literary work, from those that considered the novel as being disrespectful of the *Holy Defense* genre for instance in its depiction of Iranian forces as “opium consumers” as well as “bribe givers and- takers” to those who purport the novel to be a depiction of the realities of day-to-day lives of Iranian soldiers, with no disrespect to their self-sacrifices. Still, it seems that compared with the essays written on Ahmadzādeh’s work, which came out just one year prior to the first edition of Ābkenār’s novel, the critiques on the latter have become somewhat more technical and more non-generic. I say more non-generic in the sense that even if, as in Sheikhi’s essay, they denounce the novel’s lack of commitment and emphasize the importance of the content, as opposed to form, at least they have reached these conclusions through their analysis instead of defaulting to a formulaic and prescribed account of how one is to uphold the values of the *Holy Defense.* In their essay titled “Character Analysis of *The Scorpion on the Platform of Andimeshk Train Station* by Hosein Mortezāiān Ābkenār Adopting Philippe Hamon’s Approach” (2020), Zahrā Shuryābi, Mahdi Noruz, Batul Fakhr Eslām, and Farzād A’bāsi endeavor to adopt a technical approach to analyze Ābkenār’s novel. Shuryābi and her fellow critics hold that the most important component of the novel is characterization. They draw upon Philippe Hamon’s methodology, which contends that there are three types of characters: reference, intermediate (or pointer), and recalling. The writers of the essay maintain reference characters in Ābkenār’s story to be of two types: social and figurative. The social characters, such as Ali, Mortezā, and

Siāvash, hail from the depths of society as ordinary people and soldiers drafted to the front. These are the themes that convey the members of the second (i.e., figurative) type. They enjoy a widespread presence throughout the novel. Human characters tend to describe them in detail. Concepts (i.e., fear, death, and despair) are completely at the disposal of author's antinormative ideas and ideals. That is, they allow the author to demonstrate his anti-war stance. We can also find the novel, intermediate characters pointing at the writer. The main function of these characters is to explain the physical and psychological ordeals of other characters, including precise information on the plight of the Iranian soldiers on the war fronts. Since the narration is omniscient, the narrator describes most of the settings. However, there are intermediate characters who expound on some other scenes. However, there are intermediate characters who expound on some other scenes. Moreover, the narrator restricts himself to describing the appearance of the characters within the story. Still, the narrator has ways of exposing the thoughts of the characters (the critics, however, do not expound on how Ābkenār succeeds in performing this). That is, the narrator directly portrays the main the story within the space and time span of nineteen chapters. Likewise, these are the main characters that depict the minor ones. The writers of the essay are of the opinion that Ābkenār's use of the character portrayal has pushed him to adopt a non-traditional and iconoclastic approach to war literature which, at the same time, appreciates the braveries and self-sacrifices of the Iranian forces. My first critique of this essay is that it assumes that the characterization t more important than other components of the story, such as setting, plot, and style. It is unclear why and how the critics do not bring about any cogent reasoning to convince the reader. My second point is that their use of Phillippe Hamon's definition and types of characterization serves as the theoretical underpinning for their argument. It seems that they could have analyzed Ābkenār's novel in terms of characterization

without employing Hamon's ideas. At some point (219), they even admit that what transpires in the story goes against Hamon's theory. Still, the critics insist on drawing upon this, presumably to feel more secure or to increase the academic credibility of their essays. In the same year (i.e., 2020), Rāzie Feyzābādi adopts another critical approach to analyze *The Scorpion* aiming to unveil the power relations in the text. Feyzābādi holds that one of the aims of conducting a critical analysis of a novel is unveiling unequal power relations between social groups depicted in the text. She draws upon the critical approaches posed by Louise Phillips and Marianne W. Jorgensen, namely "explanatory critique" and "critical language awareness." These theories pave the way for oppressed social groups, so that the power relations would tilt toward them. She further purports that an analytical reading of a novel aiming at a critical view of historically significant incidents such as the [Iran-Iraq] War is even more arduous. As a genre, the novel tends to challenge the hegemonic discourse and, instead develop their narrative. It accomplishes this by depicting what has not been obtained by an opportunity to manifest itself in the hegemonic discourse. Feyzābādi concludes that it is possible to examine *The Scorpion*, as any other text. Moreover, she continues that by marginalizing the characters from remote small towns, the novel establishes Mortezā's status as the central character, or a centralized character coming from the capital city of Tehran. Mortezā represents a discourse that considers itself more righteous and wiser. Feyzābādi further believes the novel falls in the category of "anti-war" literature, offering a new and different version of the Iran-Iraq War novel. In other words, this work makes no attempt to mythicize, create a cult of the hero, or justify the war. On the contrary, it strives to mirror the misery and agony of soldiers and war-stricken people. It also challenges the legitimization and sanctification of war by revealing its hidden, hideous nature. Apart from the beginning of the essay, which is in fact, the summary of the rest of her writing, is composed

of two parts. The first part contends that Ābkenār's work attempts to evince the unjust power relations that are at work in human life and then disrupt those relations so that they would tilt toward the oppressed. The second part counters the first by purporting that the novel establishes Mortezā's status as the central character, or a centralized character coming from the capital city of Tehran. Mortezā represents a discourse that considers itself more righteous and wiser. I believe the only sign the critic can find for her claim is Mortezā's Tehrani accent. There is nothing else to corroborate Feyzābādi's claim. A short glance at the novel can easily establish that Mortezā/ Siāvash are fictitious alter egos of the writer from Tehran. Since Mortezā narrates the story, his view of things will *ipso facto* become centralized, rendering any other viewpoint as secondary. Hence, I venture to refute Feyzābādi's charge of Mortezā's alleged superiority due to his Tehrani accent. Even if this is true, it would certainly go against her opening claim that the novel endeavors to disrupt the existing power relations to the benefit of the oppressed. This is the same unequal power relations as usually one may observe in the distinction between Tehran and other cities of Iran, whereby the former has come to be known as holding the upper hand and the latter struggling for more recognition or rights.

