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Disordering Modernism:
Aesthetics of Affliction in Post-Coup Iran

By

Donna Honarpisheh

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

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in

Comparative Literature

and the Designated Emphasis

in Critical Theory

in the

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of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Karl Ashoka Britto, co-chair

Professor Nasrin Rahimieh, co-chair

Professor Wali Ahmadi

Professor Judith Butler

Professor Anneka Lenssen

Summer 2022

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Abstract

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Donna Honarpisheh

**Doctor of Philosophy in Comparative Literature
and the Designated Emphasis in Critical Theory**

University of California at Berkeley

**Professor Karl Ashoka Britto, co-chair
Professor Nasrin Rahimieh, co-chair**

Disordering Modernism: The Aesthetics of Affliction in Post-Coup Iran examines the psychic, temporal, and aesthetic forms of disorder in Iranian modernism in the wake of the British- and American-imposed coup d'état of 1953. Analyzing both the historical conditions of external colonialism (*este'mār*) and internal despotism (*estebdād*), this dissertation conducts a medium-specific analysis of Iranian modernist forms to consider the ways in which aesthetic works register psychic affliction and provide a critical way of reconfiguring the world in the wake of violence. Bringing together major visual artists (Bahman Mohassess, Bahman Farmanara, Nasser Taqvai) and fiction writers (Gholam Hossein Saedi, Bahram Sadeqi, Simin Daneshvar), this dissertation offers a new study of the relationship between violence and representation.

Each chapter traces the experience of affliction not only as a symptom of the historical conditions of uncertainty and paranoia imposed by the coup but also as an event that unsettles the psychic and historic grounds of experience, generating a channel to the untimely, uncanny, and otherworldly. As part of the experience of affliction, the artists I write about consider abstraction both as a violent technique of the state *and* as a multi-temporal dislocating force that enables their work to generate a critique of multiple regimes of power, past, present, and future. By attending to the aesthetic *form* of affliction, *Disordering Modernism* addresses the gap within research on semi-colonial histories in postcolonial studies, while also using a comparative study of media to construct a narrative of global modernity across transhistorical and transnational planes.

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I wrote a dissertation on affliction amid a global pandemic during which the whole world navigated the real threat of illness and the psychic tolls it would take on us. It was in these difficult conditions of isolation that I felt the presence of my intellectual community appear in new ways. From the beginning, my time at UC-Berkeley was filled with mentors and peers who challenged and inspired my thinking—people without whom this dissertation would not have been possible. First, I would like to thank my committee members. It has been a gift to learn from Karl Ashoka Britto; his erudition as a scholar and mentor is incomparable. He inspired me to write in moments of great difficulty and to harness the power of close-reading. I am eternally grateful for his mentorship. I am thankful to Nasrin Rahimieh for supporting my work and vision from the beginning. Her expertise in Iranian studies and comparative literature challenged me to fortify my claims at every level. Anneka Lenssen is a shining light: I am indebted to her for giving me a new language to think about art and for inspiring my thinking along the way. To say that the mentorship of Wali Ahmadi was fundamental to the development of my thinking in Persian literature and the broader political terrain is an understatement. Wali jaan, thank you. I cannot adequately put in words the profound impact Judith Butler has had on my thinking. Judith has been a generous interlocutor, an inspiring teacher, and a model for the ways an education in the humanities must fundamentally be formed by a politics of care. Judith has embodied this care with questions that enable my thinking and stay with me.

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Yasmina Raiani was my first friend here, she is ineffable and I cherish our early years together. I am grateful to have an enduring friendship with Anooj Kansara and for everything we learned together. Laila Riazi is my Shirazi sister, I appreciate her insights into my writing. Michael Myers II is family. Christine Canady is a once in a lifetime friend. Laughing with Sara Boutorabi, Emily Jane Rosen, and Thom Sliwowski is life-giving. William Morgan is a great friend who always supports me and my “town.” Writing daily with Mary Mussman and creating a lasting friendship sustained me during the pandemic. I have been thinking with Basit Iqbal about the subjects written here for years, I am grateful for his earnest feedback and his friendship. I share a love of film and family with Diana Ruiz and Kelly Norris. Amin Ehteshami and Anna Cruz were crucial sources of support and friendship in my early years. Christopher Scott and I share our passion for fashion and more. What a joy to teach and build friendships with Maya Kronfeld, Max Kaisler, and Emily Laskin. I was always drawn to anthropologists who became great friends and pushed my thinking in so many ways: Brent Eng, Aaron Eldridge, Jesus Gutierrez, Mohammad Jarada, Milad Odabaie, Jaleel Plummer, and Ricardo Rivera. Various people have generously given their feedback on my writing in ways that only friends could: Wendi Bootes, Marcos Cisneros, Aurelia Cojocar, Patrick Lyons, Daryl Maude, and Jaeyoon Park. My bay area community was strengthened through screenings at the PFA, vibrant seminars, long hikes, picnics in the park, and dancing: Thank you: Diego Arrocha, Michael Allen, Roya Aghavali, Ben Beitler, Katie Brown, Alex Brostoff, Devin Choudhury, Pê Feijó, Samra Rose Girma, Lisa Hoffman-Kuroda, Sarah Ihmoud, Veronica Jacome, Thiti Jamkajornkeiat, Marianne Kaletsky, Beezer de Martelly, Ramsey McGlazer, Cole Moore, Chika Okoye, Jared Robinson, Gemma Searle, Amber Sweat, Simone Stirner, and Bahaar Tajbakhsh. You have all given me so much.

During a difficult trip to Shiraz in which I laid my Amoo Farzad to rest, and at a time when Iran was the epicenter of the pandemic, the themes of the coup, its relationship to illness, psychic and supernatural affliction came to me in a capacity that I could not ignore. Grappling with the ways in which this history has formed my personal trajectory and shaped our collective experiences serves as the undercurrent of this dissertation. I hope that what I have written serves to honor the legacies of my grandparents and the untimely losses my family has endured.

There is no one quite like my Amoo Farbod; over the years, he pushed me to think critically about aesthetics, the avant-garde, and our culture (Shiraz in particular)—I hope he knows just how much he has inspired me. I am in awe of my sister, Rosa, for her approach to the world as a space of limitless possibility, and for instilling a fraction of this drive in me. I thank her, Fuad, Roya, and Aryana, for always supporting me and most of all, for their love. My nieces, Roya and Aryana have opened up my world in indescribable ways. They give me so much hope and joy and I am so honored to be their Khaleh Nana.

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patience, grace, and kindness. I feel lucky to have inherited her sensitive spirit and her capacity to dream. She has trusted my vision, even when I have not trusted myself. What I have learned in the process of writing is that even in conditions of affliction, there is so much life and beauty. My teachers, friends, and family are testament to that presence and for them, I am thankful.

Introduction

The striking blow of the 1953 coup d'état in Iran rattled the nation's dreams of sovereignty; soon after, with the reinstated power of the Shah and the renewed support of Western imperial powers, the nation underwent a militarized and temporal veil of order aimed at charging Iran ahead in the global race for modernity. But underneath the imposition of the rapid linear pace of colonial modernity, the wound of the coup endured as a subterranean force, a psychic fracture that would remain in the decaying atmosphere of post-coup Iran. Like many other experiences of 20th-century violence, colonial and authoritarian, the coup would disrupt the symbolic order that previously aimed to shape Iran's modern trajectory; instead, it produced a landscape of disorder that would generate a new way of approaching the modern subject. To approach a study of Iranian modernism, as this study aims to do, is to cut across a narrative of multiple sources, global and indigenous, Western and non-Western, modern and traditional, religious and secular, and to reckon with the conditions that often render these distinctions inadequate to the way in which the violence of the 20th century produces a subject who is fundamentally fragmented and shaped by multiple forces. Affliction serves as the central conceptual paradigm through which I examine literary and visual works produced in the wake of the British- and American-imposed coup d'état of 1953 through the Iranian revolution of 1979. Navigating historical conditions of affliction – psychic, supernatural, and historical – the artists, writers, and filmmakers I consider over the course of this dissertation each employ stylistic techniques of temporal and geographic abstraction, in which indexical references to time and place are not easily identifiable within their mediums, and in fact, rupture a stable or cohesive sense of the nation. These aesthetic techniques produce transhistorical and global critiques of the violence that permeated the twentieth century while at the same time registering the psychic trauma specific to the post-coup period in Iran. But first, I begin with an influential discourse of affliction that, while distinct from the aesthetic perspectives I highlight later, was integral in establishing significant questions and key themes I raise in each chapter about the foreign, the recourse to nativism and the making of the “modern” in contemporary Iran.

At the beginning of Jalal Al-e Ahmad's famous 1962 essay *Gharbzadegi* (translated as Westoxication, Weststruckedness, Westitis, or Occidentosis), the novelist, short story writer, and social critic uses medical language to form a diagnosis (*tārḥ-e yek bimari*) of Iran's afflicted condition. This condition, or illness (*bimari*), is characterized by a parasitic invasion from the West into the East. According to Al-e Ahmad, the West's invasion provokes a feeling of intoxication that permeates the non-West's entire being. Al-e Ahmad refers to it as an infectious disease that plagues from the outside and rots from within:

I speak of being afflicted with “westitis” the way I would speak of being afflicted with cholera. Have you ever seen how wheat rots? From within. The husk remains whole, but it is only an empty shell like the discarded chrysalis of a butterfly hanging from a tree. In any case, we are dealing with a sickness, a symptom¹ (*arez̄e*) imported from abroad, and developed in an

¹ The 1983 version translates *arez̄e*, which is used interchangeably in Persian with *bimari* to disease, but in this section, I have adjusted the translation to symptom to reflect its specific meaning in this context. The slippage between disease and symptom is worth noting across Al-e Ahmad's text. By referring to the symptom as the manifestation of the disease, the boundaries and origins of the source of the affliction he diagnoses is in fact more difficult to locate than he prescribes.

environment more receptive to it. Let us discover the characteristics of this illness and its cause or causes and, if possible, find a cure.²

Affliction (رنجوری, *ranjuri*) in both Persian and English encompasses disorder and disease, as well as the experience of pain and suffering. The Persian words for affliction are far-ranging, referring multiply to a psychic or physical ailment, to a feeling of pain and suffering (*ranj*, or *dard*), as well as, to an all-encompassing disaster or tragedy (*mosibat*). At times, as evidenced by Al-e Ahmad's opening paragraph, a reference to affliction is implicit in the language: while the exact translation of the term "affliction" does not appear in the original Persian of the above quotation, the terms *gharbzadegi* (to be struck by the West), which Al-e Ahmad borrows from the philosopher Ahmad Fardid⁴, or *vabazadegi* (to be struck by cholera) invoke the idea of affliction as they refer to an ailment that strikes, or, *afflicts*.⁵ Affliction, while at times referring to its multiple senses of the word, is a looming and implicit presence in the language of *Gharbzadegi*. For Al-e Ahmad, affliction serves as a clinical metaphor that presents the urgency of understanding Iran's relationship with the West. Al-e Ahmad's diagnosis offers a historiographic narrative of Iran's contemporary conditions by drawing on a number of global examples, which broadly assess the ways in which non-Western countries have become culturally and technologically dependent on Western nations. Al-e Ahmad finds the root of this dependency in matters of development and mechanical production that can be traced back to prehistoric Iran and that continue to plague the nation's political, developmental, intellectual, artistic, and cultural spheres today. This prescriptive "cure" is derived from an anti-colonial sentiment rooted in the discourse of nativism and authenticity⁶. Where the first half of *Gharbzadegi* diagnoses the problem, the second half focuses on finding a cure.

² Jalal Al-e Ahmad, *Plagued by the West*, 3.

³ Al-e Ahmad does not use the word *ranjuri* in *Gharbzadegi*, but rather folds its multiple meanings into his broad-ranging use of the term "gharbzadegi."

⁴ The term *gharbzadegi*, which is a central discursive element of Al-e Ahmad's claims, is actually borrowed from Ahmad Fardid, which Al-e Ahmad points to in the preface of his 1962 book (Al-e Ahmad, *Gharbzadegi*, 1). Fardid located Iran's cultural ills in terms of the "loss" of "authentic roots" and "identity" under the "universalizing" power of "western modernity." For an extensive discussion of the polemical role of Fardid's influence on Iranian modernity, see: Ali Mirsepassi's *Iran's Troubled Modernity: Debating Ahmad Fardid's Legacy*, Cambridge University Press, 2019. And while initially, *gharbzadegi* was a concept born from Fardid's engagement with Nietzsche and Heidegger, it was in Al-e Ahmad's text that the term was popularized and attained political and cultural mobility across multiple realms of Iranian society, including a populist axis that appealed to national pride and religiosity.

⁵ My focus here remains on the Persian lexical cluster, but it is worth highlighting the Latin roots of the word affliction: c. 1300, *affliccioun*, "misery, sorrow, pain, distress" which stems from the from Old French *affliction* "act of humility, humiliation, mortification, punishment" and directly from Latin *afflictionem* (nominative *afflictio*), which means "to dash down, overthrow," or "to strike". The meaning of affliction as "a cause of constant pain or sorrow" is from the 1590s.

⁶ Al-e Ahmad's invocation of authenticity is an extension of Fardid's engagement with Junger, Heidegger, and Nietzsche, all of whom had articulated their own critiques of European modernity, from Nietzsche's claims that modern culture was becoming "barbaric" for its excessive fragmentation and homogenization, to Junger's critique of nihilistic trends of modernity, to Heidegger's claim that technological modernity results in spiritual homelessness and abstraction, which denigrates both spirit and sensory experience. Ironically, the recourse to nativism in Iranian intellectual realms from Fardid

I begin with Al-e Ahmad not to accept his prescription without question nor to deploy his prescriptive language. Rather, I aim to approach the post-coup landscape in Iran as a problem-space, or a discursive terrain, what David Scott identifies as an “ensemble of questions and answers around which a horizon of identifiable stakes (conceptual as well as ideological-political stakes) hangs.”⁷ The problem-space of this post-coup period is, I argue, afflicted by multiple forces, and subsequently produces a new iteration of the subject against the ongoing authoritarianism of the fractured nation-state. It includes a concurrent quest for a stake in global modernist discourses, which include the rapid development of modern institutions from literary circles to global art biennales that placed Iran on the global modernist stage. At the same time, increased political repression by the Shah’s government after the coup moved intellectuals like Al-e Ahmad to a fervent discourse of authenticity and nativism that motivated a “return” to Iran’s indigenous national traditions, while at the same time, establishing Iran within a transregional anti-colonial lineage. But as the aesthetic examples by modern Iranian artists, writers, and filmmakers in the wake of transnational colonial modernity displays, these spheres, national, colonial, indigenous, imported (western) were overlapping and produced a landscape in which a “return” to exclusively Iranian traditions was neither entirely possible nor productive in the political and cultural modernisms of the post-coup period. Across various spheres, the question of “return” was interpreted in different ways, from Shi’a revivalism (which is said to have set the grounds for the Islamic Revolution⁸), to the widespread opposition to the Shah’s White Revolution, which informed Al-e Ahmad’s own fiction as is depicted in the short story *Jashn-e Farkhondeh*⁹ (“A Joyous Celebration”), to the ways in which modernists, in line with a global tradition of modernist aesthetics, turned to their own indigenous rituals of the occult, activating the uncanny temporalities and ways of knowing within the realm of the supernatural. The latter return is a key focus of my dissertation: I approach affliction as not only a condition but also a formal structure that is at once non-linear and multi-temporal, generating a form that works through the fractures brought on by semi-colonial and despotic regimes of power. Rather than reproduce a stable sense of the nation that mobilizes the *longue durée* of Iranian identity, which was an integral tactic of the Pahlavi state, the modernists I

to Al-e Ahmad and the subsequent populist mobilization of the discourse has its genealogy in a western intellectual critique of modernity and modernism. For more on the relationship between Heidegger’s concept of anti-western nativism and the rise of political Islam on Ahmad Fardid’s philosophy, see: Ali Mirsepassi’s *Transnationalism in Iranian Political Thought: The Life and Times of Ahmad Fardid* (The Global Middle East, Series Number 1), Cambridge University Press, 2017.

⁷David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2004, 4.

⁸ Critics and historians have identified the force of Al-e Ahmad’s influence on intellectual, cultural, and political spheres, identifying the rhetorical and ideological resonances between the publication of the text and Ayatollah Khomeini’s call to return to the nation’s Islamic roots during the Islamic Revolution of 1979. See: Mehrzad Boroujerdi’s *Iranian Intellectuals and the West: The Tormented Triumph of Nativism* (1996).

⁹ In Al-e Ahmad’s *Jashn-e Farkhondeh* (“A Joyous Celebration,” 1969), the story of police-forced unveiling during Reza Shah’s era is described from the perspective of a child from a religious family. Rather than take his wife to a ceremony honoring the Shah, the child’s father, a cleric, chooses to undergo a *sighheh* (temporary marriage) to preserve his family’s beliefs and dignity. The narrative is presented from the perspective of a child who doesn’t quite understand the process of *sighheh* or what these political changes mean for his family and the transforming political situation in Iran. Writing at the time of the “White Revolution,” Al-e Ahmad’s critique of Reza Shah served as an allegorical critique of the forced modernization that was also taking place in the present era of Mohammad Reza Shah.

discuss produce works from a place of ruin, decay, or fracture, where the nation cannot be reproduced as a unified or locatable whole but is dislocated from national geography and rendered through experiences of the untimely. As a cosmology attuned to the untimely, the psychic world of spirit possession works towards this alternative sense of time and place by disrupting dominant secular and humanist notions of progress. Across each chapter, I conduct a medium-specific analysis of the ways in which Iranian modernists approach a “return” as a return of the repressed, drawing from local and global sources to channel questions of the occult, spirit possession, race, myth, and nature.

This is to say that *Gharbzadegi*, though criticized for its often contradictory and hypocritical diagnoses, was a seminal text in setting the terms of a dominant way of thinking about the modern in Iran. The film critic and historian Hamid Naficy names Al-e Ahmad as a key figure in developing concepts that criticized the popular culture and inauthenticity of the heightened modernization during the second Pahlavi period.¹⁰ Naficy points to the anti-Shah and anti-Western zeitgeist propagated by Marxists and Islamists as a result of Al-e Ahmad’s theories of *gharbzadegi* during this period of Iranian modernization,¹¹ and how this political culture motivated a turn from a popular film farsi genre associated with the west to the cultivation of a national cinema in the modernist cinema of the time. Political scientist Mehrzad Boroujerdi points to the ways in which Al-e Ahmad’s ideas of nativism influenced a whole generation of intellectuals that came after, whether in the form of critical engagement or by building on his critique of technology.¹² Others have remarked upon Al-e Ahmad’s critique of secular-political models and the resulting romanticization of Shi’a values.¹³ In *Mute Dreams, Blind Owls, and Dispersed Knowledges: Persian Poesis in the Transnational Circuitry*, Michael M. J. Fischer places Al-e Ahmad within a legacy of thinkers like Franz Fanon, Albert Memmi, Octave Mannoni, Abdallah Laroui, and Ali Shariati, each of whom has addressed questions of alienation with respect to colonial domination.¹⁴ In line with this broader transnational legacy of anti-colonial thought, Al-e Ahmad can also be credited for pointing out the way in which orientalist beliefs and institutions influenced the formation of Iranian universities and intellectuals, long before the publication of Edward Said’s seminal text *Orientalism*. The discursive terrain opened up by *Gharbzadegi* expanded the conditions of the modern beyond Western Enlightenment models, and at the same time, produced a contested set of interpretations, aesthetic and political, on the notion of “return”¹⁵ within modernist discourses.

Across each chapter, I engage a set of returns—mythic, indigenous, supernatural, and otherworldly—that are expressed through various aesthetic media—short stories, paintings, sculptures, film, and photography. I establish the link between aesthetic mediums and these other-worldly, or latent features, within the sphere of representational forms. As Rosalind Morris suggests, the movement and mark of ritual into the domain of representational forms generates the conditions of

¹⁰ Hamid Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema, Volume 2: The Industrializing Years, 1941-78*. Duke University Press, 2011. 263.

¹¹ Ibid, 264.

¹² Mehrzad Boroujerdi, *Iranian Intellectuals and the West: The Tormented Triumph of Nativism*. Syracuse University Press, 1996, 70-71.

¹³ Ali Mirsepassi, *Intellectual Discourse and the Politics of Modernization: Negotiating Modernity in Iran*. Cambridge University Press, 2000, 77.

¹⁴ Michael M. J. Fischer, *Mute Dreams, Blind Owls, and Dispersed Knowledges: Persian Poesis in the Transnational Circuitry*, Duke University Press, 2004, 168.

¹⁵ My use of “return” should not be mistaken with the literary movement *bāzgaŕst-e adabi*, “literary return,” a term first used by poet and scholar Mohammad-Taŕqī Bahar, that called a movement for a return to writing poetry in the Korāŕsānī and ‘Erāŕqī styles, which began in the middle of the 12th/18th century and continued through the time of the Constitutional Revolution.

possibility for antirepresentational power.¹⁶ The expression of “return” is therefore also a mark of the way in which the critical *use* of mediums facilitates and creates the conditions of possibility to explore non-representational experiences of affliction. The modernist artist Bahman Mohasses, who could never be accused of nativism because his paintings and sculptures defied an identifiable sense of place and time, is interpolated into the discourse of *Gharbzadegi* by Al-e Ahmad himself, who identifies Mohasses as a painter who does not adopt a Western style of modernism but crafts his own.¹⁷ While in the service of preserving indigenous cultures, Simin Daneshvar crafts an episodic and hallucinatory story of a man possessed by spirits in the southern coasts of Iran: whether this narrative results in the realist authenticity Al-e Ahmad prescribes and that Daneshvar embraces, or turns out to be a more conventionally modernist narrative is a question I address in my final chapter.

To determine the extent of this influence or provide an analysis of the residual effects of westoxification as an ideology is not the aim of this dissertation. By foregrounding this diagnosis, however, I do mean to highlight the Iranian criticism that addressed the atmosphere of affliction in the post-coup period and therefore to set the stage for a discussion of modernists who attended to this affliction in significant departures from Al-e Ahmad’s prescribed nativism. Affliction for artists, filmmakers, and authors like Bahram Sadeqi, Bahman Mohasses, Bahman Farmanara, and Simin Daneshvar moved beyond the register of diagnosis and produced a set of formal devices that allowed for a sense of the subject beyond paradigms of nativism as well as enlightenment notions of the secular modern. The modernist writers and artists whose work I analyze in this dissertation considered the conditions of affliction as a predicament, and one that was not driven by the telos of a cure or revival of a world prior to foreign intervention or psychic trauma. Rather, they used their mediums to consider the after-effects of a world that would remain forever afflicted.

Whereas Al-e Ahmad constructs a narrative of affliction that positions the disease and its symptoms as emerging entirely from the outside, the modernists I discuss in this dissertation, all of whom created work in the wake of discourses established by *Gharbzadegi*, provoke an understanding of affliction as a condition that not only emerges from external colonialism (*este’mār*) but also internal despotism (*estebdād*), unsettling the clear boundaries between these forces. The modernists discussed here undermine a structure of affliction’s “source” even while they engage with a political and historical landscape that triggers multiple psychic responses of disorder. Most strikingly, the experience of affliction formally imbues the mediums in which they work, through literature, film, painting, or sculpture. Stefania Pandolfo suggests in the “aftermath of culture” produced by postcolonial and contemporary violence, the conditions of devastation destabilize systems of reference, and yet still, from this site of agony a path is carved for critical and other-worldly encounters.¹⁸ Affliction is not only the source, but also the medium through which to think about the violent and indeterminate political conditions of the post-coup period. In the chapters that follow, *Disordering Modernism: Affliction and Aesthetics in 20th-Century Iran* examines the multiple formal expressions of affliction across Iran’s modernist scene, emerging simultaneously from an atmosphere of heightened cultural modernization, as well as expressing critical perspectives on authoritarian power, dictatorial violence, and the encroaching forces of foreign occupation. Affliction, in contradistinction to Al-e Ahmad’s prescription, appears not only as a condition to be reckoned with

¹⁶ Rosalind C. Morris, *In the Place of Origins: Modernity and Its Mediums in Northern Thailand*. Duke University Press, 2000. 9.

¹⁷ Jalal Al-e Ahmad, “Bih Mohassess va Barāyih Dīvār,” *Majalib-yi Ārash*, no. 9 (Ābān 1343 [October/November 1964]): 86–91.

¹⁸ Stefania Pandolfo, *Knot of the Soul: Madness, Psychoanalysis, Islam*, The University of Chicago Press, 2018.

and extinguished but as an aesthetic and epistemological channel through which to express the afflicted state of Iran in the wake of the British- and American-imposed coup d'état of 1953.

Afflicted History: The Coup as Semicolonial Condition

The historical undercurrents of affliction I discuss in this dissertation are formed by the rupturing effects of the coup and the subsequent period of darkness it produced across Iranian society. In a recent political history of post-coup Pahlavi Iran, Ali Rahnama refers to the coup as the Iranian *nekbat* (a Persianized version the Arabic *nakba*, which means catastrophe or calamity).¹⁹ For those invested in Iran's national sovereignty and democratic ideals, the coup served as a cataclysmic event that created feelings of despair, hopelessness and melancholy.²⁰ Expanding on Rahnama's discussion of the psychic implications of the coup, my work engages in medium-specific analyses of the ways in which the coup produced not only symbolic or metaphorical references, but generated an expression of mediums that were themselves afflicted. These experimental uses of medium approached affliction both as a condition, as an aesthetic form and as a form of life. Since the aesthetic works I analyze are all produced in the wake of the coup, it will illuminate my subsequent readings to clarify the historical backdrop of the events that led to 1953 and the decades that followed.