Ebrāhimzādeh Gorji's essay, published in 2007, may be another attempt at structural analysis of the novel. A relatively significant difference between this essay and the previous two is that although Gorgi works with structural and technical aspects of the novel, he hardly employs any terms and concepts that one can abundantly find in Western critical essays. In this respect, it is possible to regard his essay as a bridge between the two critical camps mentioned as technical-oriented versus content-oriented. The closest thing he uses as a modifier is "Dāstān-e No," which means "new story" or, with some qualification: "modern story." However, Ebrāhimzādeh Gorji's explanations on the relations between objectivity and subjectivity in this

“new story” bear a resemblance to the so-called technical postmodern literary critique. Furthermore, his essay tilts toward a structural analysis of the novel, based on a figure of speech mainly used in classical (rhythmed and rhymed) Persian literature or mostly Persian poetry. This figure of speech is called " حشو ملیح" (*Hashv-e Malih*), which one can, more or less, translate into “pleasant redundancy.” That is to say, start a statement and then add another statement onto it without finishing the first one. The second one is not necessary, even though it adds to the beauty of the writing. Gorji uses this figure of speech to speak about the ambiguity the reader finds throughout the story. The critic draws upon the latter to strike a note that this is basically a short story or a long short story, which through “the pleasant redundancies” and the ensuing ambiguities, has been conflated to become a novel. Quite related to the said ambiguity, the reader tends to see the novel as a puzzle whose pieces are misplaced. This displacement demands the reader to make a mental effort to rearrange these pieces (especially the chapters) so one can make sense of the story. It also provides the author with an opportunity to manage the characters as well as the reader. Gorji also addresses the three essential components of the novel: time, image, and language and how through skillful use of them, Ābkenār manages to enchant the readers, dragging them toward the novel’s end. While Gorji succeeds in shedding light upon many subtle dimensions and aspects of the novel, he seems unaware of the critical terms one can use in explicating a literary work. Instead, he has to fall back on obscure terms hardly befitting the purpose. It is possible to contend that he has endeavored to come up with a local version of the same by avoiding the Western critical terms. This seems to be too much of a stretch, mainly because he does not come up with any concrete and succinct way to fill the gap. More importantly, when there is a text containing this type of redundancy, the reader may expect to see

long and convoluted sentences. On the contrary, the sentences in this novel are usually short and elliptical.

Unlike the above critical essays, it is possible to discern another critical current, which is more akin to the traditional criticism, a type of criticism that draws a line between form and content and employs technical terms sparingly. For instance, in his 2014 essay titled "Alas, the Evil Bird of War: A Note on The Scorpion on the Platform of the Andimeshk Train Station (Hosein Mortezāiān Ābkenār) and A Discussion on Anti-war Literature," Mostafā Ensāfi contends that Ābkenār knew well that in view of the brevity of the story, he has to engage the reader with it as soon as possible. This novel is unique in this regard. The critic stipulates that it would suffice to read the first three chapters so that one would continue to read it in its entirety in one sitting. This is the first feeling the reader experiences. My critique of Ensāfi' essay is that it counts too much on a reader's reception, especially their emotion (i.e., the story being "startling"), which is both subjective and immeasurable. Ensāfi also holds that if the story is startling, it is because it stems from the war's raw brutality. Also, the latter is what makes it plausible. Instead of merely focusing on characterization, Ābkenār has endeavored to create situations by which he can talk candidly to the reader about war, a type of candor that has always been missing in the Persian war literature. This lack stems from a grave misunderstanding that any attempt for a frank depiction of the Iran-Iraq War would be tantamount to marring or jeopardizing the face of those who fought for their country. Ensāfi further argues that what Ābkenār's story intends to impart is the destructiveness of the war and how people become its victims, even though the war is completely legitimate, a war that focuses on defending the territorial integrity of the country. This anti-war approach, Ensāfi continues, is not confined to this work. Every wise person knows that war is a destructive phenomenon. Furthermore, a

number of great authors have shared a similar approach in their novels. Erich Maria Remarque's *Im Westen Nichts Neues* (1929) and Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five,* or, *The Children's Crusade: A Duty-Dance with Death* (1969) are cases in point. Resonating with Ensāfi's essay and his underscoring the significance of the content in his essay published in 2017, Yusef Sheikhi focuses on the content of Ābkenār's work as if it is something separate from its form. He commences his essay by suspecting the genre of the book to be a fictional, even though, in the very beginning, Ābkenār has left a note that all the scenes in the novel are real. The crux of his argument is the fact that a novel, by definition, is a fictional story containing several well-developed characters and nothing more than a recording of their lives, whereas, a long short story only has one major character. Therefore, it would be prudent to appraise this work as a long short story, given lesser characters are hardly developed. This is due to the haste the writer makes in order to narrate the story of Mortezā Hedāyati. The "style" of the story is mainly composed of a different outlook on reality, as well as exaggerated descriptions yielding not surreal, but objective pictures. It is also crucial to note the precedence of fictitious atmosphere over characterization as well as a flat and straightforward plot. Moreover, unlike the complex language that Golshiri and his followers employ in their stories, Ābkenār uses a simple, clear language. Finally, the book provides a pessimistic look at the war which turns it into a radical anti-war work of literature. This is allegedly the most outstanding feature of this book. As such, Sheikhi's essay mostly focuses on the content of the work, especially its anti-war orientation. He, then, adds that he is aware of the fact that paying attention to merely the content is not particularly fashionable and commonly a critical trend. In addition, Sheikhi contends that today many writers have nothing to say and rather confine themselves to formal and linguistic games and maneuvers. He also stipulates that this is the problem with not only Iranian writers but also,