Never formally colonized, Iran served as a battleground throughout the 19th and 20th centuries for imperial powers who sought to maintain control of the region, its trade routes and strategic pathways to their other colonial territories. Many critics including Jalal Al-e Ahmad and his contemporaries have referred to Iran as a semicolonial²¹ nation, which while preserving a sense of national sovereignty and safeguarding of territory, also included partial autonomy with military and economic concessions, as well as cultural colonization, which reverberated across all levels of society. The Qajar's monarchy (1789-1926), which was ripe with its own corruption and incompetency, was subject to three simultaneous colonial forces, the Russians, the French, and the British, all of whom used Iran for their own tactical gains.²² It was this period of Qajar dynastic rule, along with the rise of European military power, that produced Iran's "fateful entry into colonial modernity."²³ The Qajar encounter with the west, including travels to Europe, produced an awareness of world-historical events, and laid the foundation for the modernizing efforts that would follow as well as the violent coloniality that modernity would bring. It was, however, the corruption of the Qajar era, a systematic exploitation of social divisions, and economic frivolity that forced financial bankruptcy, and led to the

¹⁹ Ali Rahnama, *The Rise of Modern Despotism in Iran: The Shah, the Opposition, and the US 1953-1968*. (One World Academic Press, 2021), 30.

²⁰ Ibid, 30. Rahnama describes the psychic trauma that characterized the post-coup reflections of intellectuals and artists—specifically, poets like Nader Naderpur, Mehdi Akhavan-Sales, Fereyduun Tavallali, among others, whose dreams, hopes, and visions of the future had been turned to dust by the systematic repression that came with the coup. For more on the aesthetic trends in contemporary Persian poetry against Iran's twentieth-century modernity, see Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak's *Recasting Persian Poetry: Scenarios of Poetic Modernity in Iran*, A Oneworld Book, 1995.

²¹ In *A Time of Lost Gods: Mediumship, Madness, and the Ghost After Mao* (University of California Press, 2020), Emily Ng writes about the use of the term "semicolonial" by Chinese communist thinkers to refer to China's transitional state as never formally colonized. Ng writes that the invocation of the semicolonial was invoked by Mao as a revolutionary call against imperial powers (8-9), not unlike what I described in Al-e Ahmad's *Gharbzadegi*.

²² Hamid Dabashi, Iran: *A People Interrupted*. The New Press, 2007, 34.

²³ Ibid, 35.

Constitutional Revolution (*Enghelāb-e Mashrūteh*) that spanned from 1905-1911.²⁴ These revolutionary events culminated in a new constitution and established the Iranian parliamentary system known as the Majles. The Majles was designed to be more representative of all Iranians and put forth a set of fundamental laws that would rule Iran until the 1979 Islamic revolution. In spite of these reforms, the Qajars were overwhelmingly deemed a failed state and frustrated imperial leaders, which led to the first coup the British directed in Iran in 1921, which deposed the Qajars and established another reign of power in Iran: The Pahlavis.

1921 began a period Ervand Abrahamian has referred to as “the iron fist of Reza Shah.”²⁵ This period is characterized by state-building²⁶, which was founded on the propagation of order, discipline, and state power. Reza Shah expanded the military and state police, placing the armed forces at the center of the new regime. He was considered by the intelligentsia as an “oriental despot” trained by the Tsarists and brought to power by British imperial forces²⁷. And while his reign deceptively began with the impression that the British would withdraw from Iran with the abrogation of the Anglo-Iranian agreement, many saw this as a veil for continued British intervention in Iran’s economic and political history. In 1933–34 when Reza Shah signed a new agreement with the Anglo-Iranian oil company, the illusion of national sovereignty he proposed dissolved, and the people were affirmed in their distrust. In 1941, with the Anglo-Soviet invasion, Reza Shah was forced to abdicate but Iran’s semicolonial²⁸ experience continued into the reign of Mohammad Reza Shah. The British and Russians allied to take territorial occupation, dividing Iran into two zones, the Russians in the north by the Caspian Sea and the British occupying in the south, in the oil region and along the Persian Gulf²⁹. Rather than imposing total colonial rule, the allies intended to preserve the Iranian state, while maintaining control and influence over its territories, economic resources, and puppet local governments. A critical motivation for this territorial occupation was a shared interest in controlling Iran’s oil production. Before democratically- elected prime minister, Mohammad Mossadegh’s successful efforts to nationalize the oil industry, and the subsequent coup that toppled him, came a series of labor strikes against the oil company in the Khuzistan region, including a three-day general strike where the oil-refinery was located in the city of Abadan³⁰. Led by the Tudeh party (party of the Masses, the communist party of Iran), these protests called upon the British to account for the mistreatment of workers, demanding higher pay, better housing, the eight-hour workday, and a

²⁴ Ervand Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran*, Cambridge University Press, 2008, 31.

²⁵ Ibid, 63-96.

²⁶ In *Nationalizing Iran: Culture, Power, and The State, 1870-1940* (The University of Washington Press, 2008), Afshin Marashi traces the way in which the state-building of the Reza Shah period was the culmination of social, economic, political, and cultural transformations of the nineteenth century, which took place in an international context (137). What is more, Marashi exposes that the making of the modern in Iran was always interlaced with rival symbols and forms of historical memory that came together to shape the nation.

²⁷ Ervand Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran*, 96.

²⁸ The term “semicolonial” was most conventionally used by Lenin and Mao Zedong to refer to states in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that were occupied by imperial forces who controlled their capital, influenced trade, and held political influence, and yet, preserved a sense of national sovereignty within the occupied territory. Nations among these include Iran, China, Thailand, Afghanistan, Yemen, and Ethiopia.

²⁹ Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran*, 98.

³⁰ My late paternal grandfather, Abolqassem Honarpisheh, who was a housing supervisor for AIOC (Anglo-Iranian Oil Company) and the later nationalized NIOC (National Iranian Oil Company) in Abadan, was part of these crucial strikes in 1945-46 that led to Iran’s oil nationalization.

comprehensive labor law³¹. What is more, it was during these protests that the population in Abadan and across the Khuzistan region was first mobilized to stand against the British monopoly of Iranian oil, to reclaim it as a national “jewel” and to call for its nationalization. While the government initially gave into the worker’s demands, it also did so by crushing the union; it was in these moments and as a mode of defusing the worker’s power that Mossadegh emerged to lead the call to nationalize oil, a motion that imperial powers would later refuse. It is this political backdrop of the entangled forces of imperial powers, along with the Pahlavi dynasty’s despotic regimes, that laid the groundwork for the August 19th coup d’état of 1953 (28 *mordad*), a date that remains a cataclysmic event in the Iranian psyche.

As with many Cold War era policies, the coup was justified by the CIA as an attempt to “save” Iran and the region from the spread of communism.³² What really motivated the British-American venture was a valuable natural resource the British, Americans, and Soviets all had their eye on: oil.³³ As historian Ervand Abrahamian has noted, throughout the crisis, the central concern was “who would control the production, distribution, and sale of oil.”³⁴ For imperial powers, this crisis began when Mossadegh succeeded in nationalizing Iran’s oil industry. In Iran, this was an act of sovereignty, one that had anti-colonial resonances in the broader region. As described in Abrahamian’s political history of the coup, the ceremonial day the National Iranian Oil Company was established and replaced the Anglo-Persian Oil Company was a day that echoed the shift of power that came with newly independent postcolonial nations; in other words, “oil nationalization was for Iran what national independence was for many former colonies in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean.”³⁵ For the British and the Americans, control of Iran’s oil had large-scale repercussions that would not only threaten their economic control over the resource but would also undermine their longstanding imperial jurisdiction over the region as a whole. They feared the residual effects that this might have on the broader region, giving control to Iran in the international petroleum market, while at the same time inspiring other nations to follow suit in nationalizing their own oil industries.

Until Mossadegh was able to nationalize Iran’s oil on March 15th, 1951, the British had maintained control of Iran’s oil supply and trade routes through an Anglo-Soviet invasion with the British in the south and the Russians in the north during Reza Shah’s reign (the first Pahlavi in power from 1925–1941). Following the invasion, Reza Shah was deposed and replaced by his son, Mohammad Reza, who would reign until the revolution in 1979. In 1953, in what ultimately took less than 48 hours of conspiring between the CIA in Washington, D.C., British intelligence officials in London and monarchical powers in Tehran, the coup was organized. The coup gave Mohammad Reza Shah power to defeat Mossadegh’s nationalist movement and suppress both the labor movement and the left. The Anglo-American coup reestablished British monopoly over Iran’s oil and strengthened the Shah’s iron fist in the form of repressive measures including heightened surveillance, imprisonment of intellectuals, literati, and political activists, heightened censorship, and an atmosphere of fear, paranoia, and uncertainty. With the promise of Mossadegh’s vision crushed, the decades that followed were consumed by affliction, which I will lay out in the forthcoming chapters.

³¹ Ervand Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions*, Princeton University Press, 1982, 360-366.

³² Ervand Abrahamian, *The Coup: 1953, The CIA, And the Roots of Modern US-Iranian Relations*, The New Press, 2015, 4-5.

³³ For a comprehensive analysis of the way in which the extraction, control, and distribution of oil has been a significant resource in shaping political and economic power across transnational geopolitics, specifically linking the fraught histories of oil-producing Middle Eastern nations and industrial democracies of the West, see Timothy Mitchell’s *Carbon Democracy* (Verso Books, 2011).

³⁴ Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran*. Cambridge University Press, 2008.

³⁵ Ervand Abrahamian, *The Coup: 1953, The CIA, And the Roots of Modern US-Iranian Relations*, 79.

The coup in Iran is significant not only for those interested in the history of Iran or the broader Middle Eastern region. The coup reflects a new mid-century technique in imperial power, one that didn't require the resources necessary for the territorial occupation involved in formal colonization, and the ease with which it was installed became a modern technique for subsequent coups all over Latin America and beyond. This dissertation builds from Abrahamian's impulse to situate the coup at the nexus of imperialism and nationalism and addresses the gap within research on semicolonial histories in postcolonial studies. It adds to this frame by looking at not only the historical consequences of the coup, but the way in which aesthetics, and medium-specific experimentation, in particular, provides a channel through which artists, writers, and intellectuals interrogated the psychic and untimely fractures of an afflicted lifeworld after the coup.

Aesthetics of Affliction

*I was born in a new world, already defeated, wounded, and aged.*³⁶
Sadeq Hedayat

When reflecting on the terms of affliction and Iranian modernism, one must grapple with Sadeq Hedayat's *The Blind Owl* (*Buf-e Kur*, 1937), which opens with a direct window into the psychic afflictions that possess the mind: "There are sores which slowly erode the mind in solitude like a kind of canker. It is impossible to convey a just idea of the agony, which the disease can inflict. In general, people are able to relegate such inconceivable sufferings to the category of the incredible."³⁷ Hedayat effectively renders the entangled psychic and physical characteristics of affliction to produce a novella formed by madness. What is more, his foray into madness was accompanied by a return to mythic and folklore symbols that were reengaged to stage the progressive decay of the modern subject's soul.³⁸ Formally, Hedayat's writing establishes a much longer legacy of affliction within Iran's modernist aesthetics, one of which artist collectives like *Khorus-e Jangi* (The Fighting Rooster) established by painter and writer, Jalil Ziapour, considered themselves inheritors. And if Hedayat's wounded image of Iran was formed by the dictatorial violence of Reza Shah's reign in the early twentieth century as well as the global conditions of violence that reigned supreme, the modernists I discuss felt the weight of this accumulated legacy of violence, as they created works of art from their own historical experience of affliction. As I argue across each chapter, within analyses that move between global modernist trends, Iran's semicolonial experience, and psychoanalytic frames, *affliction* is a key paradigm for understanding the political and psychic conditions of modernist aesthetics in post-coup d'état Iran.

By recasting my reading of post-coup Iranian modernism in response to the trauma of the coup, I introduce the reader to the coup as an uncanny experience that emerges from both external colonialism (*este'mār*) and internal despotism (*estebdād*). Rather than returning to an "authentic" pre-colonial past, in the postcolonial modern "the conditions of invention are no longer what they once

³⁶ In a letter to a friend, Hedayat (writing from India) had described succinctly the psychological chronotype of modernity for Iranians in the above quote (quoted in Homa Katouzian's *Sadeq Hedayat: The Life and Legend of an Iranian Writer*, 2003, 242).

³⁷ Sadeq Hedayat, *Buf-e Kur*, 1941, 1.

³⁸ In *Mute Dreams, Blind Owls, and Dispersed Knowledges: Persian Poetics in the Transnational Circuitry* (Duke University Press, 2004), Fischer suggests that Hedayat's layering of traditional "Perso-Islamic" elements with surrealist techniques requires the reader to critically engage the multiple associations that these associative layers create, therefore not only acting as mere destructive repetition, but a critical modernist engagement with the past in the present. See pages 181-198.

were.” as Talal Asad argues.³⁹ As previously mentioned, the conspiring forces of imperial powers with the Pahlavi regime’s despotism produces the coup, and the atmosphere of repression that emerges thereafter. Against a recourse to nationalist sensibilities as in the nativist impulse, modernists produced critiques of state repression, from and through new conditions of invention. In other words, it was through new uses of aesthetic mediums that modernists produced an attunement to the uncanny, the supernatural, and the untimely, as critical modes of relating to the present. In contrast to Al-e Ahmad’s prescriptive language of Iran’s condition as a wholly alien ailment, my readings trouble a sense of a locatable source and instead propose a less prescriptive model of affliction in which the issue of “source” is less central than the psychic predicament which the semicolonial state produces. While I situate the coup as a significant traumatic event against which experiences of the supernatural and alterity are staged, my analysis of affliction is not limited to a single historical moment, nor through a curative model that delineates a series of symptoms to be worked through. The historical experience of the coup produces a set of conditions that prompts aesthetic responses of destruction, fragmentation and the uncanny. These responses register the wound of the coup, without being premeditated by it for political ends. The resulting range of aesthetic forms I discuss here are not derivative of history as mechanical responses to it but remain autonomous forces that allow for new ways of seeing, narrating, and understanding affliction, reconciling the ambiguous space between the violence of history and the autonomy of form. In this regard, my analysis of post-coup affliction in Iran situates it as an experience that fundamentally alters the grounds of existence, indicating a fragmentation on a global scale and disrupting what Jameson calls the “mirage of the ‘centered subject.’”⁴⁰ In the works I discuss, the source of affliction moves between inner and outer realms (bodily, spiritual, psychic, and geographic), putting forth a subject whose fragmented orientation emerges from the interstices of these boundaries.

My readings intersect a psychoanalytic approach that transcends a causal relationship to trauma, and cosmologies of spirit possession, in which the experience of possession emerges from the spatial unlocatability between inner and outer psychic and non-human realms. This approach to the conditions of affliction as non-causal and spatially unlocatable generates a framework that challenges a narrative of Iranian modernism as following a model of imitation or influence destined to temporal belatedness or geographic periphery. Many attempts have been made to challenge the dominant European frameworks of modernism as a particularly periodized aesthetic style that follows romanticism. This has resulted in a number of spatial and temporal approaches that reproduce Europe as the central framework: Fredric Jameson’s “singular modernity,” Gilles Deleuze’s minor literature, and other such models that reify structures of center and periphery, or non-western belatedness. My attempt in this dissertation is to approach Iran’s post-coup modernist trajectories through a historical, political and aesthetic landscape that transcends these categories along with the global imperial and local authoritarian national structures imposed by nation-states and the colonial forces that reproduce them. Each chapter traces the experience of affliction not only as a symptom of the historical conditions of uncertainty and paranoia imposed by the coup but also as an event that unsettles the psychic and historic grounds of experience. The coup, much like the colonial violence analyzed by Franz Fanon, alters the epistemic and experiential relationship to the world, generating a channel to the untimely, uncanny, and destructive forces that lay dormant in the historical psyche. In other words, the experience of the coup’s trauma and the violence that preceded and was precipitated in its aftermath, activated a critical relationship to time that was open to history, and by extension, the

³⁹ Talal Asad, “Conscripts of Western Civilization.” *Dialectical Anthropology: Essays in Honor of Stanley Diamond*, vol. 1, Ed. C. Gailey. Gainesville, FL: University Presses of Florida, 1992. 333-351.

⁴⁰ Fredric Jameson, “Political: National Allegory, Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism” in *Allegory and Ideology* (Verso Books, 2019), 161.

nation's repressed elements. As part of the experience of affliction, the artists I write about consider abstraction (without indexical referent) both as a violent technique of the state⁴¹ and as a multi-temporal dislocating force that enables their work to generate a critique of multiple regimes of power, past, present, and future.

I use affliction as a conceptual paradigm to consider the possessive force as not solely encroaching or invading from the outside — as an external force, but as a force that emerges simultaneously from within as in the political conditions of Iran's entanglement with despotic and imperial powers. Freud's conception of the uncanny (*unheimlich*) as a force, feeling, and aesthetic experience that is both familiar and unfamiliar is helpful to my argument as it relates to the experience of spirit possession and to affliction as an experience, which reveals itself through the particular configuration of aesthetic form. The uncanny, therefore, calls for an attention to medium—in both the sense of the supernatural, the psychic and the cosmic, as well as in the sense of a technological medium or aesthetic device. By making use of these multiple meanings of medium, the modernists I discuss produce critical forms through which the experience of affliction is expressed. In the context of spirit possession, the relationship to affliction transforms the parasitical dimension of the colonial context which relies on an inside and outside, into a dynamic that blurs these boundaries. It also stages the problem of self-sovereignty, where the experience of possession involves a relationship to the invisible, non-human, non-corporeal world⁴², creating a sense of the subject bound to the experience of alterity. For instance, the psychiatrist and modernist writer Gholam Hossein Sa'idi uses the Persian concept of *gereftari* (to be captured, seized, or captivated) in his ethnographic text, *Ahl-e Hava*⁴³ (The People of the winds) to refer to the condition of being occupied or possessed by wind-spirits (zar) or jinn in the Afro-Iranian context. Rather than purely reflecting a one-directional condition, *gereftari* carries the connotation of a snarl or knot, thus emphasizing the condition as a form to be grappled with. This understanding of possession situates it not merely as a condition to be exorcized but as a critical mode of relating to the world that redefines the subject. Spirit possession, while serving as a channel to the psyche, is also a collective experience in the Afro-Iranian context, therefore traversing individual and collective psychic experiences to construct a new concept of selfhood outside of this binary division. Moving between psychoanalytic frames, modernist aesthetic theories, Islamic and Afro-Iranian cosmologies, this dissertation engages the relationship between modernity and psychic fracture through a recurrent rhythm of return that emerges from multiple theoretical and transnational frames of knowing.

Many readings of Iranian aesthetics (and non-western aesthetics generally) are predominantly structured around political or historical symbolic referents that limit literary analysis to historiographical claims.⁴⁴ My dissertation responds to the absence of critical attention to aesthetic

⁴¹ Daryush Shayegan, *Cultural Schizophrenia: Islamic Societies Confronting the West*, Syracuse University Press, 1992. Shayegan writes of the instrumental reason deployed by state functionaries and the violence that comes with it

⁴² Emily Ng, In *A Time of Lost Gods: Mediumship, Madness, and the Ghost After Mao*, University of California Press, 2020, 77.

⁴³ Gholam Hossein Saedi, *Ahl-e Hava*, 1966.

⁴⁴ See: Kamran Talattof, *The Politics of Writing in Iran: A History of Modern Persian Literature*, (Syracuse University Press; First edition, 2000). Talatoff's argument is reliant on a linear historical periodization of modern Iranian literature as being fundamentally produced by the nation's political conditions. For Talatoff, various trends in Persian prose and poetry emerge from dominant political and ideological movements, including western influence, marxism, committed literature, women's literature, etc. These categorizations read formal innovation through what he calls an "ideology of representation," therefore prioritizing the durability of historical and political metaphors over and above the autonomy

form in this dominant narrative of Iranian aesthetic production and builds on recent literary criticism that contends with this absence by attending to the value of formal analysis in Iranian modernist studies.⁴⁵ In light of these absences, each chapter in this study attends to the critical capacity of modernist forms in reorienting the reader or viewer towards new understandings of politics, time, and nationhood. These include stylistic experimentations in abstraction that dislocate a singular referent to time or place while also presenting a form that sheds light on and emerges from the experiences of paranoia and uncertainty that permeated the atmosphere of imposed modernization and increased state repression. What is more, studies of literary history that have remarked upon the post-coup period have focused mostly on form as a result of state censorship.⁴⁶ While these literary histories are important and reflect the political conditions of repression that consumed this moment, they also preclude a serious discussion of literary form and the way these forms can help us perceive the persistent effects of the past on the present. Specifically, they do not address *how* techniques including abstraction and allegory and other medium-specific techniques across cinema, photography, and plastic arts like painting and sculpture, are not *just* means of subterfuge, but also carry and critique the experience of affliction. In other words, mediums function not just as modern vehicles of communication, but carry the meaning of medium in its supernatural sense, activating other worlds, spirits, psychic, and supernatural. By moving across different media, literature, film, photography, painting and sculpture, I point to the ways in which affliction as a conceptual paradigm is not limited to other categorical distinctions such as genre, medium, or style, but crosses media, and even involves the permeability of mediums.

Much existing scholarship on modern Iranian aesthetics follows a model of linking experiences of psychic trauma directly to national consciousness⁴⁷ collapsing the individual and collective, or the private and public. While some of these studies adequately attend to the way in which form not only displays history but registers it, while others turn to form merely to extract its political message. My readings oscillate between Iran's particular historical-political conditions of semicolonial occupation and a foreign-imposed coup - and aesthetic theories that draw both from local traditions and from circuits of global modernism in order to understand the way in which post-coup modernists and thinkers experiment with form to generate a range of distinct meanings that shed light on disorder and narrative discontinuity. One track of my argument focuses on the way this emerging modernism indexes the particular history of Iran's experience of imposed modernization while also attending to the way time and place are abstracted across these aesthetic forms, obscuring a sense of origins. By using aesthetic techniques like hallucination, the disjointed temporality of spirit possession, or, by invoking other-worldly mythologies, these aesthetic examples create a transhistorical narrative of

of aesthetic form. For a more recent example of how literature has been analyzed through the guise of socio-historical events, see: Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak, *A Fire of Lilies: Perspectives on Literature and Politics in Modern Iran* (Iranian Studies Series, Leiden University Press, 2019.)

⁴⁵ See: Mohammad Mehdi Khorrami, *Literary Subterfuge and Contemporary Persian Fiction: Who Writes Iran?* (Iranian Studies Book 21, Routledge, 2014).

⁴⁶ Iranian Students Association in the United States (ISAUS) "An Analysis of Modern Persian Engagé Literature (1960s-1970s)" in *Critical Perspectives on Modern Persian Literature*, Edited and Compiled by Thomas M. Ricks.

⁴⁷ See: Alireza Fakhkonandeh, "Reading History, History Reading in Modern Iranian Literature: Prison Writing as National Allegory or a World Literary Genre?" *The Edinburgh History of Reading: Subversive Readers* (Edinburgh University Press, 2020), 207-233; Michael C. Hillman, *The Modernist Trend in Persian Literature and Its Social Impact*, (Iranian Studies [Vol. 15, No. 1/4, Literature and Society in Iran \(1982\)](#)), 7-29; Katrin Nahidi, *Illness as Political Metaphor in Modernist Arts in Iran*, Volume 9, Issue 1 "Other Modernities": Art, Visual Culture and Patrimony Outside the West, (2020).

modernism that expands its periodization and forms beyond the time of European modernism. The second track considers the relationship between psychic and political affliction and the divergent images and patterns of modernist aesthetics derived from a repertoire of Islamo- and Afro-Iranian traditions including supernatural forces, rituals of possession, and cosmologies of divinity that depart from secular traditions of European modernism, and at the same time, locate a constitutive tendency towards a “return” in global modernist projects that reflects on modernity’s ordering apparatuses. By drawing on mythical-abstract poetics, these aesthetic works expand a conception of time to register the transregional and multiple modernities that are at once global and speak to the problems of their time even without producing a determined political message or end. In each of my four chapters I draw on extra-national aesthetic examples to illuminate how the global currents I address in Iran are not bound to the limits of the nation even if the uncertainty of the nation’s fate looms large over the psyche. Taken as a whole, the aesthetic examples I consider begin from the experience of affliction as a way of relating to the world, what Sadegh Hedayat described as a “world already defeated, wounded, and aged” and by attending to the *form* of affliction, constructs a narrative of global modernity across transhistorical and transnational planes.

Chapters

In my first chapter, **“Possessed Subjects: Alterity and the Modern Subject in *Malakut*,”** I analyze Bahram Sadeqi’s episodic novella “Malakut,” as an expression of the permeation of the death-drive in post-coup Iran, and furthermore the way in which affliction is rendered both through the cosmology of jinn as well as psychoanalytic frames of the “foreign body.” In my analysis of the story about a man possessed by jinn who ends up seeking treatment by a doctor who poisons all of his patients, I consider the way in which the novella blurs the boundaries between existential, psychic, and physiological elements of affliction. What is first rendered as entirely foreign, as an autonomous force is also inextricably linked to the possessed body. This expression of possession defies boundaries of inner and outer, and furthermore come to reflect other unsettling boundaries, temporal (an exorcist whose body is split between old and young), spatial (between hell and paradise), and of identity (a doctor who is actually a killer) marking modern subjectivity by a constitutive relationship to alterity. At the same time, the sudden and unidentifiable appearance of jinn and accompanying afflictions transcend a structure of traumatic “source,” and activate a sense of time that precedes the experience of traumatic event. My reading in chapter two, **“Dislocated Modernism: The Interstices of Mythology and Destruction”** builds from the permeation of this atmosphere of violence and defeat and turns to the way in which destruction can serve as a medium through which to understand post-coup conditions. By engaging with the visual corpus of painter and sculptor Bahman Mohasses, chapter two argues that destruction serves as a condition of possibility and as a critical expressive capacity of approaching recurrent acts of state violence. In my analysis of both the artist’s subject matter and medium-specific experimentation between painting, sculpture, and collage, I show that expressions of figurative abstraction are the formal effects made available by conditions of destruction to evade linear art-historical narratives as well as the violent categories of myth-making that undergird national narratives. In my close analysis of his post-coup works, I show that Mohasses infuses painting with the textures of the sculptural to render visible the temporal sedimentation of his subject matter, while also subverting sculptural notions of volume by subjecting the human form to fractured bodies that reflect uneven or forestalled development. These images, in turn, produce critical-aesthetic practices at the interstices of mythmaking and destruction.

Chapter three, **“Screening the Supernatural: The Iranian New Wave and the Uncanny,”** builds from the clinical and prescriptive form of spirit possession in chapter one and turns instead to the way in which this cosmology invokes the uncanny. I examine the latent decaying features of sound and photography within Bahman Farmanara’s two new wave films, *Prince Ehtejab* (*Shahzadeh Ehtejab*) and

Tall Shadows of the Wind (*Sayehbay-e Bolande Bad*, 1978) to emphasize the relationship between the unknown in haunting and spirit possession and the dislocating features of aesthetic abstraction as an anti-fascist technique in global art house cinema. In the former, an attention to the critical capacity of mediums is supplemented with an attunement to temporal abstraction to show the way the trauma of the coup is expanded beyond the indexical quality of the historical event of 53 to critique the political despotism of the Qajar dynasty, which both activates the latent trauma of colonial national formation, and its post-coup despotism residues. In my analysis of the cinematic form, I look at the way in which sound registers non-optical modes of relating to the unknown, as well as the recurrence of photographic stills, which register an underlying element of the cinematic medium that continues to haunt the moving-image in its aftermath.

And finally, chapter four, **"Possession as Form: The Modernist Temporality of Zār"** focuses on modernist renderings of the Afro-Iranian zār⁴⁸ ritual in Iranian aesthetic production, which takes a study of Iran from the metropolitan center to the coastal and multi-ethnic/lingual towns of the southern region. In this chapter, I trace the role of spirit possession as an aesthetic form across Iranian modernism that allows for a dialectic between individual and collective psychic experiences that address multiple narratives of global historical violence. My argument is grounded in an analysis of Simin Daneshvar's (1921-2012) lesser-known short story "Sutra," about a shipwrecked sailor afflicted by spirits while at sea, which takes the form of the ritual. This formal technique, I argue, stages the narrator's experience of possession by moving between memories, hallucinations, repressions, and trauma, thus creating a disjointed narrative progression that disrupts linear chronological time. The effect of zār on the temporal experience of the text is two-fold: it indexes elided narratives in Iran's recent transnational history while also shaping the experience of the reader, who is drawn into a multiplicity of fragmented transhistorical moments. The aestheticization of zār renders the ceremony as a spiritual, psychic, and political force channeling history's wreckage as a capacity for future movement. The story interlaces shipwreck, as a catalyzing force that moves between ruin and reconstruction, and zār, as a healing ritual that does not abandon the past but channels its forces. Displacing modernism's locale from the experience of the city to sea – and the maritime border in particular – zār, as the narrative's framing device, functions as a formal structure that discloses the unconscious in its fragmented form. The emphasis on spirit possession and a concept of healing that does not result in exorcism but rather an attunement to forces of the past departs from Al-e Ahmad's prescriptive language of "cure" engaging the generative and violent components of affliction as a condition that forever changes the subject and becomes a mode of engaging with the world.

Across each of these four chapters, I discuss the way in which artists, writers, and filmmakers grapple with the ambiguous relationship between history and the formal capacity of aesthetic devices to register the conditions of the post-coup period. These modernist experiments in form are not tactics that serve political ends or messages, but rather, critical mediums that reveal the discontinuities and disorders of affliction as a form of life. They are forms shaped by the unknown, the invisible, and the destructive and therefore approach affliction as constitutive to the formation of the subject and as critical ways of knowing in the post-coup landscape.

⁴⁸ Zār is structured around various winds (which can be translated to spirits in a Western cosmology), and a related ritual of spirit possession commonly practiced in the southern port cities and islands of Iran.

Chapter 1: Possession as Revelation: Alterity and the Modern Subject in *Malakut*

“At eleven, on the Wednesday evening of that week, Mr. Maveddat was possessed (*bulul kard*) by the jinn. Considering that Mr. Maveddat’s face always had an inherently surprised and smiling expression, one could imagine the extent of his astonishment in the wake of the incident.”

Bahram Sadeghi’s (1937–84) novella *Malakut*⁴⁹ (Heavenly Dominion, 1961) is driven into motion when one of the only characters given a proper name, Mr. Maveddat, is possessed by a jinn, a figure of radical foreignness or part of *al-ghayb* (the concealed, or invisible) within the realm of Islamic cosmology. Shortly after, he is accompanied by his friends, who are only referred to as “the anonymous” (*nashenas*)⁵⁰, “the fat man” (*mard-e chagh*) and “the secretary” (*monsbi*)⁵¹, to seek treatment from an “exorcist” (*jinn-gir*) in the city. What’s striking about these opening lines is not so much that Mr. Maveddat has been possessed by a jinn, but rather the ordinary way in which the narrator describes Mr. Maveddat, as always [having] “an inherently surprised and smiling expression.” While Sadeghi invites his reader into this sudden scene of possession, the details are rendered in a deadpan, matter of fact style. Prior to the moment in which the figure of radical alterity—the jinn—takes hold of Mr. Maveddat, Sadeghi describes a state of alienation that marks the character’s face, a gap between what is felt or under the surface, and what is expressed, or represented. Possession simultaneously emphasizes an encounter with an *other* and a terrain of experience outside the realm of human representation. To render possession in the formal structure of the novella therefore involves an emphasis on alterity, its unknowable and invisible qualities, and the way in which these features disrupt

⁴⁹ Bahram Sadeghi. *Malakut*, in *Sangar va Qomqome-ha-ye Khali* (Tehran: Zaman, 1961), 335–425. *Malakut* was first published in the periodical *Kayhan-e Hafta* in 1961 (No.12, pp.7-101). Nine years later it was published together with several short stories in a collection entitled *Sangar va Qomqome-ha-ye Khali* (The Trench and the Empty Flasks). The English translation of *Malakut* used in this chapter is translated by Kaveh Basmenji and was published in Ibex Press in 2011.

⁵⁰ The character of anonymous (*nashenas*) is introduced in the company of other unnamed characters and therefore initially not a remarkable element of the plot. The presence of anonymous as mysterious and haunting however quickly amplifies the uncanny quality of the text when we discover that anonymous is working with the evil Dr. Hatam. Those familiar with the secrecy that characterized the Shah’s secret police (SAVAK), especially the way in which the sophisticated military surveillance of SAVAK agents produced an atmosphere of fear and paranoia around one’s own inner circle (including one’s own friends and family) tied to who could potentially be a part of the organization, might draw a comparison between the presence of anonymous and SAVAK agents. The haunting and unpredictable quality of this feeling recalls Parviz Sayyad’s film “Bon Bast” (Dead End, 1977) in which the film tells the story of a girl who is followed by a mysterious man; throughout the film she wonders if he is a secret admirer only to find out at the end that he is a SAVAK agent looking to arrest her brother. Sayyad’s film chillingly portrays the anxiety-ridden atmosphere of a society paranoid and fearful of the surveillance tactics of the secret police.

⁵¹ Sadeghi’s characters are first introduced as strange identities, nameless (without proper names), or, through “types” that codify subjectivities into categories or occupations. Character names are distilled into and determined by qualities that manifest themselves as recurring tendencies; for instance, “anonymous” (*nashenas*) is “selfless” but turns out to be an infiltrate who helps Dr. Hatam in his plan to poison people and the “fat man” (*mard-e chagh*) is described as self-involved, gluttonous, and excessive.

the hermeneutics of typical representational signs. This example foregrounds *Malakut's* central paradox around the limits of representation and the relationship between self and other as intrinsic and internal to the question of the self. These questions permeate the remainder of *Malakut's* plot which spans from midnight to dawn the next day: After Mr. Maveddat is possessed, his friends take him to Dr. Hatam's clinic, where the supernatural order is displaced by a medicalized biopower. The clinic is a death-driven space that permeates out into the city, but alongside this spatial and temporal order is the presence of an ethereal garden, which interrupts the plot with descriptions that activate sensory and divine realms. The garden is a topos in Persian poetics and serves as a space that converges the natural and theological resonances of the narrative. Both city and the clinic exist as anonymous places with no distinguishing features, as cities abstracted from place; as a paradoxical contrast to the unlocatability of these cities, the garden, which frames the narrative as both the beginning and ending of the story, remains a site of ethereal and incorporeal presence, described through sensual features and atmospheric descriptions rather than physical presence: "There was a full moon; it gave everything a poetical air, created mystical shadows and illuminated a gleam on the stream; it was as though eternity itself was in the making. In the atmosphere undulated coolness, elegance, and the invisible essence of light; from far, far away, unknown whispers sprinkled in the air, touching down on the ground like mist."⁵² Aside from Dr. Hatam, in the clinic there is Saqi, Dr. Hatam's wife; M.L.⁵³, a man who has willfully amputated all but one of his limbs as punishment for murdering his own son (his motive was that the son had had an affair with a stranger, who turns out to be Dr. Hatam); and Shaku, M.L.'s servant, who has been made mute so that he does not disclose the crime he witnessed.

I begin with the quotation of Mr. Maveddat's possession to exemplify the way in which the cryptic, episodic, and yet straightforward prose in *Malakut* stages the problem of alterity and psychic alienation in the afflicted landscape of post-coup Iran. The story of Mr. Maveddat and his friends is interrupted in the second chapter (Now He Speaks, *aknun u sokhan miguyad*) when the narrative shifts from the third person to a first-person narrator (the only one in the novella). Chapter two begins with a flashback that provides an other-worldly space within the overarching plot of the remaining sections; the reader is introduced to M.L. who becomes the narrator and writes his story with his remaining limb:

"I am writing with my only hand, my right hand. I am accustomed to it now. In this strange room in which Dr. Hatam has hospitalized me, I am, as always and more than ever, searching for oblivion. Again, I am longing to forget and not to feel anything (but, O, oblivion (*farmush*)! I know that you will not come, and I know that it is impossible to forget, for oblivion does not exist in the world, just as nothing exists— not even weeping)."

These lines introduce the reader to another alienated character, but in contrast to the vacancy of Mr. Maveddat's facial expressions, M.L., as though speaking from a soul suspended from above, articulates a drive to forget, a longing to feel nothing in a world where "nothing exists." The role of writing in producing narrative in literary modernism comes to the fore in M.L.'s simultaneous effort to forget his past and need to write it down. The act of writing serves as the memory-work that brings repressed

⁵² Sadeghi, 177.

⁵³ M.L.'s name, unlike the other characters in the novella, is tied less to an identity type, as it is to a fractured identity. His missing limbs parallel the missing letters in his name. The missing letters in M.L.'s identity are more than just gaps; they augment the sense of strangeness in the way his voice is featured in the story. M.L.'s voice is at once suspended and enacts a self-annihilation and simultaneously reflects the most pronounced narrative in the development of the plot and through the act of writing as it constitutes the narrative action.

memories into the surface of the text. And yet for M.L. neither the voluntary removal of his limbs nor writing have the capacity to exorcize his wounds: the experience of alterity remains within his soul. While initially the stories of Mr. Maveddat, his companions and M.L. appear as disparate plotlines, they are linked through Dr. Hatam, a sinister doctor who travels from city to city to “heal” patients afflicted with a variety of unknown illnesses. Instead of curing his patients though, Dr. Hatam injects them with a poison he claims will enhance virility and provide an extended lifespan. Ultimately, the narrative reveals that these injections are actually a deadly poison and by the novella’s end we discover that Dr. Hatam is actually a satanic figure who injects everyone he encounters leaving most of the characters either dead or dying on the outskirts of the garden

By submerging the reader in a scene of possession in its opening, *Malakut*’s narrative begins with a suspension of disbelief⁵⁴ that, according to Freud, is a characteristic feature of the uncanny as an aesthetic experience.⁵⁵ Where the question of belief and disbelief may begin as an initial experience of the uncanny, it is not of primary concern with respect to the uncanny experience that suspends this question altogether. Spirit possession, like the aesthetic rendering of the uncanny, foregrounds the *effect* of the experience itself as worthy of interrogation, thereby emphasizing an uncanny form over and above an object of fear. What is crucial here is that possession, like the relationship to the pathological symptom, stages the intimate relationship to alterity in modern subjectivity through its formal structure of recurrence, temporal delay, spatial abstraction or unlocatability, thus drawing attention to the significance of aesthetic form in producing this experience. Possession serves as the starting point and engine for the narrative’s exploration of the boundaries between paradise and hell, body and soul, life and death and the symptoms that accompany psychic trauma. In contrast to paradigms that approach the relationship to the other as either one of influence or mimetic imitation, this chapter builds from critical approaches in literary and anthropological studies that interrogate the relationship to alterity in the shaping of the postcolonial modern subject.⁵⁶ In so doing, my analysis of *Malakut* and the relationships to the foreign other (internal and external) are reconceptualized as a struggle with the self under post-coup conditions of death and destruction. In contradistinction to the latter half of the dissertation, which approaches the way in which possession serves as a medium through which other-worldly spirits are a channel into the subject’s inner psychic world, in this chapter

⁵⁴ In an interview Sadeghi gave in 1966, he described the way in which his prose produces a suspended state of reality that recalls Freud’s description of the “uncertainty principle” in his famous essay on the uncanny. The “uncertainty principle” rests on the indeterminacy of the reality of uncanny events, but while Freud saw this as an initial foray into the uncanny, he also described that the uncanny could not rely on the uncertainty principle alone, and aesthetics allowed for a realm in which the suspension of disbelief could advance the uncanny beyond the question of reality and irreality. In the same way that Freud explored this through writing, Sadeghi too located this tension in writing and described this state of in-betweenness as “the state in which I and my characters oscillate between believing and unbelieving.” See: “Interview with *Ayandegan* Newspaper,” in Mohammad-Reza Aslani, *Babram Sadeghi: bazmandeha-ye gharibi ashna* (Tehran: Nilufar, 2005), 563.

⁵⁵ Sigmund Freud and David McLintock, and Hugh Haughton. 2003. *The Uncanny*. (New York: Penguin Books).

⁵⁶ Two key texts in anthropological theory that have inspired the ideas and theoretical methods in the chapter and dissertation more broadly are Stefania Pandolfo’s *Knot of the Soul: Madness, Psychoanalysis and Islam* (University of Chicago Press, 2018) and Michael Taussig’s *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (Routledge, 1992). In more recent literary criticism, see Kayvan Tahmasebian and Rebecca Ruth Gould’s essay on the relationship between the foreign and Iranian modernism entitled, “Ajnabi, or the Xenological Uncanny in Iranian Modernism” (New Literary History, 2021).

the experience of possession is made clinical, reflecting the biopower⁵⁷ and death-drive that permeates the post-coup atmosphere. In my analysis of *Malakut*, I consider the way in which the novella blurs the boundaries between existential, psychic, and physiological elements of affliction. Furthermore, I show the way possession stages the problem of psychic alienation, the relationship to alterity, and ontology in the formation of the subject, while also asking what forms of subjecthood remain possible in the wake of affliction.

Moving between cosmologies of possession and psychoanalytic frames, this chapter works through the existential dualities presented by *Malakut* to trace the relationship between modern subjectivity and its relationship to alterity. In the first section, I will think through Freud and Breur's concept of "corps étranger" (foreign body), which Sadeghi refers to as an alternative name for jinn within the story.⁵⁸ Through close reading of the figuration of jinn and through Freud and Breur's "Studies on Hysteria," I show the way the experience of being possessed by jinn represents the spatial unlocatability of the pathological symptom. From this section, I analyze the coexistence of the drives (death and life) in Dr. Hatam and M.L., the latter who seeks to forget his sins, only to be haunted by the return of the repressed. And finally, I analyze moments in the novella in which the interrupting presence of gardens suggests the embattled terrain of the death-drive, the life-drive, and the return of the repressed, all of which are set forth through the experience of possession.

While building more from Marx's concept of estrangement than Freud's psychoanalytic framework, the influential sociologist and intellectual, Ali Shariati (1933–1977), too, links the experience of alienation and possession, in a lecture entitled "Selfless Humanity" (*Ensan-e bikhod*),⁵⁹ referring to alienation (*az khod biga-negi*) as demonization (*jinn-zadegi*) or the experience of madness that accompanies modernity. According to Shariati, to be possessed by jinn is analogous to the condition of madness (*majnun*). Shariati parallels the conditions of psychic disorder to alienation (*eliene shodeh*) and argues that both are brought on by the conditions of colonial modernity and modern man's relationship to the conditions of labor. In *Malakut*, the secular register of colonial modernity, including the bureaucratic prose and the alienation that comes with it is intertwined with the theological register of the soul and the hour of death in Islamic cosmologies. This theological framing is announced as the beginning of the first episode with a Quranic verse "Do thou give them [the hypocrites] the good tidings (*bashira*) of a painful chastisement."⁶⁰ The character "types" of the novella reflect the hypocrites (*al-Munafiqun*) of this verse. The experience of possession, however, serves as a test in the final episode, in which, the "hypocrites" who live only through falsity of external or superficial features and are given a final chance of encountering the divine world of the soul. This moment of disclosure occurs when Dr. Hatam discloses that the injection, he has been giving them will kill them and they have seven days to live. While the surreal and satirical elements of the story may deflect from the theological epigraphs that frame the opening and closing episodes, these announcements must be reckoned with

⁵⁷ In his book, *Who is Knowledgeable Is Strong: Science, Class, and the Formation of Modern Iranian Society, 1900-1950*, (University of California Press, 2009), Cyrus Schayegh examines the way in which the Pahlavi state employed biomedical sciences to tackle problems created by Iran's modernity.

⁵⁸ Bahram Sadeghi was quite familiar with psychoanalytic theories and Freud in particular. He was a student at the Medical School of Tehran University, where he studied psychoanalysis in 1955. It was during this period in Tehran where he began writing short stories and publishing them in the literary journal *Sokhan*. He wrote a doctoral dissertation entitled "A Modern View of Sexual Impotency" in 1973. While Sadeghi served as a physician, he wasn't interested in practicing medicine, and far preferred the act of writing as the best method for exploring the human soul and psyche.

⁵⁹ Ali Shari'ati, *Ensa-n-e bikhod*, (Tehran: Qalam).

⁶⁰ Qur'an, 4:138.

as an added layer that converges the earthly and eschatological predicaments presented by the narrative. The narrative therefore takes seriously the imaginal realm as an arena in which the modernist narrative is interwoven with the divine and the world of jinn, as a site of critique. This work approaches the role of jinn as partaking in the imaginal realm (a term distinguished from the limited scope of the “imaginary” as that which is outside the realm of reality) offers particular insights on the boundaries that encompass spirit realms, imaginal and divine, including an encounter between contradictory forces of life and death.⁶¹ Brought to bear on theories of the Freudian unconscious that also straddle these bounds, the converging theoretical intervention of the theological and the psychoanalytic allows me to think through the work of the soul and the body as host of subjectivity in the novella. Shariati refers to the mad, or the alienated, as a person for whom jinn has become housed in their body, *jinn dar oo kbaneh kardeb*. The encounter with jinn signifies a radical relationship with alterity and violence. Stefania Pandolfo refers to the “ambivalent quality” of the drive in relation to violence and self-annihilation and suggests, through a reading of Freud’s “Thoughts for the Times: On War and Death” (1915) in which Freud calls for a “coming to terms with the agency of the drive,” that Freud’s urgent call to reckon with the permeation of death and violence echoes a “theological wrestling with the problem of evil.”⁶² Sadeghi foregrounds this Freudian engagement with the death-drive alongside Islamo-theological questions of sin and fall, thus revealing the struggle between life and death that exists in all of us. In *Malakut*, the city and Dr. Hatam’s clinic serve as sites in which death and destruction prevail, but against the satanic, death-bound clinic, *Malakut* is interrupted by the promise of paradise, the paradisiacal garden, which we encounter only at its edge. My analysis traverses these dualities to render the ways in which *Malakut* stages the problem of subjectivity and identity in an intermedial world, rendering a society unmoored from its systems of identification, where “Malakut” as heavenly dominion becomes a graveyard.

But before I begin my analysis of Sadeghi’s *Malakut*, it will be useful to my readings of Sadeghi’s allusions to alterity and duality to trace the divine and imaginative meanings of the term “Malakut.” The term itself only appears twice in the novella as a proper name for two women, first for the wife of the young secretary and then for Dr. Hatam’s first wife. “Malakut” carries multiple meanings referring to empire; dominion; authority; magnificence, angels; spirits; kingdom of heaven; the invisible, contemplative, or intelligent world; the heavenly court; and hall of angels. In the writings of the Persian philosopher Al-Ghazali, al-Malakut is also associated with *al-ghayb* (the invisible world) which includes figures of alterity and the realm of the supernatural: other-worldly spirits and jinn. French philosopher Henry Corbin introduced the term *mundus imaginalis* to think through the intermediary and intermediate world of Malakut through the Islamic concept of *alam al-mithal* (image or semblance, example, vision, witness) or, the world of the image.⁶³ Thinking with Persian and Arabic philosophical and theological sources that take seriously the divine, *mundus imaginalis* addresses the limits of the English and French term “imaginary,” (French: *imaginaire*) which tends to be equated with what is considered outside the realm of reality or falls under the category of “fantasy.” Instead, this imaginal world is ontologically *real* and activates an “organ of perception,” making imaginative power a privileged arena of experience alongside sense perception and intellectual function. The imaginal world, for Corbin, is the site for revelation and disclosure. The imaginal is attributed with a revelatory

⁶¹ Ibid, 333-335.

⁶² Sigmund Freud, A. A. Brill, and Alfred B. Kuttner. *Reflections on War and Death*. (New York: Moffat, Yard and Company, 1918).

⁶³ Henri Corbin, *En Islam iranien: aspects spirituels et philosophiques*, tome IV, livre 7, Paris: Gallimard, 1971. The content of this paper was originally delivered as a lecture at the Colloquium on Symbolism in Paris in June 1964, and later appeared in the *Cahiers internationaux de symbolisme* 6, Brussels 1964, 3-26.

capacity, not the space of deception or illusion but as the locus of relation and the revelation of knowledge. For Corbin, this imaginative perception is a psycho-spiritual relation to the world and relies on the capacity of the imagination, such that “when it ceases to fulfill its function of perceiving and producing the symbols that lead to inner intelligence, the *mundus imaginalis* (which is the realm of the Malakut, the world of the soul) may be considered to have disappeared.”⁶⁴ If we are to interpret Corbin’s claim through Sadeghi’s naming of the death-bound story he produces as *Malakut*, perhaps, it is possible to suggest that the trauma in the wake of the coup does not eliminate the world of Malakut, but rather re-symbolizes it in a state of modernist affliction. In other words, Sadeghi superimposes a modernist literary genre onto a religious parable, invoking the divine meanings of “Malakut,” while at the same time interweaving the alienated state of the material world with the eschatological horizon of the soul.

Recalling a myriad of conventional literary genres (gothic, horror, fantasy, absurdist, surrealist), *Malakut*’s prose lays bare the uncanny quality beneath the codified structures of an alienated world. If there were a “Sadeghi effect,” it would be that the absurdities of reality, the abrupt shifts from banality to horror, the thinly veiled stability of the modern order, and the quickness with which it is destabilized can be conveyed in simple and straightforward prose.⁶⁵ There is no doubt that Sadegh Hedayat’s pivotal modernist novella *Buf-e Kur* (*The Blind Owl*, 1963) was influential to Sadeghi and *Malakut*’s narrative. Literary scholars have referenced the surreal, absurd, and uncanny elements found in both modernist works. However, while Sadeghi was certainly influenced by Hedayat’s modernist formal innovation, *Malakut* produces a much more clinical sense of the psyche to render the alienation of his characters within the prose. Unlike Hedayat’s *The Blind Owl*, which uses memories and hallucinations to blur the lines between conscious and unconscious state as a mark of the protagonist’s deteriorating psychic state, *Malakut*’s narrative does not leave room for his character’s interiority. Instead, it produces a world in which the slippage from ordinary prose into the absurd is part of the natural structure of the narrative. While each episode quickly carries the reader through new pieces of information, horrific and absurd, the plot moves forward with a stable sense of order. The narrative movement between an “I” bound to a single limb, and a third-person narrator, reflects an unsettled boundary between inner and outer, a psychic experience that can be traced to Freud and Breuer’s concept of hysteria.

***Corps Étranger* (Foreign Body) and the Autonomy of Jinn**

When Mr. Maveddat is first possessed by jinn, his friends take to the road to seek treatment through a scene that blurs earthly and supernatural worlds, with “the ephemeral and transient shadows of brambles, piles of stone and dusty hills, and the surprising whispers of nocturnal animals as if those were metaphysical, unearthly effects.” His friends seek an exorcist, but when they realize that “their species is extinct,” (183) they resort to a medical doctor and find themselves at Dr. Hatam’s clinic. Through multiple references to the loss of the figure of the exorcist, the notion of spirit possession shifts from the realm of ritual to the modern medicalization of illness. *Malakut* registers the loss of the exorcist as a figure of the past who is instead replaced by a biopolitical force on the living. In light of

⁶⁴ Corbin, 10.

⁶⁵ While the use of simple and ordinary prose became a mark of literary movements across 20th century poetry and prose, this can also be traced in poetic examples that precede the global modernist shifts of the 20th century. In his seminal three-volume text that periodizes Persian literary forms, *Sabk-šenāsi* (Tehran, 1321 Š./1942, repr. 1337 Š./1958), Taqī-Bahar argued for the premodern modernist style in Iranian poetry including Sa’di’s 13th century Gulistān (The Flower Garden) that was characterized by the simplicity of its prose, reflecting contemporary Persian language.

this, this section I will analyze the appearance of jinn in the novella, shifting from a figure of *al-ghayb* (the invisible realm), to the comedic and absurd depiction as a physical, corporeal figure who diagnoses a physical ailment in Mr. Maveddat's stomach. I will put these descriptions in the novella in conversation with the psychoanalytic concept of *corps étranger*, as a manifestation of psychic trauma and as a parallel to the jinn.