by extension, Iranian intelligentsia. This absurdity mainly stems from losing connection with tradition. Sheikhi, then, purports that, in the world of art, any valuable work has its roots in tradition. In the same manner, he argues that, if a writer creates a good novel depicting the Iran-Iraq War, it is because the story has its roots in patriotism, as well as religious beliefs; something Ābkenār's novel lacks. Sheikhi further stipulates that authors such as Ābkenār feel no responsibility toward the *Holy Defense* and follow no specific aims. He argues that the absurdity in the works of Iranian writers differs from the one in the writings authored by the likes of Beckett, Camus, or Sartre, on the grounds that these authors' works arise from the questioning the whole existence. In the former, the absurdity stems from a carelessness and the end result of a faulty understanding of tradition and modernity. Hence, if Iranian religious writers cram their stories with coarse and non-fictitious slogans or hardly know anything about the form of a story or the technicalities of story writing, the Iranian authors who are members of the so-called intelligentsia and know about these technical and formal aspects, have no commitments whatsoever. In a word, the critic objects to Ābkenār's non-idealized portrayal of Iranian forces as they consume opium or exchange bribes. The important question Sheikhi poses in the end is, "Is our eight-year defense against a foreign aggressor a cause for anti-war literature or is this type of literature begotten somewhere else [i.e., in another country]?" He, then, reiterates that there is a common issue among the members of the Iranian intelligentsia, which is a lack of concern for truth and Ābkenār's novel has just been another testimony of the same lack. My first critique of Sheikhi's essay is that he draws an uncrossable line between the form and content of a work of literature. Whereas in some traditional critical approaches to literature, it is possible to distinguish between the two, most of the later approaches question the same stipulating that there would be no literary work excluding its form. Furthermore, Sheikhi fails to grasp the significance

of the form in turning the novel into anti-war literature, that is, the same aspect of the work he criticizes most. True, Sheikhi makes comparisons and contrasts between the traditional and modern approaches to literary criticism. His contention, however, that if the proponents of the traditional approach have something to say, what they say is right, seems untenable. In other words, the proponents of this camp may support a certain political belief, but that does not make their critical stance viable. Additionally, his belief that, unlike Western authors such as Camus, Ābkenār's attention to form stems from his lack of commitment is equally untenable. Moreover, if the content comes first, why should the critic begin his essay with questioning of the novel to be the true form of Ābkenār's work preferring long short story as the appropriate genre?

One way of comparing the critical essays on *Chess with Dooms Day machine: A Novel* with the ones dealing with Ābkenār's novel is that the essays written on the former seem somewhat more reserved, whatever their positions may be. This probably comes from the nature of the novel they are tackling, even though it stands apart from the conventional *Holy Defense* literary works in their depiction of the Iranian society, Iranian armed forces, societal relations, and especially the employment of humorous and at times sarcastic tones, the novel, in the final analysis, is in tandem with the overall objectives of the war as propagated by the regime. Moreover, the essays written on it also do not have to take a radical stance. That is, although the commentaries on Ahmadzadeh's novel are to approve of the novel for its groundbreaking achievements in terms of style, or content, they do not contend that the achievements in question set completely at naught the ideas and values they intend to defy. For example, if humans will thwart or alter their destiny, as manifested by *The Doomsday Machine*, this will not defy the Divine Will, rather, human will becomes an extension or addendum to God's Providence. *The Scorpion*, however, stops at nothing to reveal the inhumane nature of the Iran-Iraq war, or war, in

general, setting at naught all ideological and political redlines any book published in Iran should be weary of. To speak more technically, in Ahmadzādeh's novel, one can see an antonymy between each binary opposition such as ethereal/corporeal, mosque/church, narrator/Parviz, Javad's mother/Guiti, black pieces/white pieces, Iranian forces/Iraqi Forces, to name a few, but there is hardly any constant, inherent interplay between them. *The Scorpion,* conversely, is nothing but an undecidable interaction between the binary opposition. As such, the ensuing fuzziness and undecidability is so fundamental that it harbors neither a rigid political system nor an imposed and constant worldview. As a result, the critical essays attempting to illuminate Ābkenār's story may have to adopt a more pointed and more radical stance to do a better job of clarifying a fuzzy and undecidable situation. Additionally, the critical responses to *The Scorpion* have a more arduous task as they should either completely approve or completely denounce the novel's stance on a variety of key concepts such as (self) sacrifice, life, death, and faith. If they do the former, they might err on the side of too much conformism with the status quo and the power behind it. On the contrary, if they approve of the novel's stance, they might subject themselves to crushing external pressure, even though they may have grasped the essence of the novel. Critical responses to Ābkenār's novel also face another dilemma because they should either focus on "form" and "technique," disregarding what has come to be known as "theme" or "content," in case they recognize a distinction of this kind. There are of course other essays that do not recognize it. All in all, however, these differences among the essays on Ābkenār's work have disrupted the formation of a meaningful intellectual trajectory. Conversely, the critical commentaries on *Chess with the Doomsday Machine* form a meaningful trajectory that becomes increasingly technique-oriented in nature over time. Finally, since both novels have been

published fairly recently (especially *The Scorpion*), it may still be premature to discern a meaningful pattern of the related critical commentaries and their changes through time.