“Are you sure that it has gone into his stomach?” “Almost. Modern medical science labels these sorts of things as *corps étranger* or let me translate it for you—foreign body (*jesm-e khareji*). When the *corps étranger* is as large as a jinn, it certainly couldn't find a better place than the ample space of a stomach.” (183)

When Dr. Hatam first diagnoses Mr. Maveddat's affliction, he refers to the presence of jinn in Mr. Maveddat's stomach as *corps étranger*, using the original French in the Persian text, and later translates it to *jesm-e khareji*. Sigmund Freud and Josef Breuer's “Studies on Hysteria”⁶⁶, develops the concept of *corps étranger* (foreign body) as the figure of psychological trauma. *Malakut's* invocation of jinn as *corps étranger* establishes a link between the alterity of the jinn and the pathological phenomenon in experiences of psychic trauma. At the same time, by retaining the French word in the original Persian, and even integrating the work of translation within the narrative, Sadeghi draws attention to the concept of the foreign (*ajnabi*) or the strange (*gharib*) within the prose itself. Thinking between *Malakut's* figuration of jinn/foreign body and Freud and Breuer's discussion of *corps étranger* in “Studies on Hysteria” (hereafter Freud and Breuer and SH), my readings in this section analyze the figure of jinn within the story as a fundamental encounter with the foreign that renders the experience of trauma as one that traverses the boundaries of inner and outer worlds, bodily, psychic, and ontological. According to Freud and Breuer the experience of *corps étranger* involves an understanding of the symptom as not merely a causal response to the traumatic event but also as an independent agent, both internal and external, which, as I will show in my readings, resonates with the cosmology of jinns.

Freud and Breuer discuss the “precipitating cause” of hysteria, a traumatically charged event, which spurs histrionic symptoms. The event typically takes place many years prior to the appearance of the symptom, resulting in a temporal lag between the originary traumatic experience and the pathological phenomenon. More importantly, Freud and Breuer's discussion of hysteria foregrounds the significance of the symptom beyond traumatic events, therefore undermining the causal link between traumatic origin and symptom. Much like the lapse between the events of the coup and the aesthetic responses discussed here, which were produced not in the immediate wake of 53 but almost a decade later,⁶⁷ Freud and Breuer point to the symptom's autonomous force, signifying its active role as a foreign agent. As Freud and Breuer indicate, the symptom's character is recurrent, untimely and *foreign* (my emphasis), suggesting that the symptom is not causally *determined* by the traumatic origin

⁶⁶ Josef Breuer and Sigmund Freud, “Studies on Hysteria,” Translated and Edited by James Strachey. (Basic Books, 2000).

⁶⁷ Rather than approach the aesthetic examples discussed in this dissertation prescriptively or as determinately symptomatic of the coup, I gather these associated texts, films, and visual art pieces as an attempt to explore the psychic forces at play in the wake of this historical event. The temporal lag does not merely encompass the delayed appearance of the symptom (whether we can impose this temporal order upon the modernists I discuss is another question), but also reflects the solidification of the second iteration of the Pahlavi regime, and the subsequent institutional developments in the fields of art, literature, and cinema. Therefore, while each chapter cannot be read as a symptom, there is room to consider how each of the artists discussed here uses their respective medium as a channel through which to consider the ongoing experience of affliction.

even if its presence is triggered by it. This autonomy does not mean that the traumatic event does not prompt the symptom, but rather that the symptom is both linked to the traumatic event while simultaneously occupying a relationship of alterity to it.

“[T]he causal relation between the determining psychical trauma and the hysterical phenomenon is not of a kind implying that the trauma merely acts like an *agent provocateur* in releasing the symptom, which thereafter leads an independent existence. We must presume rather that the psychical trauma—or more precisely the *memory of the trauma* [again what is traumatic, properly speaking, is not the event but the memory]—acts like a *foreign body* which long after its entry must continue to be regarded as an agent that is still at work.” (SH: 6, my emphasis)

What Freud and Breur emphasize is the symptom’s independent, yet interconnected character, which both exists outside of the originary event, while being internal to it. In this regard, while the event functions as *an* origin, its originary character is diffused by the activity of symptoms, always at work. While the originary trauma can act as a provocation of symptoms, it may also reflect the underlying experience of a latent trauma that may precede the experience of the event. In this way, symptoms are not only effects of an original cause, but are internal processes that lay dormant until activated. In the experience of hysteria, F and B suggest that instead of a single, major trauma, there can be a number of smaller traumas, which provoke the recurrence of symptoms. Gathered together, these smaller traumatic experiences are what, collectively, form the hysterical response. The trauma can also be formed when an “apparently trivial circumstance” is combined with the “operative event” at a particular time of susceptibility. Here, time itself bears upon the experience, proving to be an operative force on not only the shape of the traumatic event, but in the formation of the symptomatic experience. Rather than approaching the traumatic event as the determining factor, which begets the preceding symptoms, F and B emphasize the multiple temporal and spatial forces between the traumatic event and the experience of hysteria.

“There is another kind of causation ... We can elucidate this from the picture of a foreign body, which continues to operate unceasingly as a stimulating cause of illness until it is gotten rid of.” (SH 3: 35)

This shift in causation means that the foreign body cannot easily be appropriated by the inside as causally connected to the traumatic event nor can it be totally assimilated to the outside as wholly determined by external triggering factors. It therefore remains at the boundary of the inside-outside, and as a figure of psychical trauma also becomes a figure of spatial unlocatability, resonating with a typical understanding of the jinn. What Freud and Breur’s description of the foreign body teaches us is that the traumatic event can neither be reduced to biology or fantasy (as something entirely internal), nor can it be reduced to the occurrence of a harmful external event. Rather than produce a theory of the “traumatic event,” Freud and Breur produce a theory of the traumatic symptom. This is because there are no clear boundaries between inside and outside, and even the foreign body is untethered from its spatial locatability, becoming an infiltrate. In this regard the process of psychoanalysis, as with the critical approaches to affliction I describe here, are not so much about the removal or the exorcism of what is pathological or afflicted than about producing conditions that enable movement or circulation in areas that have been removed. As I will discuss in a later section, the character of M.L., who amputates all but one of his limbs as an attempt to forget the sins of his past, exemplifies this resistance to exorcism as a psycho-supernatural process, and instead suggests the “return of the repressed” as an inevitability that must be reckoned with, even in areas that have been cut off.

I turn to Freud and Breur to draw attention to the intrinsic fracture and feeling of infiltration tied to psychic pathology and spirit possession while also highlighting the foreign body's spatial unlocatability. What is first rendered as entirely foreign and as part of the invisible and incorporeal realm is later brought in as a physical character in the plot. *Malakut's* inversion of the invisible into the corporal realm and then again into the invisible draws attention to the figure of the jinn both as radical alterity and as intimately and physically tethered to the subject. This condition speaks to a sense of affliction that defies boundaries of inner and outer and draws attention to the other temporality of the jinn, that even while satirically rendered by Sadeghi as a physical being reflects an interruption to the violent ordering apparatuses of the state. The sudden and unidentifiable appearance of jinn as a figure of externality finds its host in the body, and the stomach in particular, becoming an interior element of the possessed subject. The experience of possession as generating the narrative events and later as a figural depiction produces a sense of time and space that is fundamentally altered and formed by a relationship to alterity. In Sadeghi's straightforward and at the same time absurdist prose, the jinn is produced through a figural and physical manifestation, described in striking detail in which the supernatural and the clinical converge. Suddenly, what has remained part of the invisible realm appears in the material world as a physical being with a body:

"Then the jinn came out. The slimy ribbon that had first appeared turned out to be his tail. The jinn was the size of the palm of a hand. He was wearing a scarlet nightcap, a long garment open in front, and a cloak, gilded and embroidered in filigree. Tiny, delicate slippers covered his feet. He was neat and demure, like a Qajarian courtier clerk. In his right hand, there was a pen case and a scroll, and with his left hand he hugged to his breast a small, beautiful, verdure jinn boy child with almond shaped eyes. Slimy mucilage covered him from tip to toe." (195)

The physical corporeal rendering of the jinn as a small child compared to the likes of a Qajarian courtier clerk subverts the invisible unknown quality of the jinn by attributing it with identifiable physical human characteristics. Not only that, but the jinn's physicality is paralleled with the ordered posture of a figure of monarchical power. The appearance of the jinn presents one of Sadeghi's most absurdist plotlines where the jinn emerges in order to diagnose what he has discovered in Mr. Maveddat's stomach lining. Rather than retaining the unknown quality typically associated with the jinn, the jinn is attributed with a bureaucratic and clinical role of providing Mr. Maveddat with a prescription of his affliction. The narrative suddenly shifts from a description of the jinn to the voice of the jinn himself who completes a form to document, as though he is a medical or bureaucratic official, who has borne witness to Mr. Maveddat's stomach. The card disrupts the previous narrative and structure of the text by actually inserting a bureaucratic document into the body of the text:

Mission Accomplishment Card (*Barg Anjam Kar*)

I explored every single corner of the stomach and intestines of Mr. Maveddat, forty-two, and observed that he is suffering from a dangerous and deadly gastric cancer of the cauliflower (gol kalam) specimen. The effects and blossoms of this plant were observed clearly all over the mucus. The premature and scandalous death of Mr. Maveddat, in association with intolerable spasms, is inevitable.

*Sincerely,
Agent number 999 (196)*

What begins as a state of possession, supernatural and otherworldly, is rendered through the absurd figuration of the jinn as a clinical biological disease. The jinn is discovered not to be a condition of spirit possession in the supernatural sense but an instrument that is used to transport the "possessed" to Dr. Hatem's office. Sadeghi's use of surreal humor adds another layer to clinicalization of the jinn,

where even the growth of a deadly gastric cancer is destabilized through the revelation that the cancer is actually of the “cauliflower specimen.” Sadeghi’s sharp prose draws attention to the shifting shape of the jinn, where it morphs from a Qajar clerk to a Mongol warrior without warning: “The jinn, now resembling a Mongol warrior, bowed down before Dr. Hatam, and with a sharp, whistling sound, shot out through a gap in the door and vanished into space.” (196) The jinn’s absurd appearance as a figure of state power and sudden disappearance back into the realm of the invisible registers its psychic, other-worldly, and corporeal presence between the boundaries of the internal and external. Furthermore, it is its strange shifting figural depiction that, rather than producing the jinn as a sign to be decoded, renders it as a representational enigma, or rather, as an unreadable sign that crosses multiple realms of visibility and invisibility.

Writing and the Return of the Repressed

While the presence of jinn in the opening and closing episodes of *Malakut* calls into question the struggle between life and death, invisibility and visibility, and natural and supernatural realms for the subject, the memory-driven narrative of M.L. provides yet another example of the way in which the fractured state of the post-coup period shifts the subject’s relationship to the past and crafts a new relationship to the ongoing condition of affliction. M.L. is introduced as a character who lives on the top floor of Dr. Hatam’s clinic and who has willfully allowed Dr. Hatam to amputate all but one of his limbs over the last 40 years.⁶⁸ While the removal of his limbs function in an effort to annihilate part of himself, namely, the haunting actions of his past, M.L. continues to surround himself with clear jars that store his amputated limbs, as floating extensions of himself on display. M.L.’s compulsion to amputate each of his limbs is motivated by a desire to forget all the sins he has committed: he murdered his own son for having an affair with a strange character, a man whose physical appearance is now unrecognizable due to a transformative plastic surgery. We discover later that this mysterious man is Dr. Hatam. In addition to killing his own son, M.L. cut off his servant’s tongue to forbid him from uttering the crimes he has witnessed. These attempts at forgetting, or forced repression, shed light on the unsaid, the unseen, and the role of writing in manifesting the return of the repressed. Instead of forgetting, M.L. is confronted with its impossibility, in which the act of “dis-membering” himself sets forth the re-membering in the medium of writing. Writing, for M.L. becomes the central medium through which M.L. both tells his story of evil and violence and attempts to distance himself from it. This can be extended to Sadeghi’s prose in general, which reproduces the sudden fractured rhythm of violence, while at the same time producing the terrain in which critical reflection can be made possible, recalling Socrates’ parallel to *pharmakon* in which writing functions both as “remedy and poison.”⁶⁹ In this section, I discuss the ways in which M.L.’s repeated amputations are driven by a repetition-compulsion that carries the battle between life and death-drives in *Malakut*, and how his subsequent turn to writing manifests the return of the repressed in the realm of writing by interrupting the plot with memories that externalize the subject’s inner consciousness.

The quotation that opens episode two, referenced at the beginning of this chapter, announces M.L.’s longing to forget. In comparison to Mr. Maveddat whose facial expression registers his alienated soul as a signal that proceeds the experience of being possessed by jinn, M.L. is alternately possessed by another force of alterity: the unrelenting memories of his past. In an exchange between

⁶⁸ The bodily depiction of M.L. as a limbless figure recalls Bahman Mohasses’ figural-abstract paintings, which is the subject of chapter two. Mohasses depicts humans with fractured limbs, deformed as reflections of the afflicted state of the post-coup period.

⁶⁹ Jacques Derrida, “Plato’s Pharmacy” In Barbara Johnson (ed.), *Dissemination*. Chicago, IL: (University of Chicago Press. 1981), 61-171.

Dr. Hatam and M.L., the *nabudegan* (terminator) otherwise known as Dr. Hatam remarks: “you say that you’ve got to forget, and it’s for this very reason you keep on having yourself operated on. But why do you think you’ve got to forget?”⁷⁰ As described in Freud’s remarks on the traumatic event, for M.L. the memory of his past sins, rather than the event itself, is what becomes the experience of trauma. There is no traumatic event, but only the recurrence of the memory as repetition of the trauma. For M.L. the experience of the strange, the uncanny, the other, is already an internal element of the grounds from which he relates to the world. When describing the room, he writes from he calls it *otagh-e ajib* (a strange room) but only a few lines later he writes: “Strange room? I said that before, and perhaps — sometimes I wonder how strange things could still exist.”⁷¹ The reality of M.L.’s condition presupposes a conception of reality in which strangeness is a characteristic feature of the events that take place, and yet, when recounting Dr. Hatam’s clinic, M.L. anticipates the sinister, even asking himself “What incident could still be sinister to me? (*baraye man digar kodam hadese mitavanad shum bashad?*)” The already altered terrain of “Malakut” in which strangeness is a given and narrative transcends the question of belief or disbelief meets Freud’s argument on the uncanny. Both texts explore an experience of the strange that goes beyond the suspension of disbelief and instead produces the uncanny through an aesthetic effect or experience, in the case of *Malakut* writing itself serves as a medium in which the repressed memories of the past can be reactivated on the page. As Freud discusses, an uncanny effect rather than event is produced “when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced.”⁷² Rather than rely on the unanticipated element of fear or surprise, Freud emphasizes the revelation of the strange in the familiar, a device that is evident in Sadeghi’s simple prose that lays bare the violent, the strange, and the haunted in ordinary language. Furthermore, it is through an engagement with the surface projections that conceal the strange, and the tensions inherent in the act of writing in disclosing them for the reader.

Writing serves as a medium that registers the strange and channels the memories of M.L.’s trauma while at the same time while at the same serving as a tangible record and storing device that manifests the return of the repressed in the way in which the externalization of M.L.’s narrative relates to his inner psychic world. Jacques Derrida describes the role of writing as a prosthetic device, and as a supplement that attends to the precarious space between terms such as “speech” and “writing.”⁷³ As previously mentioned, M.L.’s physical act of amputation is supplemented with and announced through the act of writing with a single limb, his only hand (*ba tanha dastam...*) at the beginning of episode two. In contrast to what literary critics of *Malakut* have described as modernist writing as “secular exorcism,”⁷⁴ I consider the relationship between psychic healing and exorcism as one in which expulsion is neither possible nor the aim. Rather, in this context, writing serves as a prosthetic act that enables movement in areas where movement has previously been cut off. For M.L., writing enables an engagement with the evil presence that possesses him and aims to demobilize him in the present. Writing does not vanquish these forces but provides a space in which they can be related in an alternative spatial and temporal axis. In other words, rather than remaining wholly internal to M.L. writing provides a relief that permits a simultaneous internal and external presence to the otherwise totalizing trauma.

⁷⁰ Sadeghi, 204.

⁷¹ Sadeghi, 206.

⁷² Sigmund Freud. “The Uncanny,” 244.

⁷³ Jacques Derrida. Excerpt from “Of Grammatology.” 1967. *Art in Theory: 1900 – 1990*. Eds. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 918 – 923.

⁷⁴ Kayvan Tahmasebian and Rebecca Ruth Gould, “Ajnabi, or the Xenological Uncanny in Iranian Modernism” (New Literary History, 2021), 165.

M.L. describes the events of his past in a series of diary entries labeled “the first day” (*ruḡ-e aval*) “the second day” (*ruḡ-e dovom*), “the third day” (*ruḡ-e sevom*), and on, ending with “the night before the thirteenth day” (*shab-e zur sizdahom*). While these designations are meant to signal the passage of time, marking each day that passes, they remain fairly abstract and ungrounded in a particular moment of time. This is particularly strange in the context that we learn that M.L. has been operated on by Dr. Hatam for almost 40 years and the story that frames M.L.’s account (that of Mr. Maveddat) takes place in a single night. This strange relation to time suggests that M.L.’s entries function in an alternate temporality within the broader narrative. In each daily entry he chronicles his surroundings, dissociated memories, and his longing to forget the memories of his sins, all as he awaits his final amputation. M.L.’s entire being is dismembered and is in and of itself peculiarly uncanny: How can the only first-person narrative and semblance of interiority in the novella come from a single limb? From where does this voice call out? Curiously, in contrast to the vivid physical depiction of the jinn in Mr. Maveddat’s stomach with its own facial expression, M.L.’s voice carries an abstracted presence which suggests a consciousness beyond its tethering to a physical bodily realm. The detached quality of M.L.’s voice extends to the way in which he recounts his memories as well, described with an almost hallucinatory quality, blending past and present with the philosophical inquiry of the future.

As a supplement to M.L.’s first person narration, M.L.’s story of sin and fall is told with reference to an ambiguous and shifting “He” (*Oū*). In the original Persian, the ambiguous *Oū*⁷⁵ (translated as He) that looms over M.L.’s entries functions as a vector for evil that parallels earlier references to the unidentifiable jinn and simultaneously collapses the gendered signification with the impersonal description of “it.” This subjectless anonymity of the past blurs into Dr. Hatam, referencing an earlier iteration of his identity as a figure of evil, who, with plastic surgery, transforms his physical appearance and becomes Dr. Hatam. At the same time, “He” is not exclusively attributed to Dr. Hatam but stands in for the alterity of evil. “He” also becomes the attribute M.L. uses to describe the part of him who committed acts of evil; “He” is therefore the external death-drive that possesses M.L. himself, the evil part of him that propelled him into committing the crimes that continue to haunt him.⁷⁶ Through writing, and through the articulation of M.L.’s relation to himself as a figure of radical alterity, there is a reckoning of the evil that he seeks to expel. And while the act of writing does not result in total expulsion, there is a gradual projection of interiority through the process of writing as externalization, that transforms possession into the productive alienation of writing. For M.L. the act of writing is tied to the act of externalizing the inner consciousness that afflicts his soul, he asks himself on the fifth day: “But why am I writing these things, and why to myself, who am well aware of what I have borne and seen? No, I must write...”⁷⁷ By reading M.L.’s condition together, considering both amputated limbs and his writing as prosthesis, M.L. functions as the only character in the novella who is neither wholly driven by imposing the medicalized biopower of the state, nor does his alienation result in total possession by these powers. The act of remembering through writing, produces a channel through which movement is enabled in spite of amputation. For M.L. this results in a desire to endure, to continue living by working through the affliction that has consumed his soul, over and above surrendering to the death-bound subjectivity that drives Dr. Hatam.

Eschatological and the Remembrance of Death

⁷⁵ While *Oū* is a genderless term in Persian, the parallel to Dr. Hatam in the novella implies its masculine translation.

⁷⁶ Sadeghi, 202-3.

⁷⁷ Sadeghi, 210.

The episodic narrative of Malakut is also an existential and theological parable that moves between multiple realms, the material world (*al-dunyā*) and the end of the world, or the eschatological (*al-ākhirā*). Within these realms, there is the narrative of the soul (*ruh*) and that of the human (*ensān*). In the final episode, Dr. Hatam reveals that the injections he has been prescribing have been poisoning the characters, giving them only seven days to live (reflecting the seven days of creation). In disclosing this reality, Dr. Hatam announces the time of death, which can be read as a sadistic tactic or an act of disclosure:

Dr. Hatam turned to the young secretary. “I have never done such a thing before,” that is, I never informed anyone beforehand; but for your sake—for I’ve taken a liking to you—for your sake, you who are young and pure, who’ve explained to me the philosophy of your life, and for the sake of your beautiful Malakut, I dispensed with my habit for once. In these remaining few days, in this remaining one week, you could live as long as a hundred years; enjoy life and enjoy each other, sing, dance, read a few novels, eat, drink, listen to one or two musical masterpieces... What’s the difference after all? You’d be doing the same things if you were to live for centuries. Therefore, the problem lies just in *quantity* and not quality; and no wise man would keep repeating routine identical acts for ages. In my opinion, a one-week life is enough in this world, provided that one really knows the time (*ta’rīkh*) of one’s death—a gift that *you* have been lucky enough to have been granted. So what reason is there for worrying? At the moment of death, you’ll have neither grief nor sorrow.⁷⁸

In these lines, Dr. Hatam claims that his revelation is an act of kindness, one that he has not taken in the past. In his announcement of death, he emphasizes the quality of life that can be lived with the knowledge of one’s time on earth. He asks a philosophical question: if one can enjoy all the wonders of life in one week “what’s the difference after all?” Thus, while Dr. Hatam injects these characters with the certitude of death, he also bestows a gift in which, the *munafiqeen* (hypocrites referenced in Surah al-Nisāh, 4:138) are given the chance to shift their perspectives from falsity to truthfulness. They are able to transcend the surface realm of appearances and enter another realm of truth. In the Qur’an, this surah is revealed in the context of justice, in which the experience and remembrance of God is political. The final episode is also framed by another epigraph that links the first Quranic verse with the lines of Jalal al-Din Rumi (Mowlana). It reads: “If thou has not had a brilliant life, there is but one moment, do thou die manly” (*gar nabudat zindagani munir, yek dudam mande ast, mardane bemir!*) These lines reflect the theological thread of vision and enlightenment as counter to the existence of the hypocrites, suggesting that to encounter this life of illumination, one must die with courage.

Thus, in addition to the modernist structures and mundane political registers that form *Malakut*, Sadeghi announces that the meaning of the story must also be read within the context of the Qur’an. The recurring mode of announcement (*bashira*) in the text, first, in the moment in which Mr. Maveddat is possessed and again in the final injection indicates the announcement as a theological pronouncement that can only be perceived by those who are capable of receiving the message. In the act of disclosure, Dr. Hatam gives the characters a chance to come face to face with the gift of life and as readers we encounter the enigma of existence. The question of divine disclosure is wedded with the realm of the invisible, at times invoking registers of the occult, and at yet moments, the repressed, or the soul. In this final moment, characters are left at the of the garden of Malakut with the opportunity to encounter the soul: the fat man dies instantly from a heart attack, the secretary goes into a panic and Mr. Maveddat stays silent. As the parable suggests, not everyone has the capacity to encounter the gift of disclosure.

⁷⁸ Sadeghi, 259/52.

Set against the historical trauma, the heightened repression, and uncertainty of the post-coup period, theories of the uncanny, and the radical foreignness of the jinn that meets the psychoanalytic interventions on the traumatic symptom, Sadeghi emphasizes the penetration of the foreign as internal to the self. “Malakut’s” clinicalization of possession pulls from historic, psychic, and existential relationships between self and other, and the spatial and psychic registers of inner and outer to stage the condition of the afflicted modern as intimately tethered to alterity. This alterity comes forth through Sadeghi’s direct prose that presents the strange, uncanny occurrences in *Malakut* as the undercurrents that drive the narrative, even as they are rendered in alarmingly simple ways. The narrative, as though possessed by the pen of Sadeghi, is formed by conflicting death and life-drives. Paralleling this rhythm is the force of writing that produces both graveyard and paradisiacal garden, while at the same time in the case of M.L. supplementing the inner world with its externalized presence. Sadeghi’s tale is no romantic return to ritual, nor does it offer a religious injunction, rather by presenting conditions of spirit possession in tandem with state-imposed bio-power Sadeghi’s existential fable asks two central questions that inform the remainder of this dissertation: how do the conditions produced by the post-coup period shift the subject’s ways of relating to the world? And what is the role of aesthetics in registering and critically relating to the experience of affliction?

Chapter 2: Dislocated Modernism: The Interstices of Mythology and Destruction

We built, we destroyed, and a sad song weighed on the world.

Marino Marini

Minotaurs, bodies without limbs, fish out of water, severed heads, and faceless countenances: these are the images that recur in the paintings of the late modernist artist, Bahman Mohasses (1931-2010). Mohasses's corpus includes a collection of paintings, sculptures, and collages, which span 60 years. Mohasses's work maintained a dialogic and often subversive relationship with local conditions and state-led institutions as well as established modernist canons, local and international. Where the state aimed to develop a rhythm of order, continuity and progress, the post-coup period produced a traumatic uncertainty in the political, historic, and psychic ground of the nation. It is because of Mohasses's engagement with the traumatic uncertainty of the post-coup period in Iran, rather than in spite of this local context that his work tends to be ill-served by historicist frameworks that attempt to assign it a role in an unfolding order of development (of either self, society, or national tradition). Mohasses's figural abstraction serves as a visual gesture against ideology, while also remaining difficult to place within national narratives of Iranian modernism that proliferated in the same period. As an artist who maintained a radical resistance to state or national narratives of his work, Mohasses's corpus could not be easily usurped in national movements of modernism or "schools" of modern art such as the contemporary Saqqakhaneh arts movement, nor I argue can it easily be relinquished to a European-inspired canon. In many ways, his corpus and his relationship to it, shattered cohesive notions of canon-formation and linear art-historical narratives altogether. This is exemplified in his compulsion to destroy his work, leaving little to posterity except scattered remains.

Mohasses accrued a certain reverence over his career, with friends and critics who considered themselves to be in on the conceptual tricks of his practice, not only offering testimony to his difference but also making films that capture the eccentric personality behind the canvas, which drew parallels between the figure in Mohasses's beloved painting 'Fifi' (Fig. 1) and his own enigmatic persona. Critic Jalal Al-e Ahmad described Mohasses's central imagery—often eyeless humans (Fig. 2) or gasping fish—as “deformed by stone and pressure, as if having just escaped from a vice grip or “posing” before the camera of your eye to preserve their honor⁷⁹.” Literary critic and historian Ehsan Yarshater saw elements of protest and satirical metaphor in Mohasses's “deformed shapes and disfigured monsters.” Meanwhile art critic Enrico Crispolti identified the *atemporal* quality of Mohasses's portrayal of human figures, drawing attention to the way in which they are not bound to a single temporal moment. Crispolti remarks upon the recurrence of male figures in Mohasses's corpus who were both imbued with a material force while also exhibiting a sense of disfiguration. In this chapter, I trace the processes of what I refer to as figural abstraction in Mohasses's work, which can be discerned, I suggest, even prior to the 1953 coup, amid the theoretical debates of avant-garde figures who cast doubt on the desirability of mythological narration as a component of visual art in Iranian society. My interest lies not in setting Mohasses against his peers or in some schema of international modernism inheriting the problems of “belatedness” and centers and peripheries (although I will engage with the literature that does). Rather, I am interested in the terms of Mohasses's engagement with the long durée of “post-coup” conditions characterized by an atmosphere of defeat and destruction. To address the ways in which these conditions permeate the formal qualities of Mohasses's work, my analysis delineates the multiple meanings of myth and mythology, as both a force of violence as well as a structure of temporal and symbolic recurrence that informed his practice

⁷⁹ Jalal Al-e Ahmad. “Bih Mohasses va Barāyih Dīvār,” *Majalib-yi Arash*, no. 9 (Ābān 1343 [October/November 1964]), 86–91.

and led to a deployment of destruction as a creative medium. Mohasses was drawn to the atemporal structure of mythical referents that span ancient and contemporary times, considering both their signification as legible and multiply potent with meaning. But rather than approach these recurrent symbols with codified meanings, Mohasses employs their malleability, by constructing paintings resembling stone, as though the subjects therein are molded by the hands of a sculptor. Mythological figures are changeable and function as both subjects and subjecting forces of the 20th-century atmosphere of violence that surrounds them. As such, his usage of recurrent motifs, from minotaurs to fish, not only comment on form but enact a critical attention to destruction as a world-historical phenomenon and a recurrent aesthetic and political force. Carving a space amid the art-historical and political pressures of his time, Mohasses's corpus, I argue, emerges at the interstices of mythology and destruction.

Over the rest of this chapter, I engage with a corpus of Mohasses's pre-revolutionary sculptures and paintings in order to show how his work moved between the temporal and aesthetic practices of myth-making and destruction—as two parallel movements that reflected an anti-authoritarian commitment. My reading of Mohasses's sculptures and paintings produced in the 60s, points to the multifarious expressions of myth and mythology at play in his work. At times, Mohasses directly invokes figures of Greek mythology, or draws on its symbols as a form of legible iconography. As theorists of myth have identified, the category of myth underwent a development from the Persian and Greek traditions, which utilized myth as a set of heroic stories, to the association between myth and fabulation, and later in the 19th and 20th century, with the emergence of nation-states, myth would support the founding origin stories of nationalism. Mohasses's formal experimentation confront the political and specifically ideological undercurrent of myth as a multi-layered structure that solidifies the founding narratives of nationhood and state leaders and contains a repetition and congealing power that violently works to maintain such myths across time⁸⁰.

Building from the work of Talal Asad, who engages with the multiple meanings of myth, I identify in Mohasses's work a critical engagement with myth's multiple meanings as a structure of violence, but also as a shifting iconography in which symbols can carry multiple meanings across time and geography⁸¹. Thinking with these meanings of myth, I also engage a theory of destruction, which draws from writings by Bahman Mohasses on Pablo Picasso and Gil Anidjar on Walter Benjamin who think with destruction as a creative medium through which to approach the violent conditions of the 20th century. Moving between formal and critical-historical analysis, I engage Mohasses's works within the context of Iran's post-coup period, the emerging aesthetic modernisms of Iran, and those of the global canon, both of which were produced within a transnational atmosphere of anti-authoritarian political movements.

With a post-coup corpus that resists both national and ideological categories, Mohasses's works in sculpture and painting register a politics of dislocation where the expressive symbolism of his works evade fixed moorings, resembling Freud's understanding of the symptom. Georges Didi-Huberman describes the active quality of Freudian impression, in which symptoms are described beyond a clinical determination and, "the unconscious formation... ceases to depend on an

⁸⁰ Bruce Lincoln. *Theorizing Myth: Narrative, Ideology, and Scholarship*. (The University of Chicago Press, 1999).

⁸¹ While Asad is primarily interested in the ways in which contradictions within the category of myth come to pervade modern secular discourse, and while he does not provide a comprehensive theorization, he is attentive to the ways in which myth has inherited a number of binaries from antiquity to the present, including: "belief and knowledge, reason and imagination, history and fiction, symbol and allegory, natural and supernatural, sacred and profane" (23). *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*, Stanford University Press, 2003.

iconography.”⁸² The notion of impression is based on multiple indeterminate factors Freud identified in the hysterical symptom, such as the repetition of memories, displacement or “derivation”, and “antithesis,” when something has the potential to turn into its opposite. These characteristics of the symptom place a gap between figural manifestation of the symptom and signification. This permits a reading of the symbol as a symptom that actively generates feeling in the present. By undermining the structural codes of iconography, the notion of impression allows for the unforeseen and the incomprehensible to take the place of ordering structures that turn images into icons of meaning-making. Mohasses’s invocation of recurrent symbols in Greek mythology is, I argue, neither a representational index nor a reflection of a traumatic event. For this reason, my discussion of myth and mythology traces various forms of myth including the myth-making practices of the state that aim to create order and preservations as well the mytho-poetic that reflects a critical process that undermines those very structures. The mytho-poetic symbols in Mohasses's work generate a temporality of active unfolding and rests on the tensions and disjunctures that are expressed in symbols and scenes. In Mohasses's works, real and imaginary signifiers serve as mirrors, not in terms of a translucent symbolic meaning, but as an expressive form that moves between abstraction and figuration. As such, my analysis of Mohasses's works considers the ways in which ideas such as biophilia, myth, destruction, and violence come to saturate his work not only in content but in the formal means of expression, often moving fluidly between the structural boundaries of mediums, bringing together techniques in sculpture, painting, and collage, and amplifying the imprint of each form on the other.



Fig.1 Bahman Mohasses, “Fifi Howls from Happiness,” 1964. Oil on canvas.



Fig 2. Bahman Mohasses, “Head I,” 1966. Gouache on paper.

⁸² Georges Didi-Huberman. *The Surviving Image: Phantoms of Time and Time of Phantoms: Aby Warburg's History of Art*. Translated by Harvey Mendelsohn. (The Pennsylvania State University Press. 2017), 190.

Key examples in his corpus of what I describe as figural abstraction are exemplified in two crucial paintings produced in the 60s, “Fifi Howls from Happiness” (Fig. 1) and “Head I” (Fig. 2). “Head I” is part of a series of five small paintings in which Mohasses depicts a number of singular, abstracted heads with no distinguishing facial markings beyond a crude pair of eyes that remain in the realm of an intimation. The painting's key characteristic is its textured stone-like quality and color, resembling a free-standing sculpture made of stone that emerges from rubble. Colored as though distressed by the marks of time, the sculpture is placed against a monochromatic gray background. This series displays Mohasses's interest in the face, while at the same time reflecting a radical departure from the iconicity of classical facial representations. The icon here retains its bare form while becoming abstracted from its distinguishing signifiers. In “Fifi” (Fig. 1), Mohasses's treasured painting, which he revealed that he carried everywhere with him⁸³, the artist's play with the figural and the abstract is established as central to his occupation with psychic interiority and the external human form. Fifi's figuration is characterized by its intense red color set against a green background and a bodily form is shaped by rudimentary lines, stark use of color, missing limbs and a lack of expressive features. By reducing the human figure to its barest shape, Mohasses draws attention to its primal qualities. The bounds between human and animal are blurred by naming Fifi a creature who howls. Fifi reveals both a character named and unknown: *who* is Fifi? Fifi's howl is declared but its source remains an enigmatic question: *why* does Fifi howl? And how does this howl manifest happiness? In contrast to “Head I” which features suggestive facial markings upon a figure already calcified, “Fifi” is a red figure whose face is almost entirely filled by a dark cavity in which markings and expressive features are invisible. Interestingly, while the source of Fifi's howl is left unclear, the void in the dark-rimmed orifice recalls Lacan's discussion of the mouth as a drive that cannot be satiated.⁸⁴ Furthermore, in a Freudian register the mouth is itself a significant orifice, the medium through which the unconscious dream is articulated and subsequently becomes open to interpretation. Understood from these psychoanalytic perspectives, the mouth is not only Fifi's characteristic feature, but also at once the perpetual void of the drive, the dream, and the nightmare. There is no doubt then that “Fifi” invokes both visual and acoustic registers of the unconscious, bridging the psychic ambiguity of a dark cavity with the figural distinction of a mouth that howls, mysteriously, from happiness. “Fifi” remains one of Mohasses's most famous works, both for its striking imagery, but also because of the artist's stated psychic affinity with Fifi. The human, animal and monstrous figure return as central subjects across Mohasses's work. As my later analyses show, Mohasses' use of disfiguration presents a critical reflection on destruction as an operative atmospheric force but also as a medium through which life after the coup is understood.

The Mark of Mossadegh and the Iranian Avant-Garde

Among the works in his mostly anti-naturalistic corpus, there are a few realist portraits that stand out. One in particular: a portrait of Mohammad Mossadegh, the former prime minister of Iran. The portrait of Mossadegh is dated 1952, one year before the coup that toppled him and sent him into exile. The portrait, while seemingly conforming to a straightforward mode of pictorial representation in comparison to Mohasses's later works in collage, figurative-abstract painting and anti-statuary sculpture, is nevertheless significant for its rare choice of subject. It is perhaps not hard to imagine the fascination Mossadegh may have held for Mohasses. In 1952, given the success of

⁸³ Mitra Farahani. “Fifi Howls from Happiness,” Original title: *Fifi az khoshbali zoore mikesbad* (Documentary released in 2013).

⁸⁴ Jacques Lacan. *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI*. Translated by Alan Sheridan. (Norton Press, 1981). 167-68.

Mossadegh's parliamentary election in the year prior, his images were widely circulating both in the streets and newspapers of Iran and around the globe (Mossadegh was named Time Magazine's Person of the Year in 1951). An image like the one seen in Fig. 3 was not uncommon in popular media, and for a young emerging artist involved in the political and intellectual scene at the time, its absurdly realist depiction might not be worth remarking. In fact, the realist portrayal of Mossadegh, which almost appears to replicate a journalistic or media image, is in sharp contrast to Mohasses's later approach to human figuration, which involves figural abstraction, including heads without bodies, faces with no expressive features, and shapeless figures dislocated from their surroundings. And yet, even as this starkly mimetic portrait of Mossadegh stands in contradistinction to his remaining corpus, a closer inspection of the painting reveals not only Mohasses's attunement to aesthetic deconstruction and psychic attunement, but also his political concerns characterized by both the political potential of what Mossadegh could bring for Iran's future and the critical anxieties that come with placing so much hope on a single heroic figure.

In an autobiographical essay included in a monograph of his works, Mohasses retrospectively describes the significance of the political moment in which Mossadegh was in the process of nationalizing the Iranian oil fields, and he writes "there was no time for studying" because "the streets consumed us."⁸⁵ He describes an atmosphere of artistic and cultural "ferment," and he mentions being in deep intellectual and artistic contact with a number of figures, including the revolutionary poet Nima Yushij, the Cubist painter Jalil Ziapour, the Dada poet Hushang Irani, and the Marxist social theorist, Khalil Malaki, among others. Within his stylized autobiography, as though the interruption in the text mirrors the interruption of artistic momentum at the time, Mohasses cuts into his description of the cultural scene to announce the political rupture that bore multiple effects across Iran's political, social, and aesthetic trajectories: the coup.

He writes: "With the US-backed overthrow [of Mossadegh], "it was all over!" and thereafter, Mohasses left Iran for Italy in 1954 to enroll at the Rome Arts Academy where he studied the works of European modernists like Pablo Picasso, Francis Bacon, Henry Moore, and Marino Marini, among others. At the age of 14, Mohasses studied painting with Mohammad Habib Mohammadi (1904-1971), a painter who had studied at the Moscow Art Academy.⁸⁶ Before his time abroad, he attended Tehran University's Faculty of Fine Art and spent his early 20s involved in Tehran's avant-garde circles. In addition to his long-ranging work in painting, sculpture, and collage, Mohasses also produced a number of literary translations, bringing the work of Italo Calvino, Jean Genet and Eugene Ionesco into the Persian language and also the Iranian theatrical stage in Tehran. His work involved the convergence of formal mediums including figural paintings that drew from the bodily shape of the sculptural form to sculptures that spoke less to the conventional volume of the form than to a delicate and humble bodily representation. By cultivating an aesthetic practice that worked across and between mediums, often bringing the sculptural into his painting and vice versa, Mohasses disordered the conventions of painting and sculpture. His work in each medium reflects a permeability of forms. It can also be said that this sensibility towards disorder is formed by a historical and political affliction that emerged from both an internal and external invasion and the critical effects it produces. It is therefore meaningful to track the significance of the events of 1952-53 as a significant wound that emanates in disordered ways within the broader context of his corpus. In doing so, this chapter aims to consider the ways in which 1953 fomented an anti-ideological political stance that permeated Mohasses's relationship to the norms of mediums, artistic conventions, and art historical canons.

⁸⁵ Bahman Mohassess, Enrico Crispolti, and A.V. Serov, *Bahman Mohassess: Scultura, Pittura, Grafica, Teatro* (Rome: Società Editrice Romana, 2007).

⁸⁶ See: <http://www.leilahellergallery.com/artists/bahman-mohassess>

Specifically, it was his own attunement to the psychic residues of the coup that led him to produce works that prioritized psychic effects over and above previous standards or artistic categories.



Fig. 3 Bahman Mohasses, Portrait of Mohammad Mossadeq, 1952, Oil on canvas.

In the portrait of Mossadeq, the prime minister faces at an angle, looking away from the direct gaze of the audience. The face models a three-dimensional image, containing the figural detail of Mossadeq's wrinkles, and yet, both the tie he is wearing, and the background are rendered as a flat surface, producing a disconnect in the painting's dimensions. This peculiar disconnect suggests the painting was produced from a two-dimensional image to start rather than beginning from a three-dimensional subject as in the typical convention of portraiture. The painting resembles an exact reproduction of a formal photograph that would be seen in a contemporary newspaper. Mohasses then places Mossadeq's figure against a collage of textile and territory, into a fresco-like backdrop that fades into the lines of Mossadeq's head. Placed against the Iranian flag, Mossadeq is enveloped by the symbol of nationalism. Beside the flag is an unmarked map, representing Iran's struggle to attain control over its oil—a struggle Mossadeq is understood to represent, both nationally and internationally. In 1952, when this painting was produced, Mohasses was 21 years old and among many young intellectuals and emerging artists who believed in the vision of democracy and national sovereignty for which Mossadeq stood. Where Mossadeq's face appears to be receiving sun, the background made up of the map and flag are muted in their color. The oil painting suppresses the full tonality of oil paint, resulting in a faded flag and blue-gray topographic surface. Both the muted color and lack of dimensionality produce an uncertain and anxious experience, even if also tinged with possibility. While Mossadeq is himself illuminated in the painting, the use of collage results in a more complicated representation of his heroism. Just as both the flag and topography of Iran are fragmented by the edge of the canvas suggesting an excess to the dimensions of the canvas. Mossadeq's portrait carries a sense of temporal imminence, of a project not yet completed, which is further amplified by

the subject's gaze. Rather than totally mythologizing him as others did in this historical moment, or continue to do so in the present, the painting emplaces Mossadegh in a shifting idea of what he's responsive to and what he's responsible for.

At first glance, the portrait is radically different from Mohasses's later works; but as I will explain, it can be read as an early example of his signature movement between figuration and abstraction. While the portrait is self-reflexively a representational form, the topographic backdrop lacks a horizon-line and replicates an abstraction of the land already found in printed maps of state territories. The color of Mossadegh's face is almost the same as the depiction of land, producing the effect of his face standing out and fading into the shadowed territories behind him. The use of collage is therefore not only an amalgamation of shapes and real elements (such as the rendering of Mossadegh's face that might be featured in a newspaper), but also, a mark of Mohasses's various aesthetic inspirations, between naturalism, figuration, abstraction, and cubism. Although Mohasses's portrait of Mossadegh is far from the stylized geometric lines of cubist painting, the way in which land is abstracted here also recalls Jalil Ziapour's *Khoroos Jangi*⁸⁷ (The Fighting Rooster), which served as the iconic cover for the short-lived but influential avant-garde journal by the same name (see Fig. 4). While on the surface Mohasses's portrait of Mossadegh is stylistically quite different from Ziapour's fighting rooster, these images converge in their shared engagement with the stakes and circumstances of representing heroes. Where Ziapour places the rooster's symbolic power in place of visual representation of a known hero, Mohasses interrogates the role of Mossadegh's place in Iranian society by placing him against the abstracted pressures of land and country that looms in the background.

Prior to his departure to Rome for his formal studies, Mohasses was part of *Anjuman-e Khoroos Jangi* (The Fighting Rooster Association, also commonly referred to as the "Fighting Rooster Surrealists"⁸⁸). As an editor of the avant-garde journal, Mohasses engaged in intellectual conversations about aesthetic styles that broke from the conventions of Persian neo-classical forms, as well as political visions that critiqued the outdated authoritarianism of the monarchy. Each issue had an essay on painting, surrealism, and other aesthetic styles, establishing not only the significance of visual forms on their own terms, but also a practice of modern art criticism in Iranian art circles⁸⁹. In 1948, Ziapour, the group's founding member, published an artistic manifesto *Refutation of the Theories of Past and Contemporary Ideologies from Primitive to Surrealism*⁹⁰, which circulated in journals and newspapers and established the artist's convictions around the need for painting to cultivate its own critical tools and forms outside of language and representational events. Not yet translated from Persian to English, the

⁸⁷ The journal was among the first of its kind that gave a platform for emerging modernists in Iran. Members of *Anjuman-e Khoroos Jangi* were from the beginning interested in a modernism that was at once global and based on Iranian heritage. Jalil Ziapour and other members of the association were leading representatives of cubism in Iran, which arose in the 1940s and offered a vocabulary and aesthetic form to approach Iranian traditions outside the representational or symbolic forms typically assumed in orientalist painting styles.

⁸⁸ Hassan Mir-Abedini, *A Hundred Years of Story Writing in Iran (Sad sal dāstān nevisi)*, vol.1 (Tehran: Cheshmeh, 1998), 192.

⁸⁹ Aida Foroutan. "Why the Fighting Cock?" The Significance of the Imagery of the Khorus Jangi and Its Manifesto "The Slaughterer of the Nightingale," *Iran Namag*, Volume 1, Number 1 (Spring 2016), XXVIII-XLIX.

⁹⁰ Jalil Ziapour, *Theory-e jadid-e ziapour dar naqashi, loqv-e nazarba-ye makateb-e gozashte va moaser az primitif ta surrealism* [Refutation of the Theories of Past and Contemporary Ideologies from Primitive to Surrealism] accessed July 19, 2021, http://www.ziapour.com/wp-content/uploads/2008/12/jalil_ziapour_theory.pdf. This essay has not been translated and all translations unless specified are my own.

manifesto formulates the necessity of painting to abandon purely figurative or naturalistic styles and to instead embrace anti-representational and abstract forms. The manifesto makes continuous reference to “parasites” (the text uses the Latin term rather than the Persian *angul*) most specifically identified as natural and unnatural images, or descriptive events that serve as limiting indexical images that plague various schools and styles of painting. These “parasitical” invasions are identified as either mimetic representations of the natural world, or a form of art whose purpose is meant to provide a mimetic visualization of a narrative text that precedes it. Ziapour draws this limitation to painting’s originary emergence as an art form that supplemented text in order to illuminate a historical manuscript. Painting must therefore depart from these clutches and create the conditions of its possibility through the specific technical qualities of the medium itself, including: “color, design, form and composition.”⁹¹ The parasitical Ziapour refers to is both tied to the figural representations of the natural world as well as the limiting structures of language that link form to meaning in a news-like matter. These forms of representation, Ziapour argues, should be destroyed in order for painting to convey the depth and possibility of the medium. “Each line and each color, each form and each composition, are themselves masters of their own beginning, proclamation, and end, and consequently, the theme. Hence, any form, image, or theme that is inclined towards familiar nature violates the art of painting.”⁹² Rather than functioning as supplemental images to an always external parasitical language, Ziapour argues for painting’s turn inwards. These lines evince a desire to break free from dominant forms in which language and images are conveyed, particularly the structure which deprioritized the latter. Ziapour cautions against the convention in Iranian art history that binds painting to the task of mythology and instead calls for an artmaking, and as a result, a form of reading that allows the latent expressions of abstract forms to produce their own structures of creating, seeing, and feeling.

The manifesto concludes with a dictum that emphasizes the necessity of creating art that speaks to the social and political structures of the present, drawing a connection between the work of art and social mobilization. Ziapour concludes:

It should be noted that: new creative techniques do not emerge without the needs of the environment; And no request can ever be ahead of the request of its time; Because each request has a cause; and naturally the cause of each request is borne of the necessities in the society. Therefore, my theory is not and cannot be outside the demands of our present time.

Ziapour’s temporal dimension is significant to his theory because it advocates for aesthetic abstraction that cultivates the imminent techniques of painting as a creative medium rather than as a representational supplement to textual content. According to Ziapour, this focus on technique allows the painter to create forms that are both grounded in the needs of the moment without prescribing its role beforehand. The tendency towards abstraction is therefore not in the service of following an international modernist trend but locating the stakes and possibilities of cultivating the practice of painting to produce formally autonomous works within the Iranian context within a long legacy of painting in Iran⁹³ along with the urgency of organizing political worlds in the present.

With critical interventions like the one discussed above, members of the Fighting Rooster including artists from a variety of disciplines, poets, painters, writers and critics, came together to

⁹¹ Ziapour, 10.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ In another essay within the journal, Ziapour drew connections between the influence of Persian miniature painting on European artists establishing the legacy of Iranian abstraction and figuration within a chronology of art history that does not find its roots in Europe.

debate and discuss the pressing concerns of the field of aesthetics. Departing from previous conventions in artmaking wherein artists would act individually or independently, or depend on aristocratic patronage, members of the Fighting Rooster created a group and a platform in which artists could debate the stakes of contemporary aesthetics and work collaboratively in their creative production. Interestingly, Ziapour's assertion that cultivating the practice and criticism of painting beyond a representation of manuscripts, was less about removing outside sources than it was about generating a practice and reading of aesthetics on its own terms. While both journal and Fighting Rooster Association were short-lived because of government pressure⁹⁴, their lasting impact on discourses of Iranian modernism and Iranian art history is undeniable. For Mohasses, his time as an editor and contributor of the Fighting Rooster association altered his understanding of aesthetic mediums, figural abstraction, and deepened in him a critical perspective on painting beyond its function as a medium in the service of representing heroic figures.



Fig. 4 Jalil Ziapour, Image of *Khoros Jangi* cover, 1949, Ink on paper.

Drawn in black and white and featured on each journal issue, the visual figuration of the rooster prefigured the manifesto and asserted the stakes of a new movement in painting that would

⁹⁴ When the Fighting Rooster was shut down by the government, Ziapoor started another magazine called *Kavir*, "The Desert," until that too was shut down and Ziapour went to start another short-lived magazine that returned to the symbolism of the rooster, entitled *Panje Khorus* "The Cock's Claw." After Ziapour had left the Fighting Rooster, he was succeeded by poet Hushang Irani, Bahman Mohasses, and Sohrab Sepehri. See: Bahman Mohasses, ed., *Panje Khorus* (1953).

be distinguished from what had already taken place in surrealist and modernist writing⁹⁵. Ziapour's rooster serves as a visual schema for the project of Iranian cubism and political mobility. The rooster carries multiple meanings, invoking the coming of Bahman in ancient Zoroastrian spiritual traditions, awakening Muslims for the act of prayer in Islamic symbolism, and serving as the soul of inspiration in Persian mystical writings.⁹⁶ Critics have also noted its connection to the Gallic cock—a symbol of French revolutionary struggle and a powerful leitmotif within Picasso's oeuvre,⁹⁷ multiple contexts which allow Ziapour's Fighting Rooster to traverse both national and international cubist vocabularies. The lines and curves of the rooster's figure serve as the central imagery of the frame, while at the same dividing the pictorial surface and rendering a deconstructed backdrop. The rooster stands with an aggressive posture, which evokes a sense of motion and gives the icon a three-dimensional life. The image is framed, which as Katrin Nahidi suggests, serves as a structural reference to Iranian miniature painting, establishing a connection between text and image,⁹⁸ without overdetermining the visual by the textual. This connection is further amplified with the caption *Khoroos Jangi* and is further accentuated by the journal's publication of critical and literary texts. Specifically, Ziapour's image of Khoroos Jangi is accompanied by a poem by the modernist poet Nima Yushij entitled "Az shahr-e sobh" ("About the city of the morning"), which poetically narrates the journey of a rooster accompanying a caravan through Iran. The poem follows the rhythm of the rooster's crow, beginning with the sound "cock-a-doodle-doo" (*ghooghbooli-ghoo*) that reemerges three other times throughout. Yushij's poem presents the reader with a silent and empty village awakened by the rooster's puncturing crow. The poem's emphasis on the sound of the rooster's crow demands the words on the page to be read orally, transforming the words into a call. The recurrence of the rooster's crow serves as an invitation for readers to join the caravan and begin a new day, emphasizing the revolutionary impulse of the rooster.