After a recuperative reading of the critical essays on *The Scorpion*, I intend to perform a close reading of the novel. In other words, I consider the novel as an autonomous entity focusing on how its various components (e.g., time, space, plot, and language, to name a few) speak to each other and to the totality of the work. As I pointed out in previous chapters, this constitutes the internal logic of the novel. The more an incident or character is in line with the said logic, the more realistic it will be.

It is the summer of 1988. It is the final days of the Iran-Iraq War and the final days of Mortezā at the front. Iranian forces are experiencing successive defeats. Rumor has it that Iran is soon going to accept the UN resolution number 598 and a ceasefire would follow. The space is a tiny room in Andimeshk's Train Station where the story commences. This commencement, however, imparts the sense of an ending. Everything has come to an end even before the story begins. Everybody is dead before the reader gets to know them.

Even prior to focusing on the story line, two things grip one's attention. First, the title which is composed of two parts. This is usually intended to be humorous or surprising and, of course, may remind the reader of an old, and now almost uncommon practice in story writing whereby the title is composed of two parts. Hossein Nush Āzar appraises this as something intentional as well as purposefully irregular and confusing to demonstrate the confusion and trauma that war usually causes. He believes that one can trace this back to the 20th Century Western novel where the same confusion was employed in portrayal of psychological traumas stemming from the two World Wars. Nush Āzar further posits that *The Scorpion* is a long nightmare. It is the story of the disintegration of a world in which no one can be a hero. That is

why none of the characters in the novel, not even the narrator-cum-protagonist, has character [i.e., in the sense of distinctive identity or individuality] ("War Literature- Part Two"]). The second point is this statement at the beginning of Ābkenār's story: "All scenes in this novel are real." This reminds the reader of the convention used in the beginning of many Western novels: "The story, all names, characters, and incidents portrayed in this production are fictitious. No identifications with actual persons (living or deceased), places, buildings, and products are intended or should be inferred." In Persian literature, the author Sādeq Chubak used this in the beginning of his works. Decades after Sādeq Chubak, Esmāil Fasih and Rezā Barāhani started writing this turn of phrase at the beginning of some of their novels. In the case of Barāhani, the critic Nāser Zerā'ati, entertained that by this, he too wanted to revive a dead practice to convey an original message: all people and incidents in this story are either real or are inspired by reality (130-131). By saying "all scenes in this novel are real," Ābkenār seems to be making a comparable point. Despite portraying some bizarre incidents, he wants to convey an unfamiliar, but a deeper kind of reality, perhaps the gist of reality or the reality as the author processes or refines it (Leiris 6). Regarding portraying bizarre incidents, Mahdieh Ā'bedi underscores the fact that this novel drags the reader to a very strange place the likes of which one cannot find in any other place, that is, something poles apart from the conventional stories of the Iran-Iraq War (12). Here, there is a pendulum-like interplay of these representations between objective or outside reality and dream. In a word, there is no single and fixed representation of the structure of the novel. Instead, there are different possibilities and manifestations.

Hosein Nush Āzar, moreover, holds that the structure of the novel is purposefully irregular and confusing to demonstrate the confusion and trauma that the war has caused. He believes that one could trace this back to the 20th Century Western novel in which the same

confusion was employed to portray the psychological traumas resulting from the two World Wars. Nush Āzar further claims that *The Scorpion* is an interminable nightmare. It is the story of the disintegration of a world in which nobody could be a hero. That is why no character in the novel, not even the narrator-cum-protagonist, has a character [i.e., in the sense of distinctive identity or individuality] ("War Literature - Part Two").

A soldier who goes by the name of Mortezā, which presumably reminds the reader of Hosein Mortezāiān Ābkenār, narrates *The Scorpion.* The story starts in a train station where the narrator is hiding from the military police. It ends in the same station where it has begun. So, the whole story looks like a circle or a vicious cycle. When one reaches the end, one should read it again drawing upon what has learned from the first reading. In other words, juxtaposing apparently disconnected chapters having different viewpoints, the story loses the possibility of reducing a plurality of spaces to a single geometric linear one. As I pointed out earlier, there are indefinite interplays between a series of binary oppositions: the first part of the title/the second part of the title, all scenes are real/no scene is real, alive/dead (or, by extension, life/death), and the beginning of the novel/the end of novel. Moreover, there is one level of narration that the narrator recounts as opposed to the second level in the book that in chapter six of Ābkenār's novel, Mortezā literally unearths with the help of his bayonet. This is a story titled, *The Train Dripping Blood* (also, almost the same as the second part of the title of the Ābkenār's novel) the chapter six of which the protagonist is reading. It is not certain that this is a narrative on two levels or two independent narratives. This introduces yet another binary opposition. It seems that it is not only Ābkenār's novel that frames the unearthed book, but also, and at the same time, it is the second story that creates or continues the first one. One can even assume that there is a constant interplay between the two stories, which acts as two parallel mirrors. Furthermore, if