Drawing a connection between Yushij's poem and Ziapour's painting creates an affinity between both forms that builds from a genealogy of working between text and image without diluting the power of either form. What is more, both poetic narrative and visual rendering of the rooster are grounded in a specific historical context when there was increasing critique of the monarchy and each form works to summon the power of collective action as an alternative path from the authoritative force of the royal regime. For Ziapour and other members of the association, the rooster symbolized a wakeful and protective spiritual being. At the same time, Ziapour explained that its designation as a *fighting* rooster was because "we chose a fighting rooster, who represents beauty and also fights for our existence, because no thought can be established without a great effort and fight." There is therefore a political vitality espoused by the rooster that is carried over from its mythological past⁹⁹ into the struggles of the contemporary society from which it was constructed.

⁹⁵ Aida Foroutan. "Why the Fighting Cock?" The Significance of the Imagery of the Khorus Jangi and Its Manifesto "The Slaughterer of the Nightingale," *Iran Namag*, Volume 1, Number 1 (Spring 2016), XXVIII-XLIX.

⁹⁶ Ibid, 7.

⁹⁷ Fereshteh Daftari. "Redefining Modernism: Pluralist Art Before the 1979 Revolution." *Iran Modern*. Edited by Fereshteh Daftari and Layla S. Diba. (Yale University Press. Asia Society Museum, 2013), 29.

⁹⁸ Katrin Nahidi. "Cubism in Iran: Jalil Ziapour and the Fighting Rooster Association." (Stedelijk Studies <https://stedelijkstudies.com/journal/cubism-in-iran-jalil-ziapour-and-the-fighting-rooster-association/>).

⁹⁹ For a more detailed analysis of the varying ancient, mystical, mythological, and symbolic significance of the rooster in Iranian traditions, see Aida Foroutan's essay: "Why the Fighting Cock?" The

This political backdrop to the fighting rooster and Mohasses's engagement with the collectivity of the Fighting Rooster Association is significant in our reading of his portrait of Mossadegh as well as the political and art-historical underpinnings of his later corpus. The rooster's centrality in Ziapour's sketch serves as a symbolic index of political action, while at the same time expanding to a transhistorical set of references in revolution and political mobility. By placing Mossadegh at the center of his portrait, Mohasses departs from the curves and lines of Ziapour's sketch to the potent symbolic rendering of Mossadegh, not just as the anthropomorphic embodiment of the rooster, but rather as a central figure whose position and power remains embattled in the broader context of nation and territory. The large scale of Mossadegh resembles that of the rooster in Ziapour's drawing, which foregrounds the power of both figures against the abstracted landscape and establishes a sense of strength and political possibility around the centrifugal subjects. Bringing the portrait of Mossadegh alongside Ziapour's *Khoros Jangi* and the context in which they both emerged allows us to place Mohasses's aesthetic and political engagement within a broader circuit of Iran's avant-garde artists.

Returning to the portrait of Mossadegh, I have remarked upon its oddity as one of the few images in Mohasses's corpus that invites viewers to identify with a central subject even while hinting at the projected power of the subject through disjunctive collage. While at first glance, the portrait of Mossadegh makes use of symbolic registers of political power, the psychic and figural imprint is expressed against a backdrop that is fractured and spilling over. In contrast to this portrait, which retains connection to a specific time and place, Mohasses's later post-coup works are marked by an aesthetics of dislocation and focus on subjects suffering from alienation, violence, and the afflictions produced by systems and humans alike.

Mohasses and the Conflicting Modernisms of the 60s

What does it mean to construct a narrative of an artist who resisted the constraints of categorical limitations of both local Iranian and western art historical canons? To write on Bahman Mohasses is to grapple with this question and to conduct a sort of detective work that must contend with a scattered timeline, missing details about his works, and a corpus largely destroyed or hidden in private collections. This chapter attempts to work with the remains Mohasses has left, not to construct a conclusive narrative of his work, but rather to open onto the aesthetic, political, and psychic questions his works present to the viewer. I contend with the regime of belatedness that plagues discussions of non-western artists and also the language of derivativeness that produces a range of figures bound to their European source: an Iranian Kafka (Sadeq Hedayat) or an Iranian Bacon/Picasso (Bahman Mohasses), what Caroline Jones labels "predicated internationalism,"¹⁰⁰ which reinscribes cultural hierarchy and produces a compulsory self-exotification from artists considered on the "global margins." This ultimately requires the non-western artist to enter the global canon only on the terms of the west and furthermore reduces the non-western artist to an allegorical representation of the nation. It also follows an additive model of canon-formation rather than allowing the originary style of artists to shift the terms through which we understand the canon altogether. Bahman Mohasses is an artist who allows us to think beyond the reductive terms of modernist narratives which place Europe at the center and the narratives of belatedness that come with emerging national modernisms of the 20th century. I am not interested in dismissing the webs of influence in Mohasses's work but rather in pointing to the way these descriptions center the western artist in the

Significance of the Imagery of the Khoros Jangi and Its Manifesto "The Slaughterer of the Nightingale," published in 2016 in *Iran Namag*.

¹⁰⁰ Caroline Jones. *The Global Work of Art: World's Fairs, Biennials, and the Aesthetics of Experience*. (University of Chicago Press, 2017).

work of the non-western, either entirely removing the non-western artist from the category of the global, with which Mohasses was invested in contending, or dismissing local conditions, whether political or aesthetic in forming the artist's work. In fact, Mohasses's relationship to the global canon is formed by a desire to join its aesthetic parameters, declaring "I conceive of art like the ancients, or perhaps like Bruegel, Goya, Picasso, and Matisse of our era. Not as an outlet for my personal miseries."¹⁰¹ Mohasses rejects artmaking based on national affiliation, personal psychology or conformity to style, and instead prioritizes a creative practice that speaks to its own time, creating new mythologies and destroying the conventions that limit art and politics.

The 50s were an important period for the development of aesthetic trends and reflected departures from past styles in Iranian art forms with a curiosity about impressionism and cubism to experiments in surrealism and abstraction. And still, figurative painting was the most prevalent method during this period and only until the 60s could one justifiably speak of "schools" of modern Persian painting.¹⁰² It was clear from the beginning that while Mohasses's work was popular among both Iranian and international collectors, his aesthetic production did not reflect the trends of developing schools, which made his work difficult to place within art-historical narratives. Mohasses was a contemporary of the nationally-recognized Saqqakhaneh modern arts movement a label that, according to Yarshater, was coined by art critic Karim Emami in 1963 following Tehran's third international arts biennale in 1962 to refer to the work of artists who incorporated Shi'a iconography and found objects in their visual production.¹⁰³ *Saqqakhaneh* itself refers to the public drinking fountains constructed around Iranian towns and cities in memory of seventh-century Shi'a martyrs denied water in Karbala. The *Saqqakhaneh* reference therefore activated the memory of the past as a vital and pertinent image within Iran's modernist movement, establishing a mytho-historical legacy tied to ancient traditions and national prowess. The term was used to describe the works of artists from the 50s and 60s who channeled traditional subjects and motifs, while also establishing a highly formal and technical painting and sculpture practice. As Fereshteh Daftari notes in her historiography of Modern Iranian Art, the Saqqakhaneh responded to multiple calls that emerged in the post-coup period: first and foremost critics like Jalal Al-e Ahmad who called artists and intellectual to cultivate an "authentic local" perspective rather than one influenced by the west.¹⁰⁴ The term *Saqqakhaneh* also came at a time when the nation-state was still in search of a national art movement and Queen Farah Pahlavi herself, a patron of the arts, saw the value in the Saqqakhaneh as an Iranian modern art. It was over a decade later when Tehran's Museum of Contemporary (TMoCA) first opened its doors in 1977 (see figure 5) that it presented its first exhibition: "Saqqakhaneh" curated by Kamran Diba. Concurrent with the establishment of Iran's commitment to modern and contemporary art, this founding exhibition served as a further step in canonizing Saqqakhaneh on the world stage as Iran's contribution to global modernism.

¹⁰¹ *Bahman Mohassess. Scultura, Pittura, Grafica, Teatro* (Bahman Mohassess: Sculpture, painting, graphics, theater, 2007). The series of aphorisms was translated from Italian to English by Nicole Trigg.

¹⁰² Ehsan Yarshater. "Contemporary Persian Painting" *Highlights of Persian Art edited by Richard Ettinghausen and Ehsan Yarshater*. (Westview Press, Boulder, CO, 1979), 364.

¹⁰³ Yarshater, 367-368.

¹⁰⁴ Daftari, 29.



Fig 5. Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art

It was clear early on that Mohasses's works (along with other artists like Sohrab Sepehri, Behjat Sadr, and Abdolreza Daryabeigi) were more invested in elements of nature and the afflictions imposed by modernity rather than a revival of traditional forms such as calligraphy, miniature paintings, folkloric crafts and images like those of the Saqqakhaneh school. As Yarshater states:

The bitter protest and eloquent satirical metaphors in Mohasses's deformed shapes and disfigured monsters are unique. Reminiscent of a group of prominent Mexican artists which includes Tamayo, Orozco, and Siqueiros, Mohasses's vehement and vengeful comments seem to have more in common with German expressionism than with the general trend of Persian painting. They provide a welcome case of total contrast and divergence. Somewhere between the total absorption of a Saidi or a Sadr, in an art devoid of any social content, and Mohasses's loud and threatening cry of pain and anguish, lie the majority of the artists, whose works capture the moods of their time or the attitude of their particular circle.¹⁰⁵

Yarshater's comparisons to German expressionism and Mexican artists like Tamayo, Orozco and Siqueiros is interesting because it calls upon a global trend of artists who interrogated the psychic manifestations of their time through figurative-abstraction. His aphorisms, written decades later, retrospectively narrate the various movements between abstraction and figuration, he states: "In 1958, when abstract art was at its peak, I predicted a return to the figurative." His work carries more complexity than these lines suggest, because as he and other artists reflected, the lines between the two movements were not as clear as they seemed. It was perhaps less of an aversion to abstraction than a critical distance from nationally-bound artistic movement that combined elements of cubism and Shi'a motifs. This style is most clearly reflected in the works of the group's early members Hossein Zenderoudi and Faramarz Pilaram. For instance, while Zenderoudi's "Sun and Lion" is figurative insofar as it takes an animate figure as its centering pictorial device, it does so by creating an abstract rendering of popular symbols such as the lion and the sun layered upon talismanic charts engraved with etchings, numbers, and religious texts. Zenderoudi's hybrid movement between figuration and abstraction was therefore interested in repurposing the symbolic imagery of ancient and contemporary

¹⁰⁵ Yarshater, 364.

Iranian visual culture, creating temporal link to previous Iranian art histories, while also laying claim to movements in abstraction at the global level.



Fig 6. Charles Hossein Zenderoudi, *Avant toi et moi, Il y a eu d'autres univers*, 1958. (left)

Fig 7. Charles Hossein Zenderoudi, *Sun and Lion*, 1960. (right)

Pilaram's works explore a similar leaning towards Shi'a popular art as in the works of Zenderoudi, including flat geometric shapes and calligraphy. "Mosques of Isfahan" (Fig. 8) depicts a number of geometric shapes in silver and gold, giving the painting a sense of illumination typically associated with Islamic religious texts. Therefore, as both the works of Zenderoudi and Pilaram show, Saqqakhaneh's experiments in abstraction were bound up in the textual traditions that mediated traditional Iranian art forms, even as their works attempted to unbind and deconstruct these associations.



Fig 8. Faramarz Pilaram, *Mosques of Isfahan*, 1962. Ink, watercolor, gold and silver paint on paper.

While Mohasses was selected to show works alongside these Saqqakhaneh artists at the biennale, an exhibition format that upholds the nation as an organizing container and basis for international comparisons, his works stood out in the way he approached the figural as a style that did not necessarily oppose the abstraction of time and space. Where figuration in its purely representational form as the dominant principle was deemed passé by Iran's art critics, Mohasses was not dissuaded by the critical capacities inherent in disfiguring the figural and combined a distinct and dialectical relationship between figuration and abstraction in his works. His subtle merging of the figural was always marked by an act of abstraction either in environment or in formal configuration, creating a sense of disturbing disjointedness. The content of these works evaded symbolic registers associated with Iran's national lineage like that depicted in Hossein Zenderoudi's "Sun and Lion" (see Fig. 6) and instead created a multiple series of paintings that grappled with nature, violence, and psychic alienation, including his "Head" series of abstracted heads that appear to be stones, the "Fish" series, which includes fish out of water and violence against nature, a number of untitled anthropomorphic figures, which portray minotaurs and bodies with missing limbs, as well as a number of large-scale works that deal with contemporary global politics. By ignoring trends, Mohasses maintained a consistent engagement with his surroundings while resisting the conventions that belong to the official versions of modernity established by biennials and by various governmental regimes.

Encounters with the State

*Sculpture is pure truth.
With sculpture I have always made Anti-Statuary.*

Aphorisms by Bahman Mohasses¹⁰⁶

In the aphorism quoted above, Mohasses wrote in Italian, "In scultura ho sempre fatto Antistatua." Rather than making a claim against the sculptural, Mohasses rejects the statural, invoking the statues' more conventional and enduring qualities. In Italian, the etymological definition of "statua" is "something that stays still and stands upright." Formally, and within the Italian art historical tradition, the statue is bound up in a religious and figural legacy that glorifies the human form, dating back to the Renaissance. Mohasses's rendering of the royal family approaches the form by maintaining the dignity of the human figure without deification. The monumental sculpture serves as an Anti-statural gesture, which rejects creating an eternal mythic statue of a state leader whose legacy was bound up in repetitive acts of violence in his own reign as well as the extended reign of Iranian history (this repetition of state violence is developed in chapter 3).

¹⁰⁶ *Bahman Mohassess. Scultura, Pittura, Grafica, Teatro* (Bahman Mohassess: Sculpture, painting, graphics, theater, 2007). Mohasses included these aphorisms about sculpture in this monograph published in Italian that details his work.



Fig 9. Large-scale sculpture of the royal family (Commissioned by the royal family)

To produce a sculpture that is as Mohasses professes “Anti-statuary” suggests a resistance to the congealing power of state monuments that leave their mark for the forgetfulness of future generations. The state intends to leave an enduring mark of its legacy, a “myth” by way of its meaning as both a story of “endurance” and as a “fiction” that traps the horrors of the state in its commanding force. An analysis of Mohasses’s state-commissioned sculptural productions of the 60s positions his work outside the state’s effort of mythologizing its own power, instead emphasizing other powerful myths (of nature and destruction) that permeate his work. In this section, I discuss Mohasses’s encounters with the Iranian state as an important dialogical engagement marked by the specificity of Iran’s modernist movement, which developed concurrently with national modernization projects permeating educational, architectural¹⁰⁷, and artistic spheres (among others). The cultural and financial investment in modern art festivals and institutions spearheaded by Queen Farah Diba established a relationship between the state and modernist trajectories without overdetermining them as state-created objects. What I mean is that contrary to western art historical narratives where avant-gardism

¹⁰⁷ For a comprehensive analysis of the way in which architecture, as a form of cultural heritage, was integral to the efforts of the Pahlavi regime in both reviving “Persia’s cultural grandeur” and establishing its position as a modern nation, see: Talinn Grigor’s *Building Iran* published by Periscope Publishing in 2009. Grigor traces the historical and stylistic construction of mausoleum projects and the building of monumental structures that began in the late nineteenth century and multiplied until the mid-twentieth century during the rapid stages of modernization in Reza Shah and Mohammad Reza Shah’s reign. These public monuments, museums, historical landmarks, exhibitions, and other associated public processions were meant to both reflect radical secular ideals and national unity, while also establishing Iran’s social and political contribution to the “civilized world.”

is located outside of state institutions, an approach to Iranian art history must expand its vocabulary beyond these assumptions to make room for the coexistence of state-funded opportunities that created modernist artistic gestures that were often out-of-joint with the state's desired perception. Therefore, while Mohasses's work departs from national narratives of Iranian modernism, this did not preclude him from participating in state-organized festivals, exhibitions or from producing works commissioned by the state.

The Queen commissioned Mohasses for multiple pieces in the 60s and 70s including a large-scale sculpture of the royal family¹⁰⁸ (Fig. 9). Although Mohasses accepted the commission, he did so by questioning the conventions of power in the sculptural form, ultimately creating a sculpture that the royal family chose not to display. State-commissioned monuments generally serve the intended purpose of memorializing figures of state power through the enduring materiality of a grandiose stature and features that express strength and divine-like qualities. While size and magnitude are constitutive features of monumental statues, Mohasses's rendering of the royal family is on the upper end of conventions for public statuary, appearing almost monstrous in size (although exact measurements are unclear), which parallels Mohasses's interest in the monstrous which I discuss later in reference to the minotaur. On the other hand, the son's physical presence is represented as a strange figure both large and small altering the viewer's sense of perception in enigmatic ways. The son appears as a child with an adult torso and child-like limbs. His clothes appear too small as though he has outgrown them. And yet, his face is flat, with little emotional expression. The child carries a conjunction of growth patterns, jarring the cycle of biological development, and suggestive of an arrested cycle of reproduction. Mohasses's sculpture is therefore no mere statue of mythological power, it is a form that carries the movements of arrestedness and growth, destruction and mythology, as well as the psychic anxieties of the royal family.

By mobilizing the sculptural medium's emphasis on bodily figuration and perception, Mohasses pushed the form beyond its limits by using it as an opportunity to interrogate the interiority of the royal family, laying bare its psychic fractures. This was most clearly expressed through the bodily posture and facial expressions of the family. Rather than portraying them as strong, regal, and unaffected mythic figures standing outside of time, Mohasses gave the royal family expressive features of worry, fear, and concern, grounding the monument in a temporal moment in which the Shah was losing grip over the nation. By rendering the psychic world of the family, Mohasses puts forth an image of the biological family as internally disintegrated. Rather than placing the shah alongside his family, Mohasses creates a marked distance between the Shah and the queen and their son. Each family member is positioned facing different directions, further marking a fracture within the family. Building from the grandeur of monumental sculptures, the shah is depicted as a large, monstrous figure, situated in stark contrast to the rest of his family. He is seen gripping his coat and looking down. The queen on the other hand is not facing forward but facing the opposite direction; she holds onto her son's shoulders, with an anxious grip for what is yet to come. Mohasses previously expressed his intention to create the image of someone who was worried that her son would not become king. The royal family was of course discontent with this production and the statue was never exhibited. By accepting the state-commission, Mohasses did not accept its prescribed ideals, rather he aimed to produce a sculpture that was a direct confrontation with the state's power, an encounter that assumes a relationship with destruction both prior to the sculpture's creation and after it was shared with the

¹⁰⁸Mitra Farahani. "Fifi Howls from Happiness," Original title: *Fifi az kboshbali zoore mikesbad* Documentary released in 2013.

royal family. When charged with the possibility that the work might be destroyed, Mohasses replied: "You have so many soldiers, if you want to destroy it, ask them to come destroy it."¹⁰⁹

This gesture disrupted the normative expectation of state-commissioned pieces and created a discursive exchange between state and artist. For Mohasses, the decision to produce the sculpture was neither a decision to conform to the paradigms of state monuments in a way that deprioritizes the artist nor was it a rejection of the project altogether. Rather than rethinking subject matter and material, Mohasses produces a monument that bends the form altogether, defying laws of perception and intended qualities of endurance and state mythology. Instead, the temporal abstraction of the monument as a structure that exists throughout time to capture the grandeur of a state figure is upended by drawing into the psychic world of the state figure—a technique that borrows from the expressionistic elements of painting and draws them into sculpture's capacity for figural and facial expression.

Mohasses's aphorism on anti-statuary sculpture should be contextualized within a corpus that approaches the technical facets of the medium to produce an art that is fundamentally opposed to repressive forces of state power.¹¹⁰ That is, they embodied an expressiveness not typically felt or experienced in the static conception of monumental sculptures as enduring, stable, and timeless architectural features of modern landscapes and state-building. Mohammad Reza Shah was famously referred to by his followers in God-like terms like *Shah*, *Saye-ye Khoda* (Shah, Shadow of God), or *Khoda*, *Shah*, *Mihan* (God, Shah, Country). These terms, which circulated during the Shah's reign, were meant to produce a sense of the Shah as both divine and celestial as well as rooted in the nation and country. The Shah, compared to a God-like figure, became an ever-present and eternal facet of the nation and the sculptural monument was only meant to amplify this sense among citizens. Rather than using the sculpture as a means of reproducing the state figure, in this case, the Shah as a god-like or eternal figure, Mohasses's sculpture produces a sublunary human lacking control and fearful of his fate.

Mohasses's participation in state-led arts exhibitions and commissions raises important questions about the relationship between avant-gardism and government-funded programming in the production of 20th-century avant-garde movements outside of European centers. To receive government-funding was not necessarily to promote the itinerary of the state; in fact, at times, many

¹⁰⁹ This information is from a dialogue in Mitra Farahani's film "Fifi Howls from Happiness" written and directed in 2013 between Mohasses and two art collectors/artists, in which Mohasses recounts the Shah's dissatisfaction with the sculpture.

¹¹⁰ Mohasses's attunement to the ways in which destruction permeates both state and humanity produces an imminent destruction within his own works, specifically, a tendency against a culture that preserves paintings and monuments over and against nature. Mohasses's investment in universal history is brought to a limit when confronted with the mythic quality of destruction itself. In an analysis of his works, we see that destruction is not simply a movement that destroys universal history (in the context of cities and monuments destroyed by state violence or an artist whose work is censored or destroyed by the state) but is also an instrument of universal history. Whereas statist mythologies extinguish the excessive or residual elements of disorder with ordering principles, Mohasses's mythology allows societal disorder to take primacy. This attunement informed his reflections on the false mythologies created around artists and paintings, in which he asked, "what sense is there in preserving a painting, when there will be a sky without birds, a sea without fish, and a forest without wild creatures?" He further emphasizes the need to preserve the living creatures around us when he cites Giacometti: "In a fire, between a cat and a Bruegel, I would save the cat." Mohasses's embrace of destruction is also in response to the blind "preservation" that continually repeats the violent mechanisms of state violence against humanity and the natural world.

performances resulted in visual production that were critical of the Shah's regime¹¹¹. The Shiraz Arts Festival (*Jashn-e Honar Shiraz*) presents an example of the ways in which avant-garde art, theater, cinema, and music were deployed to both serve the state's imperative of displaying its own modernist aesthetic production on the international scene, while providing artists from across the world both a platform and funding to put forth a global array of avant-garde aesthetic performances and exhibitions. The festival famously made use of the entire city disrupting traffic and pedestrian movement with theatrical performances¹¹². Bahman Mohasses took part in the inaugural 1967 *Jashn-e Honar* in an exhibition on Contemporary Iranian Art¹¹³ as well as the following year's festival in 1968.¹¹⁴

In a study of the related circumstances that obtain in the career of Turkish artist Cengiz Çekil (1945-2015) and what was ultimately a dual practice of creating installations that exemplify avant-gardism and political critique while also producing figural sculptures in the service of the Turkish state (specifically, the project of memorializing Atatürk), the art historian Sarah-Neel Smith aptly puts forth a need to reconceive art-historical narratives that previously rendered a strict opposition between the commitments of the avant-garde and the nation-state. Çekil, like Mohasses, produced Atatürk sculptures in the wake of the 1980 coup, and the subsequent military junta and aggressive liberalization of the Turkish economy. While previous narratives of his work have disregarded these sculptures, Smith reckons with their significance, as monuments that engage with the political contingencies of the present, while Çekil's installations chart alternative futures. Bringing these multiple temporal and political registers together, Smith writes: "To do so requires us to leave behind conventional art histories' enduring insistence that to be a legitimate artist one must work single-mindedly in the service of an avant-garde agenda. Instead, Çekil's case demands a more holistic consideration of an artistic life involving not just avant-garde critique but also modes of making shaped by the presence of an authoritarian state, artistic strategies of provisionality, and the pressures of survival."¹¹⁵

Cengiz Çekil and Bahman Mohasses are worthy of comparison in part because their artistic practices emerged at a time of heightened authoritarian modernity in Turkey and in Iran, respectively, and because their engagement with state-led commissions produced radically different conceptions of figural sculpture. All the while, their work exemplifies the role of a twentieth century artist who moves both between the international circuit of avant-garde movements and also engaged in state-dominated art worlds. In 2014, Bahman Mohasses was included in an important survey of contemporary Iranian

¹¹¹ Peter Chelkowski's book, *Staging a Revolution: The Art of Persuasion in the Islamic Republic of Iran* published in 1991 highlights the way in which the Shi'a passion play 'Ta'ziyeh was employed as a performative symbolist act against the Shah's regime, even while it also drew on Iran's *longue durée* of ritual and performance in the Shi'a Islamic tradition.

¹¹² These performances were sometimes in tension with religious communities in Iran who felt that *Jashn-e Honar*'s avant-garde impulse was too much of an imposition of European modernism on the traditional values of Iranian religious culture.

¹¹³ Also included in this inaugural exhibition of Contemporary Iranian Art were paintings and sculptures by Reza Abdolnabi, Bahram Alivandi, Mass'oud Arabshahi, Nasser Assar, Shirin Javid-Bakhtiar, Sadeq Barirani, Bahman Boroujeni, Abdorreza Daryabegui, Ahmad Esfandiari, Mohammad Ja'fari, Simin Khakpour, Hossein Mahjoubi, Cyrus Malek, Gholamhossein Nami, Mohsen Olia', Faramarz Pilemar, Abolqassem Sa'idi, Ma'soumeh Seyhoun, Mahmoud Sina, Jazeh Tabataba'i, Sadeq Tabrizi, and Parviz Tanavoli.

¹¹⁴ Shiraz-Persepolis Festival of the Arts 1967-77 Detailed Catalog of Events. Compiled by Sheherazade Afshar Ghotbi in collaboration with Arby Ovanessian.

¹¹⁵ Sarah-Neel Smith, *Cengiz Çekil's Dual Practice: Conceptual Installations and Authoritarian Monuments, 1983-91*. (ArtJournal, Winter 2019), 78-79.

art entitled “Unedited History”¹¹⁶ at the Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris. Fereshteh Daftari remarks upon the exhibition’s exclusion of Saqqakhaneh art works, or pieces, considered to have been part of a state-designation of modernist art. Daftari writes:

“Plausibly, a desire to disregard artists perceived to have been co-opted by the Queen might have been the motivation—in which case all modern art of that period should be ostracized. Maybe the currently flourishing market for these artists’ works (certainly not in existence in the early 1960s) appeared in the eyes of the organizers as complicity with the commodity-based capitalist system. Regarding the first concern, Bahman Mohassess, profusely represented in the Paris exhibition, was just as ‘contaminated’ by official support as any other. He received a number of commissions from the state—for instance, a public statue in front of Tehran’s City Theater and a sculptural portrait for the royal family. In any case, acceptance of support from the Queen in the form of personal or museum acquisitions, exhibitions, or commissions need not be equated with endorsement of the regime.”¹¹⁷

Daftari’s point about the ubiquity of twentieth-century artists in Iran who both led the avant-garde movement while also partaking in the opportunities afforded by a state-funded arts scene is well taken. And yet, perhaps the question is not whether Mohassess took on state commissions, but how his artistic production was affected by the various contexts in which he created work, if at all. Unlike Çekil, Mohassess did not compartmentalize the state-initiated sculptural commissions as a divergent part of his aesthetic corpus. Like his paintings from the same period, Mohassess takes the invitation as an opportunity to interrogate the psychic fractures within the royal family, while also entering the art-historical legacy of the form as a chance to destroy its conventions and produce a work that would bring tension to the state’s expected version of the avant-garde. In an aphoristic statement about the repetitive cyclical nature of repressive state leaders in Iran, Mohassess wrote: “They used to have Aryamehr [Mohammad Reza Shah’s title], they replaced him with Ayatollah. They only knew the A from the alphabet!” His sculptural production rejects any variety of icon worship (*jard parasti*) as he exclaims in Farahani’s documentary. This chosen engagement with the royal family was therefore also a negotiation with the mythologizing tendencies of the state as well as the repetitive structures that replace state leaders with others, reflecting a form devoid of content.

The Convergence of Forms: Creating a Mythology of Affliction

Art is biophilic; the necrophilia of the three monotheistic doctrines has degenerated it.

Bahman Mohassess

“His humans, deformed by stone and pressure as if having just escaped from a vice grip or “posing” before the camera of your eye to preserve their honor. If in each of his exhibitions you encounter a new set of works, if the harmony of colors on his canvases (*pardih*) plays a song before “the ears of your eyes” (as the old man would say), if he has moved the delicacy of technique beyond the grace of Lady Behjat, the reason lies in his incessant search—for a route to escape contemporary painting’s stutter. He has surely heard the quote by Sartre that the “painter” is mute, that he does not draw signs on the canvas (like words) but instead creates a thing.

¹¹⁶ *Unedited History: Séquences du moderne en Iran des années 1960 à nos jours*. Musée d’Art moderne de la Ville de Paris/Arc 16-Mai - 24 août 2014.

¹¹⁷ Fereshteh Daftari, *Persia Reframed*, 38.

Perhaps this is why most of our contemporary painters are grand idols, quiet and made of stone? And why, try and speak with them as you may, they shroud themselves in solemn silence? As if to say: “Our words are on the canvas (*pardih*).” At any rate, under these circumstances, Mohasses’s presence is a blessing. He arrives bearing a cane—perhaps with the intent to repel evil—but he does not manufacture an aura for himself behind a veil (*pardih*) of silence. One can easily sit with him and share a few words about the cold comforts we have discovered.”

Jalal Al-e Ahmad

As discussed in the previous section, Mohasses’s critical engagements with form and power were not just acts of subversion that disrupted the paradigms of art historical convention, nor were they, as Al-e Ahmad points out, merely attempts to draw signs on the canvas. Mohasses’s practice of myth making moved between expressions of figuration and abstraction generating an experience of time and meaning that relinquished pre-determined significations. Drawn to powerful mythic symbols, like the minotaur or the fish, Mohasses produced a series of floating signifiers that offered transhistorical critical engagement with the 20th century’s perpetual atmosphere of destruction. The texture of this destruction is connected to state power and the forces of violence against nature. In the epigraph above, Mohasses uses the term “biophilic” to describe art. I understand this term to be an ontological orientation that reflects the here and now. For Mohasses, biophilia, in contradistinction to religion, is profane and suggests an attunement to the natural world. This biophilic attunement registers dynamics between mastery and non-mastery in nature, destruction as event or banality, and the slow decaying temporality of the destroyed. For Mohasses, nature is deeply intertwined with atmosphere, where destruction of nature becomes a habitual atmospheric condition, permeating the painting’s foreground and background. In this regard, Mohasses’s approach to destruction functions as both a contextual scene and a medium, an approach he emphatically identifies and admires in Picasso’s work¹¹⁸. Gil Anidjar reflects on the shape of destruction as involving a rapport with the world in his reading of Walter Benjamin’s essay “The Destructive Character” (1931). As a motion fundamentally bound up with the world, destruction moves towards the edge of this rapport, even moving outside of it, and has the capacity to destroy politics, while also constituting historical consciousness. By playing with this edge, destruction is profoundly political and apolitical.¹¹⁹ The destructive character serves as a “signal,” while at the same time being a sign that has “no interest in being understood.”¹²⁰ In this section, I discuss the relationship between Mohasses’s expression of the destructive character and his use of destruction as medium. The pervasiveness of destruction in Mohasses’s work, I argue, is entangled with multiple strata of myth-making, both poetic and statist; in my readings of his paintings, I show how Mohasses invokes familiar signs through the figural while at the same time undermining the durability of their meanings through techniques of temporal and spatial abstraction.

Mohasses’s attunement to destruction as a natural occurrence is formed by a secular sensibility, which he places in contradistinction to what he calls the “necrophilia of the three monotheistic religions.” The proclamation that “art is biophilic” assumes a relationship to the natural world in his

¹¹⁸ Bahman Mohasses, “Ensān-e Āltamīrā,” *Bukhara Magazine*, no. 11 (2001).

¹¹⁹ Gil Anidjar. “Becoming Nothing.” *The Immanent Frame: Secularism, Religion, and the Public Sphere*, November 15th, 2017.

¹²⁰ Walter Benjamin. “The Destructive Character.” Text published originally in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* on November 20th, 1931.

work. This biophilic attunement, however, is not an unadulterated celebration of nature or anthropomorphic life in a romantic or realist sense, but rather, an exploration of the boundaries between life and death, and the space of existence that hinges between both realms. Mohasses's sculptural work seeks to destroy the durability of state-created Myth, producing a sculptural sensibility that is also an anti-statist sensibility that permeates his works in painting. The textured paintwork is reminiscent of stone or bronze (see figures 10-19). These stone-like paintings, even more than his sculptures, subject the figural to an act of abscission, leaving the figural as unidentifiable fractured subject without the expressive features of representational figuration. While none of Mohasses's paintings are marked by a specific referential time, the stone-like quality of each figure produces a durable object laden with time. New and old symbols of mythology are brought to the surface of his paintings to express a series of dislocated and untimely scenes. It isn't that Mohasses necessarily reproduces a series of mythic referents, readily available to the cosmopolitan viewer, but rather, that he constructs a mythology by attuning the viewer to the sedimentation of anguish and affliction across both anthropomorphic and biophilic realms.

To inform my reading of Mohasses's paintings as a gesture of building a new mythology, I turn to Talal Asad whose writings on secularism explore the permeability of "religious" and "secular" categories in order to understand the secular mythologies that undergird state projects and secular sensibilities. Integral to a destabilization of these dominant categories is Asad's broadening of conceptions of myth and mythology beyond enlightenment understandings that deem myth a non-rational, unruly, and primitive aspect of culture as well as those understandings of myth as a decorative or fictional mode of rendering events that require unmasking or literalization. Asad traces several mutations in the discourse around myth, one being a transformation of the opposition of the sacred and profane into a new opposition between imagination and reason. To explicate the development of this binary, Asad quotes Marcel Detienne: "exclusionary procedures multiply in the discourse of the science of myths, borne on a vocabulary of scandal that indicts all figures of otherness. Mythology is on the side of the primitive, the inferior races, the peoples of nature, the language of origins, childhood, savagery, madness—always the *other*, as the excluded figure"¹²¹ and shows how Reason was endowed with the task of defining myth in the human imagination. Asad points to a disjuncture between Enlightenment categories of understanding and defining a "science of myths," with the pejorative tendencies of labeling myth as all that which refuses categorization. This disjuncture in the discourse around myth is, in part, what one finds in Mohasses's visual production. Theorists have used the term "mythopoetics" to consider the forms of aesthetic expression that rest on an assemblage of mythic symbols, or practices of myth making. As Kriss Ravetto-Biagioli argues, mythopoetics, "is not a practice where such analogies become forms of representation," but rather, in contrast to the symbolic meaning-making of myth, mythopoetics "calls attention to the disjuncture, doubling, and instability involved in the practice of analogy itself"¹²². Mohasses' corpus is shaped by practices of myth making and narratives of universal history in content and in form. His works critically probe the features of life that often rest outside of these narratives: grotesque figures, parasitical invasions, and decaying natural life. These subjects hinge between the boundaries of life and death and call upon the viewer to dwell in the interstices of mythology and destruction.

Asad's critique of myth relieves our discussion of myth from discourses that label it as religious and irrational, as well as processes of "unmasking" that simply seek to expose the pervasiveness of secular mythologies in modern ways of seeing and understanding the world. I follow Asad's opening

¹²¹ Talal Asad. *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*. (Stanford University Press, 2003), 30.

¹²² Kriss Ravetto-Biagioli. *Mythopoetic Cinema: On the Ruins of European Identity*. (Columbia University Press, 2017), 3.

of myth to suggest that artists like Mohasses turn to myth to employ its power as a recurrent *form* that entails a temporal quality of endurance and a familiarity of signs rather than as a predetermined icon that requires decoding. This understanding of myth is more closely related to the link between recurrent figures and a register of time, where the invocation of mythic figures is not used to create order out of the present but as a means of laying bare the recurrence of figures that disrupt or dislocate the time in which they surface. The use of mythic symbols across Mohasses's work generates a new mode of engagement for the viewer. The symbols on the canvas are not to be made transparent by the rational eye but can enable a place in which creation can meet the place of action, a place of uncertainty, and even at times, unknowability. With this understanding of myth, to create a "mythology" is not only to harden as with the mythologizing force entailed in acts of state monumentalization, but also to consider the techniques of mythology as a form and process in relation to the fragility of the world. To create a new mythology becomes a critical practice, to explore, for Mohasses, what begins in Iran but transpires to an international scene, the petrified landscape produced by state power. What is more, in Mohasses's figural myth-making, nature comes to absorb all of the forces that lay claim to it, as the founding origin story that undergoes cycles of death and generativity. At the same time, Mohasses allows the viewer to engage with nature as an embattled ground, not merely in the modernist binary between technology and nature, but rather, by approaching nature in its hardened state, Mohasses considers the role of nature as a carrier of wounds, afflicted by the world around it, even if the affliction remains invisible.

The paintings discussed in this section are endowed with a sculptural quality of texture and endurance. The presence of human and animal figures in these works is attentive to the relationship between the figural and the mythic. Mohasses invokes mythic forms and art historical conventions across his works, not with the intention of imposing aesthetic unity, but to dislocate settled meanings. The figural, for Mohasses, is therefore always in a dialogic relationship to the structural. By attending to the violent forces of modernity that afflict the environmental and humanist world—whether it be the violence of states, the psychic agony of the modern subject, or destruction of nature, Mohasses situates the typically referential readings of the figural into a contestatory abstracted landscape. While occupied by forces of violence, the following paintings in Mohasses's corpus do not focus on the source of violence, instead they use color and flattened horizon lines to express the immediacy of decay. The paintings I discuss are a series of gouache heads, still life fish paintings, and a number of larger scale works that depict global historical moments. I begin with an analysis of Mohasses's signature sculpture-like faceless heads and then turn to the fish series. What comes to be the central focus of these images are figureless heads devoid of the representational quality of figural painting and subsequently, what is rendered as still-life are a series of tableaux so devoid of life, they carry only the stillness of the dead, flat, image. Again, by bringing tensions to the fore of the image, Mohasses renders the decaying status of the biophilic by way of rendering nature through a necrophilic image.

Many of Mohasses's smaller sculptures defy the force of volume by rendering the figure as slender and enfolding onto itself, as a means of undermining sculptural conventions.¹²³ His paintings, on the other hand, are saturated with other elements of sculpture including gray tones, gouache textures, and bodies and figures that resemble stone. This use of sculptural textures in his paintings attaches a mythic sensibility to his subjects, even while they often represent maniacal or weakened figures. This sculptural drive in his paintings counters the mythologizing force of the sculptural as heroic, while also manipulating the medium's materiality as one that carries a temporal reference either through fracture, decay, and deterioration. Mohasses's use of stone and sculpture in general is of a

¹²³ Mohammadreza Mirzaie, "In Between Homage and Parody: On Relationships Between the Practices of Bahman Mohasses and Marino Marini." (Center for Italian Modern Art, Issue 5, May 2021).

radical malleability, taking its strength and capacity for pressure and using it to push, form, and deconstruct the indexical cohesion of realist painting. In both “Personaggio I” (Fig. 10) and “Elmo Antico” (Fig. 11), Mohasses puts forth figures that are at once anthropomorphic (earthly beings) and extra-terrestrial, dislocating the painting from a sense of place while at the same time generating a feeling of the archaic and the modern. “Personaggio I” (Fig. 10) depicts a faceless head against a flattened horizon line split between black and red. The flattened surface eliminates a sense of distance and depth, instead, both land and sky are given a sense of central immediacy in the face of the viewer. The head is defined by darkened lines that frame the subject, while also illuminating its presence as the central image. In place of an eye, the head is marked by a pinkish gray, evoking a chipped sculpture, rotting from the inside. The rotting feeling, obtained by these uses of color, attribute the faceless head made of stone with a flesh-like human quality. The head’s position on the canvas is suggestive of both rhythms of growth and decay, as it protrudes from the depths of the red backdrop out into the darkened skylight, as though emerging from beneath the ground. Mohasses’s series of faceless heads at once create the sense of a fetus that has yet to develop its limbs and a rotting corpse. This sense of archaic realism is further developed in “Elmo Antico” (Fig. 11), which again figures an illuminated faceless head against a dark backdrop. The black background contains an etching of a thinly traded red suit of armor, an invocation of Greek mythology, particularly red-figure pottery, an important stylistic feature of Greek figural drawing. The etching almost fades into the darkness of the background as it frames the faceless limb that obtrudes from the bottom of the canvas, again as though it extends beyond the canvas. In this painting, there is a meeting of multiple mythologies, although it is the faceless limb, a figure of stunted or spoiled possibility that takes center stage as the recurring mythic structure in this series.



Fig 10. Bahman Mohasses, *Personaggio I*, 1968, Oil on canvas.

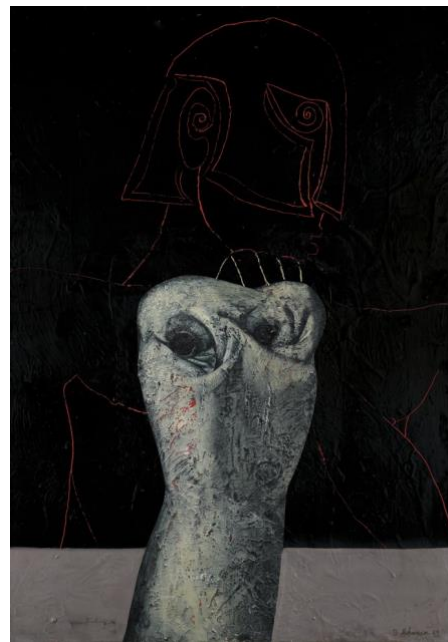


Fig 11. Bahman Mohasses, *Elmo Antico - Ancient Helmet*, 1969, Oil on canvas.

In these faceless heads, Mohasses activates a tendency in destruction to uproot. Walter Benjamin describes this tendency in his short essay “The Destructive Character,” which approaches the question of destruction by crafting an architecture of its movements; according to Benjamin,

destruction's motto is “clear away” while its central activity is “make room.” These movements entail a “clear[ing] away the traces of our own age.” Destruction effaces history and the grounds from which it emerged. Benjamin emphasizes the work of the destructive character as a “rooting out, out of his own condition.” This “rooting out” [*Radizierung*], which comes from the Latin *radix*, refers etymologically to that which penetrates the soil, while also being connected to the word radical, that which forms the root, rooted. The figures in both *Personaggio I* (Fig. 10) and *Elmo Antico* (Fig. 11) produce a sense of radical uprooting as they emerge from the ground. They emerge as though out of nowhere, a ground that has been cleared. At the same time, their emergence is arrested, a figure petrified into existence. In these works, destruction appears as a rhythm that uncannily persists within nature, as imminent to it, rather than merely as an external source of invasion.

The sharp horizon lines of both paintings are reminiscent of landscape painting while radically departing from an idyllic representation of nature, or any detailed composition that renders a story. In Mohasses's landscapes, nature is not depicted in a romantic gesture that recovers what has been lost to the forces of colonial modernity. Mohasses depicts nature as already obstructed, made stale, and it is precisely these unavoidable and ever-present conditions of destruction that interest his work. In yet another example of the way destruction instances itself, Benjamin describes the ways in which the destructive character stages a confrontation with nature: “The destructive character is always blithely at work. It is Nature that dictates his tempo, indirectly at least, for he must forestall her. Otherwise, she will take over the destruction herself.”¹²⁴ While as Anidjar points out, Benjamin denies the creative work of destruction, there is a competing mechanics described between nature and destruction, where Benjamin posits destruction as male and nature as female. At the same time, destruction must mimic and obstruct the tempo of nature, for it is “she [nature] that dictates his tempo.” In this description, the opposition between nature and destruction becomes more permeable, where destruction does not only operate on nature, but through it, as a medium. By understanding destruction as a medium, we can consider the way in which Mohasses opens up the forces of destruction in his work, and how it comes to permeate his use of mythic symbols, lines and color, and time and place.

Each painting is divided into two-tone color blocked sections that make up a single surface; neither section is marked with distinguishing details to indicate a shift between ground and atmosphere. As one can note in *Personaggio I* (Fig. 10), the painting is divided into deep red tones that abruptly split into a dark black gray. This stark background appears as a cosmic backdrop to the mythic qualities of nature and nature as myth. The stone-like protrusion recalls the excavation of a fossil, but it is not merely a stone marked by the past, but what Didi-Huberman identifies in the art history of Aby Warburg, as a residue accompanied by a “dream wish,” in such a way that “a buried fragment, a *fossil*, takes on the tensions proper to the *future*.”¹²⁵ *Elmo Antico* (Fig. 11) presents a curious arrangement of time with the faceless head whose time is left ambiguous and the terracotta trace of Greek figural drawing in the black backdrop. These converging figures indicate what Freud calls the “indestructible” nature of unconscious material, drawing the time of each image into a time of immediacy. As Warburg attempts to archive the figural image, it is with a recognition of the failure of hermeneutic symbols. As Didi-Huberman discusses, the emphasis on plastic figuration “does not mean that an abstract idea has found a good visual metaphor or a ‘literary image.’ It means, rather, that a certain quantity of energy has become embodied through the sedimentation of time, has become *fossilized*, and yet has preserved all its power of movement, of *transforming itself*.”¹²⁶ Didi-Huberman's meditation on temporal

¹²⁴ Walter Benjamin. ‘The Destructive Character’ (1931), trans. Edmund Jephcott, in *Selected Writing: Volume 2*, 541-542.

¹²⁵ Georges Didi-Huberman. *The Surviving Image: Phantoms of Time and Time of Phantoms: Aby Warburg's History of Art*. (The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2017), 230.

¹²⁶ Ibid, Pg 30.

and energetic aspects of fossilization and the movement it preserves illuminates Mohasses's stylistic, which uses paint to construct visual images that recall the fossilized structures of sculpture, while at the same time emphasizing trace, residue, and eruption. These psychic elements give the structures of fossilization a capacity to move and speak across times.

The energetic impulse of fossilization is further registered in paintings from the fish series, in which destruction is not only an invading force from the outside but presented through an internal expression of decay. Mohasses carries over his tendency towards sculpture in these paintings, which results in a series of works with stone-like color and textural markings. Not exactly part of the fish series, but almost as a prelude, Mohasses's *Il Pescatore* (Fig. 13) depicts an anonymized shapeless figure that punctures a fish in the water with a metal rod until its death. The white semi-abstract figure is reminiscent of the shapes and forms used by British sculptor Henry Moore to render the body. The figure is abstracted, where you can make out its various body parts, but they are rendered only as simplified shapes rather than with any distinguishable features. The figure is oversized with a circular head, as though the body is growing at a different pace than the figure's limbs and head. The face is marked by two dark dots and a thin line that runs across it as the only expressive features that leave a visible impression on the face. The figure's legs are trapped in a sea of water, but rather than portray the legs in water through an appearance of depth, the water is depicted as a slit through which the figure's legs mysteriously slip. The lighting in the painting also adds to the feeling that was once ordinary or familiar in this scene is made strange, not only in the obvious depiction of the anthropomorphic-other-worldly figure, but also in the techniques used to render surface, depth, light, and color. The coloration of the water is a deep dark blue while the sky too is darkened suggesting that this is a nighttime scene. Mohasses plays with color by producing light in a context in which it would otherwise not exist; the figure's legs are made transparent in the otherwise abyssal quality of the water, rattling our sense of perception, and disorienting our sense of time. The violent scene is depicted against a strange subterranean backdrop divided into a cracked purple sky and the faded blue of the water; both sections appear to have undergone intense brush strokes rendering the marks of the paintbrush as texture but also as a stultified atmosphere. The surface of the painting is entirely flat, further amplifying the strange depiction of the central figure. The scale is also an important feature of how the figure appears in the painting; while the figure's core appears to have grown larger than the rest of its body, its legs and arms remain small. The infantile straw-like limbs extend out of the overgrown body, reflecting a disjointed temporality, of a time both stalled and hastened. Much like the son in the statue of the royal family discussed earlier, the lines that shape the figure are made up of pathetic little tracings, with no definition, expressive features, or bodily detail. Therefore, while the figure functions as a disturbing force of automatized violence, it is also a parody of itself. Its legs are depicted as fragile limbs overwhelmed by an amorphous yet domineering body. While this figure lacks any representational features that might link it to a human figure, the shape of the figure's core recalls the oversized frame of Mohammad Reza Shah, which, like this figure, was both excessive in scale and also expressive of weakness (see Fig. 9). In between the figure's dainty legs, we see a penis protruding outward towards the fish, which signifies the unidentifiable figure as gendered. And yet, while the penis is directed towards the dying fish, its presence only adds to the figure's strangeness. Set against the overwhelming size of the figure's overgrown body, the penis dangles out appearing small and infantile.



Fig 13. Bahman Mohasses, *Il Pescatore*, 1964.

Il Pescatore (Fig. 13) is an important image because it places the anonymized creature, which reappears in *The Minotaur Scares the Good People* (Fig. 17), as an intervening yet invisible force in the deadened fish that come about in the fish series, therefore acting as a thread between the various series discussed here. The violent destruction of *Il Pescatore* is rendered invisible in the still life paintings. Instead, these paintings foreground psychic disturbance within the style of the still life, by emphasizing the inanimacy of what is typically animate. Turning now to the perishing and anesthetic fish in the fish series, I ask: Are these the same fish? How could they be? The following still life paintings (Fig. 14, 15, 16) are carefully designed; the fish in each painting are unmarked by visible wounds as though their lifelessness is tied from an atmospheric condition. Each fish is left limp and lifeless on the canvas; Figure 14 shows two fish, one lying on its back, and the other whose head is colored by a blood red beneath the stone-like gray, appearing as an internal affliction. The paradox of the still life is in Mohasses's foregrounding of death, or as animate subjects turned inanimate, made devoid of life, and concretized as motionless and inanimate. It is as though Mohasses uses the style to bring the dead subject to the surface.





Fig 14. Bahman Mohasses, *Untitled*, 1968, Oil on cardboard.

Fig 15. Bahman Mohasses, *Untitled*, 1969, Oil on fiberboard.

Fig 16. Bahman Mohasses, *Still life*, 1969, Oil on canvas.

In these paintings, contrary to “Il Pescatore” (Fig. 13), we are left with the after-effects of wounding, the residue, and the remains, and yet, rather than framing it as traumatic event or as a response to a wounding event, Mohasses centers the dead or dying fish as an ordinary element of the landscape. A fish out of water, ordinarily signifying a moment of distress, a flinching moment of heightened movement crying for what sustains life, becomes a banality of everyday existence.