one deems this as a story framing another story, traditional Eastern storytelling (e.g., *One Thousand and One Nights*) is what come to one's minds. On the other hand, the second story seems to be the continuation of the first story. So, in a way, this is a story that ponders its status as a story. It warns the reader that this is not a pretension of reality; rather, this is a self-conscious fiction, that is, "metafiction" (Klinkowitz). On the face of it, this emphasis on the fictionality of the story may go against the claim that "All scenes in this novel are real." It is as if the author enjoys himself by bombarding the reader with the incessant rush of nightmarish incidents that convey the gist of the realities of the war. These sad experiences were probably what had made everybody (i.e., the writer, the narrator, and every contemporary Iranian) a scorpion; a creature who absorbed the black venom of its time and stings itself to death when it sees itself surrounded by fire and destruction.

These constant converging and diverging of binary oppositions are best expressed here: "He looked at the sky. He saw two full moons in the sky which, at the same time, entering and emerging from each other" (Ābkenār 30). As a deconstructive strategy, this is how Ābkenār tends to unearth these presupposed ways of thinking. This is how the writer not only unmasks, but also destroys the accustomed ways of thinking about the dire realities of his own time: war, life, death, and revival. Ābkenār stresses the undecidability of the above oppositions. There is a constant interplay of binary oppositions of which neither gets the upper hand.

> The real-world dead-end that one can observe in the battlefield manifests itself in another form. The narrative style, at times, distances itself from realism hovering on the border between reality and imagination. Siāvash's death and Mortezā's mourning over him is a case in point (41). Reality and imagination become so interwoven that even the fate of the

central character (i.e., Mortezā) is ambiguous and the reader is not sure if Mortezā reaches home or he shares the same fate with Siāvash (Feyzābādi).

It is towards the end of Iran-Iraq war when, in step with the overall defeat and retreat of the Iranian forces, Mortezā tries to reach Tehran. At some points he claims that he has finished his military service and at times, it seems that he has gone AWOL. He is accompanying a friend, namely, "Siā" which translates into both "black" and a short form of "Siāvash," who is an Iranian mythical figure passing the ordeal of fire ("red"). Also, it becomes clear that "Siā" is a dead body far from the hope of redemption or passing the test of fire. Just as 'Sia' seems like the truncated form of "Siāvash," he stumbles upon each word. Not only is he a dead man, but he is also at the mercy of a dominant power or discourse that mutilated his body and truncated his words. On the other hand, there is a "beardless mullah" who speaks gibberish and rambles meaningless, useless statements without pause, on TV. One can hear words like "war," "peace," "victory," "chemical weapons," and "martyrs." This incoherent flow of words seems to form a powerful and dominant political-religious discourse that determines the fates of people such as Mortezā and Siāvash.

Throughout the novel, one can see the interplay of the colors black and red as a binary opposition. Sometimes, the two colors are even mixed, "He looked at the seat, which was bloody and from its edge, black blood was dripping on the floor of Aifa truck" (15). There is also another case of same symbolism signifying black: "Andimeshk", a city in southwestern part of Iran. One could read this as "Andi (اندی یا اندکی)"+ "meshk مشک یا مشکی." Both parts together mean 'a bit black.' It could also be an ironical understatement meaning "very black" or "pitch dark." "Andimeshk was dark" (Ābkenār 49). Nevertheless, this is juxtaposed with "blood." In the end, the reader comes to know that Siāvash is a dead man who accompanies Mortezā everywhere; presumably the latter's dead alter ego or twin: "Hello! Hello! Everybody has died.

They have all attained martyrdom!" (71). One reads about this phone call after a long passage describing a great number of Iranian soldiers and officers waiting for a train to come or wandering in a wilderness. Hence, as in Siāvash who a dead man walking is, all the other soldiers and officers may be the dead walking and talking. Presumably, the whole story is that of the dead, the dead whose blood is dripping from the platform of Andimeshk train station. What is the cause of death? The scorpion.

Here is another instance of symbolic use of black and red: "The watchword [in Persian, literally: "the name of the night"]: match" (27). What we have here is the blackness of night as opposed to the redness of the fire.

Another important characteristic of the novel is its change of viewpoints. For example, it moves from third person in chapter 17 to second person in chapter 18. This helps the reader experience different perspectives of the reality presented. Furthermore, the non-linear, apocalyptic portrayal of a war scene, that is, a corpse-littered desert and a dreary mixture of red blood and black death, the shadows and the darkness compounded by having to wander around in thirst, all heighten the tension presented in the story.

The external pressure on *The Scorpion* is another point worth elaborating here. The novel's third edition was banned in Iran after some harsh commentaries stating that the novel goes against the *Holy Defen*se and its pertinent values, as it presents tawdry details such as the exchange of bribes between soldiers, sodomy, obscene language, defeatism, and escape. Subsequent editions of the book then appeared in France. In lieu of making concessions to the censorship by implementing changes that would render the work less problematic, the novel remained intact on all fronts. It continues to be seen if a change in publishers has any impact on its reception with the Iranian readership. Of late, one hardly legal, yet very effective way of

trading and exchanging Persian books, has been to email a PDF copy of the manuscript for free, or for a reduced price. This may play a role in compensating for the remoteness of the French publisher from the Iranian readership.

Now it would be prudent to make comparisons and contrasts between the two novels I have selected for this chapter. As I mentioned earlier, due to the temporal proximity of the publication dates of both novels I have selected for this chapter as well as the temporal proximity of the essays published on either of the novels, it might not be an easy task to discern any meaningful trajectory or pattern for changes. Unlike the critical essays on the previous novels that evinced a gradual direction or a pattern of unfolding, if one juxtaposes, in order of the publication dates, the critical commentaries on either of the two novels, the critical essays seem to be in the constant state of flux unraveling no certain direction or pattern. In general, however, there is a tendency toward more technicality, less ideological mind cast (especially in the form of the *Holy Defense*), more toward of a defying, questioning, and ridiculing of the established values revered and idolized, at least in its shallow and conventional manner.

Furthermore, both works have a circular plot (Ghaffāri and Sa'eedi 116). Unlike critics such as Ghaffāri and Sa'eedi (116), I do not believe that Habibzādeh's story has a circular plot. Still assuming theirs is correct, one can continue with this argument as the circularity in both novels defies the facile depiction of the war and the related incidents which induce a questioning of the linear plot one usually sees in the more conventional stories of the Iran-Iraq War, especially the *Holy Defense* works. One should, however, remain cognizant of the differences between the two, as the circularity in *Chess with Doomsday Machine* mostly stems from the writer's choice of components and materials of the story, that is, how he juxtaposes contradictory elements. In Ābkenār's novel, however, this circularity is the result of the constant interplay of

binary opposition, so much so that it unveils a much deeper type of undecidability of the reality of war in general. This could mean that, in *Chess with Doomsday Machine*, the circularity of plot and the confusion of signs are by-products of an external choice. To conclude, in Ābkenār's work, the said indefinite interplay springs from the deeply etched possibilities and potentials of the components of the novel and the constant interplay between them.

Conclusion

This conclusion is more of an attempt to tease out certain parts, aspects, or dimensions of the present research, which could shed light on its totality or on the seminal points it shares with the reader. In other words, it is a partial summary of the whole dissertation. It is not an attempt to simplify the perception of literary works dealing with the subject of the literature of Iran Iraq war. Conversely, it is a gesture toward demonstrating the ever-growing complexity of the literary works I have selected and analyzed when one examines them every time and measures the changes rendered not only through time but because of time. The whole process of reading and perception is quite complex, and the present research, at its best, elucidates parts of it. Finally, there will be suggestions for further analysis. My contention here is that, taking all components and aspects of the works I have taken into account, the reader will be able to move past contradictory epistemological approaches to ascertain the reality of the Iran-Iraq War. Finally, there will be suggestions for further analysis.

Any single reader's, or the literary critic's, perception of the literary work serves as the lynchpin in the perception of the literary works analyzed as well as the critical commentaries about them. As one moves from the novels analyzed in the first chapter to the subsequent chapters, it is possible to see that both stories and critical essays become increasingly individualized, introspective, and less likely to mirror the grand narratives Islam and Marxism create. To that end, the stories exhibit increasing attention to the more recent, more complex techniques of story writing. For instance, a chronicle-like, camcorder-like method of narration in the first novel considered in this dissertation (or, as Abdul'ali Dastgheyb calls it a quasi-novel, that is, a mélange of story and reportage) gives way to a technique such as metafiction in the last

novel I have studied. Metafiction is usually part of the postmodern story writing repertoire. The technical complexity and richness of the later novels portray the contemporary reader's increasingly complex perception of reality.

A possible similarity between Mahmud's novel and Ābkenār's is that even though both have a protagonist, they introduce many characters. A possible difference between the two is that the former depicts an entire city and the latter a large number of members of Iranian military members wandering in the wilderness. In Mahmud's novel, people hardly have any individuality. Even the narrator is a passive person acting like a camcorder. As such, composed of all the people in the novel, the whole city of Ahvaz is, in fact, the protagonist *The Scorched Earth*.

Conversely, in *The Scorpion*, the multitude of the members of military wandering in the desert as well as those in the barracks and the train station do not impart any sense of togetherness. Not only are all of them dead (as the reader finds out toward the end of the story), but also there is no connection or resonance between them: it is an every-man-for-himself type of situation. There is no connection or resonance between Mortezā and Siāvash, who are one character. These two are not readily compatible. It is as if each dead man lives in his own world of the deceased. Therefore, each character does not form a piece of a jigsaw puzzle which would in turn form a whole picture, but rather is an independent world.

From the first and last novel studied, it is possible to observe gradual transformations. These transformations transpire despite the four novels are located between the first and the sixth novels, that is, the two novels by Fasih, one by Farāsat, and another one by Ahmadzādeh, which are the points of departure and destination in the present research. between the two beforementioned points of departure and destination.

Another possible point that comes as the lynchpin among all the six novels is symbols, symbolism, and their role. Can one assume that symbols and symbolism grow more organic and integrated as one moves along, they grow more and more organic? There could be meaningful comparisons in terms of symbolism between Farāsat's novel, the second out of the six novels studied, and the very last work, *The Scorpion* and *The Headless Palms. The latter* contains exaggerated images composed of overt symbols, which the narrator mainly inserted them to make the story grandiose or heroic. In Ā̱bkenār's novel, however, symbols stem organically from the situation. Conversely, in *The Headless Palms*, symbols demonstrate and highlight the normative values the narrative adheres to.

In contrast, in the later novels, symbols express the deeper layers of meaning. The same unique internal logic provides the work's unique way of perceiving and understanding the world, that is, what one can stipulate as the work's ideology. The structural and stylistic components of the novel more and more organically connect with the internal logic of the work contributing to it. This undercuts those components inserted in the text to fulfill an outside normative agenda, which causes the component to look out of place or loosely connected. What seems to be new is that in cases where what has been included in the story as fact and reality tallies not with the work's internal logic but with the outside sources and normative agendas, there is a telltale built-in text to reveal this. The cut pinky, which accuses the narrator at the very end of *The Scorched Earth*, is a case in point. Presumably, it is an invitation to reread the novel, this time with an eye on what might have gone wrong or neglected. However, as one moves toward the later novels in this dissertation and the symbols become more organic and integrated into the totality of the literary work. No telltale, such as the cut pinky, is included to imply a breach in perceiving and representing reality. In other words, no normative principle or ideological filter (in a sense

explained in chapter two) disrupts the harmony between components of the novel. That is, as the reader's perception of a certain component of the novel as being realistic and its degree of realism depend upon the degree of proximity of the perceived component to the internal logic of the novel.

This perception of the proximity of certain components of a work to the internal logic of the same work, which comes as the benchmark for realism, disregards historical data and conditions. This is because the close reading of the text transpires in an incomplete historical moment. In other words, it happens in the very present moment, that is, before this very moment is gone. If the present moment passes, a new version of the reader should turn back and read the text from a past historical moment. Hence, a recuperative reading of the text in the present moment seems out of the question. As a result, any single reader, e.g., either me or each of the critics who analyzed the story, should confine themselves to a reading of the text that deems it as an independent and autonomous entity with its internal logic coming as the benchmark for being either close to or far from reality.

On the contrary to the above, which ignore biographical and the historical conditions surrounding a story in favor of its internal logic, there has been noticeable scholarships such as the essays by Nāser Irani (1984), Rezā Navvābpur (1985), and Ahmad Karimi-Hakkāk (1986), among the outstanding critical commentaries published in the 1980s. These essays mainly tackle whether the analyzed work, for instance, Fasih's two novels examined in this dissertation, have managed to wholly and faithfully reflect the realities of Iran in the earlier 1980s. This is especially the case concerning incidents such as the Iran-Iraq War as well as its impact on the lives of Iranians living in cities near and far from the fronts and the Iranian émigré residing in Europe, especially France. The relations between the narrator and the writer and if the former

serves as a persona for the latter in representing the realities is of utmost importance in this regard. It is also important to note if the restrictions such as (self-)censorship, one of the influencing factors lying outside the text, have affected the way the components of literary works come together, forming the story's internal logic.

The critical commentaries I have selected for my research have either of the two as their point of departure in analyzing one of the six novels: text or outside-the-text factors such as historical, biographical, cultural, and social conditions surrounding it. I contend, however, that no matter which one of the two comes as the point of departure in one's perception of a literary work, the very idea of points of departure and destination indicates a distance between form and content. I doubt such a distance exists as no content is independent of formalistic or textual features. Therefore, one cannot advance ideas such as the priority of either content or historical-political context over the formalistic one, that is, stylistic and structural considerations, or vice versa.

Finally, due to the rigid nature of *the Holy Defense* or Marxist criticism, the critical perceptions of the novels I have discussed here, especially toward the dissertation's first half, do not readily change through time. As I have illustrated, many of the critiques I have discussed in my dissertation drew a line between content and form, attaching the utmost importance to the former. But the works of critics such as Nurshamsi no longer maintain a separation of form and content, even though they believe in the priority of the content. Shishehgarān also claims that in today's world, defining and representing reality objectively is out of the question. Hence, nobody can claim that it has created an out-and-out realist work. The objective reality here is the outbreak of the war and, in the case of Farāsat's novel, Khorramshahris' defense of their city. The writer has chosen this historical reality and has fictionalized it. In *The Headless Palms,* the

historical background is there. According to Shishehgarān, what is absent, however, is the fictitious world and fictitious characters. One may deduce his approval of the novel's adherence to Islamic values here. The same commitment affects the novel's portrayal of external realities. The points of departure for the perception and analysis of the novel are external, that is outside the text, such as the Iraqi invasion of Iran and the almost unique significance of Khorramshahr (Jazini & Shishehgarān). The said points of departure, however, lead to a full-blown apology of Islamic values, an apology so strong that it suppresses the fictionality of the story turning it into a chronicle of some sort (Shishehgarān).

In each chapter, I conducted a detailed examination of the selected novels as autonomous entities as well as their interactions with their surrounding conditions. A step further could be envisioning a trajectory of how the interactions in question render the work under study (non) ideologic (ideology in particular in the Althusserian sense of the term as well as Bakhtin's definition both included in the body chapters). The four novels I analyzed in the first two chapters had direct and unequivocal relations with the concept of ideology. *The Scorched Earth* is a Marxist novel, and *The Headless Palms* is a typical Islamist, Holy Defense work. One can define the statuses of Fasih's two novels as the ones in a constant skirmish with outside normative and ideological control. So, even though his two novels do not seem to promulgate any value system, it is possible to consider their relative success or failure in terms of the degree to which they have avoided ideological censorship or been affected by it. *Chess with the Doomsday Machine* is a turning point in this trajectory. However, it seems to take the pledge with the ideals of the Holy Defense, the thoughtful juxtapositions, and the ensuing ironical questioning of almost everything that many other novels of the Iran-Iraq War revere or at least take for granted. In other words, each ordinary and conventional incident contains what negates

or questions it. This is unlike Fasih's works' clashes with censorship, which is in the position of exteriority to the story. *The Scorpion on the Platform of Andimeshk Railroad or Blood's Dripping from This Train, Sir!* constitutes the acme of this process, whereby the novel has moved beyond any internal or external involvement with normative, ideological systems such as the *Holy Defense* Novel. A̱bkenar's novel, then, manages to establish an autonomous world. In conclusion, taking all of the above into account, the reader can move past contradictory epistemological approaches to the reality of the Iran-Iraq War.

It is also possible to deem this dissertation as a point of departure for further research. For example, I believe that it has a significant potential for ramifications in areas such as Peace Studies and Human Rights Education, in which one could measure and analyze Iranian readers of the novels mentioned above' response to the Iran-Iraq War as a collective trauma and also by extension, all Iranians' responses to the same. That is, it is possible to study how, over time, this trauma turns into a memory with a significant potential for empathy, reconciliation, and tolerance. Hence, as one moves along, due to their technical, stylistic, and structural complexities, the novels I have selected for the latter part of my dissertation exhibit much more potential for poetic witnessing as opposed to the novels included toward the beginning of the same research; the novels, which tend to be chronicles and accurate records of the war incidents. In other words, the comparisons between the first novel and the last unveil a gamut of gradual changes in terms of literary style and structure, and perception, which will provide a basis to include empathy, reconciliation, and peace. As a result, it is possible to teach the six novels and the whole dissertation to establish positive peace, which one could define as promoting a culture of long-lasting peace and non-violence ("What is positive Peace?"). This is unlike negative peace, where one seeks to restore peace after a war breaks out and "*does not capture a society's*

tendencies towards stability and harmony" Just the way the first war novels in the dissertation, due to their chronicle-like and camcorder-like manner of representing the incidents, did not manifest deep insight into what transpired, and, at the time of the novels' publication, Iranians' collective memory needed some time for incidents of this kind to sink in, it was also just the beginning of the critiques focusing on the Iran-Iraq War novels. Drawing upon two major ideological frameworks of Marxism and Islam, these critiques tend to measure whether the novels they were focusing on have been faithful to those frameworks. As one moves along, however, the critical commentaries increasingly deal with the technical, stylistic, and structural complexities that bestow the works they analyze with the capacity to go down in the collective memory of Iranians.

What, however, may vitiate the critical appraisals in question is that they need to offer detailed statistics and facts, such as the number of editions and copies in each edition. One may use these details to demonstrate how the Iranian readership, *in toto*, has perceived the stories. In other words, this is the first time anyone has endeavored to measure how those works have gone down in the collective memory of Iranians. There has been no way to gauge the conditions and, as I quote Letitia Nanquette in the first chapter, "dynamics of production and circulation of literary works [including the Persian novels of the Iran-Iraq War, especially the ones I analyzed in my research] in Iran, revealing the forms, structures, and functions of Iranian literature within Iranian society" (4). It is merely within these perimeters, the statistical universe, and only relying upon a meticulous methodology that details such as the copies in each edition or literary awards could gain full significance. It is only in this case that one may accurately gauge the degree of readers' perception as well as how the perception in question went down their collective memory. This predicament notwithstanding, there is still a significant difference between the

critical commentaries on the war novels published in the 1980s and those that came out almost thirty years later. The former, for instance, gauges if and to what degree the novels they analyze have been faithful to the grand ideological frameworks they were supposed to follow. The latter, however, tend to investigate the built-in structural, stylistic, and technical characteristics of the stories that came out toward the beginning of the twenty-first century. An attempt to determine the relationship between the attributes in question and how, because of them, the literary works will go down in the Iranians' collective memory calls for much more meticulous elaboration.

A second possibly thought-provoking point for further research is that by adding the newer Persian novels of the Iran-Iraq War to this study, it will be possible to discern whether the changes I have traced continue in the same direction or there will be trajectories and new directions; new directions, which may render null and void one's conjectures about any future pattern of change. The more novels one includes in the study, the bigger the possibility of the process.

Another common denominator between the novels I selected for this dissertation is the interactions between forces exerted on characters and their resistance against those forces. This could be fodder for a separate analysis drawing upon Michelle Foucault's famous statement, "Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power" (95-96). One could discern a trajectory here. This trajectory begins with so-called Holy Defense novels as well as the ones under the influence of Marxist ideology. One can study whether and to what extent this ideologic rendering has influenced the possibility and accuracy of the resistance being exerted in a position of interiority to power. In novels such as the ones by Mahmud and Farāsat, the respective ideologies have channeled the

exertion of power on individuals and their reactions to that power. As one proceeds, they start tackling stories here; the ideological grid does not affect the power-resistance equilibrium.

Based upon the transformations in Persian war literature, one may extend the paradigm to contend that this study may indicate that contemporary Persian literature is moving toward having more polyphonic literary works. These works tend to have the capacity to harbor various voices or viewpoints, which undercut the *Holy Defense* novels' tendency to contain only two voices: the narrator's and the enemy's. Presumably, works such as Ahmadzadeh's work mark a transition stage in contemporary Persian novel from ideological to non-ideological.

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