Mythologies of Destruction

Every ‘I Believe’ is better than ‘I Don’t Believe,’ except where ‘I Don’t Believe’ is a credo (an ‘I Believe’).

Aphorisms by Bahman Mohasses

To conclude, I discuss Mohasses’s invocation of universal history as a multi-temporal experience that both reflects and refracts the political commitments across perpetual experiences of state violence. I draw on a set of large-scale paintings that exemplify moments of direct engagement with global historical events, one that specifically indexes the Civil Rights Movement in the US and another historically abstracted painting that produces an atmospheric nightmare of violence and collective despair. First, I begin with Mohasses’s preoccupation with the minotaur as a figure of Greek mythology embodied by a monstrous form with a reputation for violence and destruction. The invocation of figures who embodied this state of being in flux builds from Picasso’s gravitation towards classical mythological figures, which Mohasses describes as simultaneous destruction and preservation of the human form: he writes, “Picasso chose figures of classical mythology who were in a constant state of metamorphosis: minotaurs, centaurs, scythians, and fauns.”¹²⁷ The figure of the minotaur recurs across Mohasses’s paintings and sculptures, as well as in the broader circuit of surrealist and psychoanalytic circles during the early 20th century. As Plutarch writes in the “Life of Theseus,” the minotaur is “A mingled form and hybrid birth of monstrous shape.... Two different natures, man and bull, were joined in him.” However, as I noted earlier, Mohasses did not invoke familiar symbolic referents with the intent of entering a representational code of art historical referents, but rather draws on the mythic endurance of the minotaur to invoke a long history of authoritarianism,

¹²⁷ Bahman Mohasses, “Ensān-e Āltamirā,” *Bukhara Magazine*, no. 11 (2001): 65-66.

a figure that is itself in flux. The minotaur's figural composition as a hybrid human-monster allows the viewer to reflect on power, authority, and violence as a threat both immediate and in-flux. By rendering these mythological figures in an active *scene* of violence, expressed through metamorphosis or violent encounter, the minotaur functions not only as a symbol with a predetermined meaning but comes to live in a radical temporality in which all history is present.

Georges Canguilhem writes that “the existence of monsters calls into question the capacity of life to teach us order.”¹²⁸ The monster is not only a force of power but a figure that is itself possessed. The monstrosity of the recurring figure of the minotaur across Mohasses's work is interested in this aberration of the human form, as well as the ways in which monstrosity constitutes an annihilation of the limits of form, by expanding beyond its normative order. In *The Minotaur Scares the Good People* (Fig. 17) Mohasses depicts a minotaur facing a group of “people” marked by a sense of fear. Mohasses expresses fear in the people's faces by portraying mouths open so wide they almost take up the entire head appearing as black circles. This curious emphasis on the expanded abyss-like mouth renders the petrification of the scene through a simplified technique of abstraction rather than through precise facial features. The bodies are animated by a sense of movement with various limbs facing multiple directions, giving the viewer a sense of a temporality of crisis in which direction is altogether disordered. The sense of urgency is amplified with the motion depicted in the scene by figures running away and what appears to be a mother holding an infant. Bodies are colored in white/gray, yellow, and red as opposed to the bluish-gray hue of the minotaur. There is undoubtedly an encounter between the minotaur and the fearful people on the other side, but what to make of their aesthetic similarity? The people are not depicted as figurally realist or representationally whole but as limbless and truncated bodies just as the minotaur is depicted in morphologically expanded sense.



Fig 17. Bahman Mohasses, *The Minotaur Scares the Good People*, Oil on canvas, 1966.

Fig 18. Bahman Mohasses, *Minotauro Sulla Riva Del Mare*, Oil on canvas, 1977.

As I have argued, destruction for Mohasses served as a medium while also expressing the perpetual crises of his time. In an essay entitled “The Human Altamira,” (*Ensan-e Altamira*) Mohasses examines Picasso's relationship to time and the way in which his art generates a mirror unto the pervasive violence of the 20th century.¹²⁹ According to Mohasses, Picasso used “destruction” (*kharab kardan*) as his central medium and method through which to explore the “here and now” (*hal ast va*

¹²⁸ Georges Canguilhem. *Knowledge of Life*, Fordham University Press, 2008. ProQuest Ebook Central, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/berkeley-ebooks/detail.action?docID=3239506>.

¹²⁹ Bahman Mohassess, “Ensan-e Āltamīrā,” *Bukhara Magazīne*, no. 11 (2001): 63-64. All translations of this text are my own.

dar hamin ja) of the contemporary moment. In describing Picasso, Mohasses writes: “Rebellious individual, whose social interactions, private life, and artistic purpose involved one thing: to destroy.”¹³⁰ But destruction, as Mohasses conceives of it, is not unilaterally imposed; rather it involves a process of negation that motivated 20th-century modernists. For Mohasses, Picasso’s destructive tendency is also an act of creation: “Picasso, the destroyer and creator.” Through this shared understanding of destruction, both Picasso and Mohasses produced figures in their works that express both dream and nightmare. Mohasses reflects on Picasso’s rendering of the human form and the way in which enacts this creative destruction, “Picasso disfigured the image of the human figure, he tore it apart, but he did not eliminate it.”¹³¹ This act of destruction mirrored an act of abstraction, an abstraction that rendered the critical and psychic realities of the moment. As Mohasses expressed, this was necessary because “reality was never real enough.”¹³² This resulted in figures whose bodies were formed by excesses or death. Bodies that were of another world but were indeed closer to the psychic realities of the present than any “realist” depiction. In this regard, if we are to locate the affinities of Mohasses’s work with Picasso’s, it would not be because of a shared set of symbolic referents but because of a shared vision towards the otherworldly, and the way in which it reveals the violence and destruction that characterized local and global contexts, from the Spanish Civil War, the 1953 coup, to the killing of Martin Luther King and so on.



Fig 19. Bahman Mohasses, *Requiem Omnibus (Death of Martin Luther King)*, Oil on canvas, 1968.

In *Requiem Omnibus (Death of Martin Luther King)*, Mohasses portrays the body of the late Martin Luther King Jr. on the ground with another smaller-framed figure bent over him in mourning. As is typical in his paintings, this depiction of MLK emphasizes the human form. The body defies conventional proportion and contains deliberate asymmetries, with an emphasis on bones and limbs that protrude outwards or appear to have overgrown from their expected scale. The shape of the clenched fist recalls Picasso’s *Guernica* (see Fig. 20), imbuing this scene with the political resonances that informed Picasso’s work, amplifying the sense of violence across transhistorical moments with the calls of the present. While *Guernica* includes simple tracings to mark its subject’s facial expressions, *Requiem Omnibus* further removes any facial features, emphasizing the body and its limbs. Through the legs, feet, hands, and arms, rather than the face as the focal point of expression, Mohasses effectively conveys the racial violence of this moment. The painting’s gray hues, which are ingrained by the sculptural texture of his paintings I previously discussed, depart from Picasso’s clear demarcation of

¹³⁰ Ibid, 64.

¹³¹ Ibid, 65.

¹³² Ibid, 66.

black, white and forms of gray that appear as shadows. In describing the significance of *Guernica*, Mohasses writes, “If *Guernica* has remained a personal nightmare for Picasso, it would never have been created, and it would never have become the mythic painting of our time.”¹³³ What Mohasses describes here is an impulse to render the collective nightmare, and *Requiem Omnibus* responds to this by placing the assassination of Martin Luther King, and the struggle of the Civil Rights Movement, within a thread of world historical moments as well as transnational art historical lineages.



Fig 20. Pablo Picasso, *Guernica*, Oil on canvas, 1937.

Mohasses saw himself as creating works within a legacy of global modernists and aimed to cultivate a narrative of himself and his work that was neither sedimented nor structured like the monumental images of the state. All the while, his tendency towards destruction was, as the above aphorism muses, a credo, which carried within it a drive towards critical art that resisted becoming usurped by state narratives. When writing his will, Mohasses made sure that none of his remaining works would be gifted to state institutions whether Italian or Iranian. While the state and status of his remaining works is left unclear, Mohasses left his anti-statist politics vehemently clear. Mohasses's corpus represents a radical tension between a desire to create and be a part of history while at the same time carrying a proclivity towards destruction. And while Mohasses revealed that he destroyed many of his pieces in Mitra Farahani's documentary about him, some of these supposedly destroyed pieces were later found and sold in an auction in March 2021, proving to be very much alive and intact. This falsity subverts the intentions of Farahani's documentary, and more importantly reveals that even beyond a material destruction, Mohasses created a narrative ambiguity, one that did not lend itself to a simple recovery in either national or art historical narratives. Mohasses's material and embodied destruction is fundamentally a political and a historical act that defies the reductive categories of canon-formation as well as those of state ideology. This confrontation with the state's violent motor of destruction is what propels Mohasses to respond with his own; when asked what he thought would come of his remaining pieces, he replied: “I don't think about it. If they're destroyed, shattered, stolen, or whatever, it's a victory of the ignorance of these times.”

Returning to the haunting image of Mossadegh (see Fig. 3) that began my reflections in this chapter, I note that while the representational figuration of Mossadegh seems like an aberration in the context of his later works, the viewer can note the use of collage as a structure that could render the force and encounter between political, national, and the natural worlds. The abstracted flag and landscape in which Mossadegh is set against registers a movement between figuration and abstraction as a channel through which to contend with the unknown ends of the political moment. For Mohasses, the figure of Mossadegh served as a focal point of the forestalled political possibilities of democracy in Iran. The disruptive force of the coup, encroaching through forces both internal and external,

¹³³ Ibid, 69.

produced an atmosphere that laid bare the structures of destruction that permeated multiple strata. Destruction is ossified through an act of congealing the destroyed through sculptural textures, generating a channel for Mohasses to examine the barren and thwarted landscape that it produced. In my examination of Mohasses's aesthetic practice of figural abstraction, I have engaged the political, historical, and psychic disturbance of the coup as a series of after-effects that produced an afflicted ground through which myth-making and destruction are revealed as constituent mediums. By approaching the structural and formal shape of destruction as a recurring experience rather than solely through the perspective of founding trauma, Mohasses' corpus perceives the way in which violence and destruction of the 20th century (the coup being only one example) operate in a mediumistic capacity as a way that both shapes the world and changes the way we move through it.

Chapter 3: Untimely Mediums: Temporalities of the Uncanny in the Iranian New Wave

After the coup, the Shah's forces quickly aimed to solidify the state's power over "disruptive" political factions that had taken to the streets to express their dissent towards the regime. With a sense of restored order, there was a return to the temporal and institutional trajectory of state-imposed modernization projects. Most notably, the White Revolution of 1963 (*Enqelāb-e Sefid*),¹³⁴ set into motion a series of state-sponsored reforms during the 1960s and 70s, including a woman's right to vote, health and literacy corps, workers' rights, along with contentious land reforms that programmatically abolished feudalism, among other cultural shifts. While the Pahlavi regime was attempting to produce a version of the modern; this did not translate into a political modernity, but rather, intensified its autocratic state power. Cultural developments were paralleled with the solidification of state power, suppressing student protests against the Shah, establishing an atmosphere of surveillance through the Shah's secret police force, SAVAK, and heightening state censorship in aesthetic production. Paradoxically, the formation of cultural and educational institutions laid the foundation for artists and filmmakers to receive state support to produce their work, while the Shah's apparatus for censoring those same works was at an all-time high. The modern arts initiatives led by Queen Farah Diba conveyed the nation's desire to establish itself at once as cosmopolitan and aesthetically innovative, while at times being at odds with the work produced by artists, who often received state-support for projects only to be censored when these works were completed. The nation's internal and external relationship to establishing itself as modern was in a bind. While there was an external desire to represent Iran's modern cultural production in the form of film festivals and international arts events, the conditions of what that representation would look like made it increasingly difficult for artists to openly critique the state. The manifestation of aesthetic modernism within Iran's film culture was therefore nestled at the axis of global modernist forms and anti-fascist political critiques, where abstract forms, which are both temporally and contextually portable (transhistorical and not determined by the geography structure of the nation-state) carry the potential to produce critiques of the political and historical time. The emergence of art house films—or, more clearly described, films that reflected a stylized departure from the commercial cinema of the period, and most particularly, the popular *film-farsi* genre¹³⁵—arose in parallel with the Shah's restored power.

¹³⁴ The White Revolution (*Enqelāb-e Sefid*) was a reform movement launched by the Shah, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, in 1963 (until 1979) that produced many foundational rights within Iran while also weakening classes that supported the traditional system. It included land reform, enfranchisement of women, nationalization of forests and pastures, literacy corps, establishment of a number of quasi-government institutions, etc. These modernization efforts exemplify Iran's struggle with modernity characterized by certain developments alongside a deepening structure of despotic power, as Ali Mirseppasi has pointed out, "modernization in some spheres of life occurred without resulting in modernity." See: Ali Mirsepassi, *Intellectual Discourse and the Politics of Modernization: Negotiating Modernity in Iran*, Cambridge University Press, 2000. The darker side of these changes resulted in increased militarization, further inequality between land-owning and ruling classes, as well as, among other social issues, the stripping of organizations that had once sustained working urban classes and the intelligentsia (newspapers, unions, political parties, etc). As Ervand Abrahamian articulates in his chapter on the White Revolution: "The White Revolution had been designed to preempt a Red Revolution. Instead, it paved the way for an Islamic Revolution" (140). For more on the topic, see: Ervand Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran*, Cambridge University Press, 2008.

¹³⁵ These films have also been designated as "stewpot films" or "meat-and-potato films" (*film-e abgusht*), "doggerel films" or "drawstring films" (*film-e bandtonbani*), and "dream-weaving cinema" (*sinema-ye*

Without overstating this opposition, where film-farsi embodied melodramatic and popularized tales of clashing morality, values, and class conflict all with the intent of providing pleasure and entertainment,¹³⁶ the emerging art cinema of the time embraced cinematic stylization, authorship, inter-medial aesthetic collaboration, and a distinctly Iranian engagement with the perils of modernity characterized by a focus on rural village life, ritual, and regimes of power. This experience was marked simultaneously by the forces of modernization that, on the one hand, brought the establishment of cultural institutions as well as the circulation of transnational film genres, and on the other hand, solidified the state's military apparatus while also creating an atmosphere of heightened censorship and surveillance. The art films created in the wake of this period inscribed the afflicted experience of modernity into the unfolding of the film's narrative and also foregrounded characters who were driven by their psychic concerns over and above melodrama.

Formally, this thematic attunement to the psyche manifested the proliferation of formal features including narrative discontinuity, repetition, spatial and temporal discontinuity, and flashbacks.¹³⁷ Many of the films of this experimental genre were produced in dialogue with global avant-garde movements, thus creating an aesthetic lineage beyond national borders. At the same time, these films mark a search for an Iranian national cinema,¹³⁸ informed by the psychic wounds of the

royapardaz). Abgushti films refer to a stew made with lamb and potatoes, commonly eaten with bread by "tough guys" or everyday people. Bandtonbani refers to "pyjama pants" suggesting a low-brow quality comedy. Finally, "dream-weaving" refers to an escapist tendency in these films, marking a style of fantasy and melodrama that often included song, dance, fighting, and other forms of popular entertainment. As much as these designations reflect the derogatory relationship critics had with film-farsi, the feature films of this genre were a significant commercial cinema of the late 40s to the late 70s. While an analysis of their national, political, and aesthetic contours is outside the bounds of this chapter, a study of this variety would be worthwhile. For more on film-farsi, see Hamid Naficy's chapter on "Commercial Cinema's Evolution" in *A Social History of Iranian Cinema, Volume 2 (The Industrializing Years, 1941-1978)* and the recent 2019 documentary "FilmFarsi" by Ehsan Khoshbakht, which uncovers previously censored footage of the genre. Unlike previous characterizations that dismissed film-farsi, Khoshbakht locates the national and political significance of these escapist drama films as providing a social need in the post-1953 period, which was plagued by increasing social unrest and inequality as a result of the coup and the Shah's increasingly repressive force over the nation. Of course, with the resulting Islamic Revolution, most film-farsi films would be banned due to the excessive representation of what the new government would deem a contamination by "Western influences," which included sex, drug use, and violence.

¹³⁶ Hamid Naficy. *A Social History of Iranian Cinema, Volume 2 (The Industrializing Years, 1941-1978)*. "Commercial Cinema's Evolution" (Duke University Press), 149-50.

¹³⁷ Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema: Volume 2*, 341.

¹³⁸ Given the decades-long popularity and success of Iranian cinema that we are used to at the global and local level today, it may be hard to fathom a time in which Iran's film industry was "on the brink of disaster," as critic Karim Emami put it in his 1963 review "Plight of the Iranian Film." While the overwhelming number of foreign films dubbed into Persian were part of the public's cultivation of movie-going culture, it also produced a more sophisticated taste, proving that these foreign films were also a source of competition for Iranian filmmakers. As a result, many films in the late 50s and early 60s were failing to attain financial success in comparison to imported films at the box office. Without naming it as such, Emami attributes the "failure" of many Iranian directors to their inability to take control of the set; instead, they were dominated by external producers or financial donors. In a sense, Emami is calling for the cultivation of a film "author," someone whose artistic mark is both felt and seen across all aspects of the film. He also draws attention to a lack of authenticity; for instance, in the

nation's internal and external repressive forces. I situate my readings within the national-political context neither to flatten the aesthetic innovations that took place in this period nor to reduce this emerging counter-cinema to an ideological end. Rather, my aim is to show how formal experimentation gives shape to the experiences of modernity that exist outside of state or nationally delineated political and ideological narratives. To this end, I analyze the convergence of film's medium-specific features—the materiality of the moving-image along with the audible but invisible nature of sonic experimentation—and how these formal features speak to the temporal and political contexts from which they arise, without being determined by them. This attention to cinematic form suggests that the “return of the repressed” I discuss in each film is manifested both in the haunting relationship to power and history, as well as within the aesthetic realm, specifically cinema's relationship to photography and sound as uncanny elements within the medium. Photography was itself brought to Iran by Nasir al-Din Shah Qajar, establishing its early use as a tool of the state even, as in *Shahzadeh Ehtejab*, it is used as the medium in which critique is made possible. But first, I will frame my analysis with a discussion of the new intermedial collaborations that these art-house films instantiated.

Historically, the Iranian New Wave is typically narrated as having lasted about a decade from 1969 to the year before the Islamic Revolution in 1978.¹³⁹ Given the almost concurrent emergence of the Iranian New Wave and the French New Wave, it bears referencing some of the minor differences with respect to literary adaptation (as a predominant concern of early cinema and the global avant-garde in general), especially in light of critics' concerns that filmic adaptations of literary texts sacrificed the integrity of both forms. The French New Wave has a fraught relationship with the use of literary sources for screenplays or cinematic adaptations. Directors of the New Wave and critics involved in the *Cahiers du cinéma* were haunted by the dominant literary traditions that preceded them, especially the overwhelming veneration of writing.¹⁴⁰ As a result, the *Cahier* critics/directors who formed the French New Wave were driven by the “querelle de l'adaptation” and began to form aesthetic principles that distinguished themselves from literary genres and storylines. The emerging cinema of Iran had a much less contentious relationship between literary adaptation and cinematic productions. From the beginning, the directors that formed the nucleus of the Iranian New Wave embraced collaboration between the literary and cinematic avant-garde. The emergence of the New Wave (*Mowj-e Now*) is often marked by Dariush Mehrjui's iconic 1968 film *Gaav* (*The Cow*) set in an anonymous village and structured around the relationship of a man and his cow. When the man returns from a short trip to the city, he finds his cow dead; what follows is the man's metamorphosis into his cow, staging a pathological experience of mourning. The film's script was adapted from a short story from the collection *The Mourners of Bayal* (*Azadaran-e Bayal*) by the modernist writer and psychiatrist Dr. Gholam-Hossein Saedi, whose aesthetic, psychiatric, and ethnographic contributions to the Iranian modernist corpus I discuss in chapter four. But this film reflects just one example of the many script to screen adaptations that led to some of the most experimental films of the period. It was through inter-medial collaborations and an attention to the specificities of the moving-image that some of the most

films of Samuel Khachikian, which were financially profitable, and relied on an imitation of Hollywood plots, rather than a substantial production of an Iranian cinema based on Iranian stories. While the development of the Iranian New Wave certainly rests on this context, as Emami articulates, a “high-caliber intellectual” cinema would not resolve the issue of financial success, but at the very least, it would set a standard and evolve a national cinematic industry in the making.

¹³⁹ Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema: Volume 2*, 349. Naficy marks this time frame with the release of Dariush Mehrjui's *The Cow* (1969) and concludes it with films including Parviz Sayyad's *Dead-End* (*Bonbast*, 1977), Farmanara's *Tall Shadows of the Wind*, and Parviz Kimiavi's *O.K. Mister* (1978).

¹⁴⁰ Robert Stam. “Adaptation and the French New Wave: A Study in Ambivalence” *Interfaces*, 2012-13.

experimental aesthetic productions emerged. These important collaborations include Bahman Farmanara's partnership with Hushang Golshiri on Farmanara's breakout feature, *Shazdeh Ehtejab* (*Prince Ehtejab*, 1974), based on Golshiri's modernist novella published a few years earlier in 1969. But this is not to say that the relationship between fiction and film was unidirectional: M.R. Ghanoonparvar, for one, points out that Golshiri's *Shazdeh Ehtejab* is itself an example of prose that carries the imprint of the cinematic form in the construction of narrative, including flashback, constant scene changes, and abrupt shifts in point-of-view.¹⁴¹ As I will show in my close readings of each film, the cinematic "rendering" of Golshiri's prose does not foreclose the unique formal experimentation made possible by the cinematic medium, but serves as a springboard for the creation of films that are both visually and sonically "new," attending as much to ways of seeing as to stories themselves. The fruitful collaboration that began with *Shazdeh Ehtejab* was only the start of a 30-year friendship between Farmanara and Golshiri and the two worked together again on *Sayehaye Boland-e Bad* (*Tall Shadows of the Wind*, 1978), taking what was originally a four-page short story and transforming it into a script that Golshiri himself admits was improved by Farmanara's cinematic intervention.¹⁴² This chapter will focus on the films that emerged from these two central collaborations of the later period of the Iranian New Wave.

Working from within an emerging film industry, the films I discuss in this chapter speak to the problems of their time, including the cinematic concerns just discussed as well as their political context, while also activating the cinematic medium in order to summon previous times, and to anticipate future ones. While speaking of a New Wave necessarily involves a foundational newness, one that is not prescribed or fully defined, it is from a retrospective assessment that I identify, in the filmmakers of the New Wave, an inherent drive to grapple with the cinematic medium itself, producing in turn, a medium-sensitive viewer.¹⁴³ As Laura Mulvey has argued, the cinema's privileged relationship to time (also shared by photography), contains a storing function similar to the way the memory serves as a remainder in the unconscious of an experience lost to consciousness.¹⁴⁴ The cinematic medium thus already carries a fundamental relationship to a temporality afflicted by loss, repetition, and uncertainty. It is from this theoretical position that this chapter attends to the way photography and sound conjure what I call the medium's uncanniness. In naming the uncanny, I mobilize a range of meanings associated with the term, but specifically, I am interested in the uncanny's relationship to latent aesthetic manifestations, and specifically, a Freudian uncanny that emphasizes an altered relationship to the aesthetic object felt by the reader or spectator. In the films I analyze, this includes attuning the spectator to the photographic stillness that produces the moving-image, as well as the non-diegetic sound that occupies a position of alterity to the film's diegesis and haunts the image in

¹⁴¹ M.R. Ghanoonparvar. *Iranian Film and Persian Fiction*, 2016, 126.

¹⁴² According to an interview conducted by Hamid Dabashi with Bahman Farmanara, Farmanara and Golshiri worked on the script for two years until they got the original 4-page short story to 25 pages. From there, Farmanara wrote the full script on his own. For the rest of the interview, see: Hamid Dabashi, "Close up Iranian Cinema: Past, Present and Future." Verso Books, 2001.

¹⁴³ This term is borrowed from Yuri Tsivian's book *Early Cinema in Russia and Its Cultural Reception* (Routledge Press, 2014). This sensitivity included noticing seemingly mundane occurrences on the screen like the movement of wind, waves turning into rivulets as they crash against the shore, or the unsteadiness of a card player's fingers. These seemingly uneventful moments also came to draw the spectator's attention to cinematography including camera distance, tracking shots, and color. Later, as Robert Spadoni points out in *Uncanny Bodies: The Coming of Sound Film and the Origins of the Horror Genre* (University of California Press, 2007), the coming of sound would also result in a return to medium sensitivity.

¹⁴⁴ Laura Mulvey. *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image*. (Reaktion Books Ltd, 2006), 9.

its aftermath. In close analyses of two of Bahman Farmanara's key films of the later period of the New Wave in the 70s, I show how both the aesthetic and political attributes of the uncanny are entangled in forms of power including the reach of political rulers and their regimes as well as more nebulous powers that move between the supernatural and material world. My analysis begins with *Shazdeh Ehtejab* (*Prince Ehtejab*, 1974), which is organized around a haunting temporality of returns where past and present are blurred, and the violence of the declining Qajar dynasty meets the contemporary force of the Shah's rule. *Shazdeh Ehtejab* assumes a pathological form, characterized by the film's "present" being punctured by the protagonist's dreams, hallucinations, and episodic memories of his tormented past. These scenes are fragmented, moving between timelines as well as versions of the past, marking material and psychic rhythms of repression and forgetting. The relationship between photography and the moving image is an integral aspect of the film: a series of Qajar photographs recur throughout the film as a source of the past's enduring weight on the present. Shifting from this film's focus on material artifacts, I turn to *Sayehha-ye Boland-e Bad* (*Tall Shadows of the Wind*, 1978) to consider the invisible manifestations of the uncanny in the cinematic medium. Where *Shazdeh Ehtejab* incorporates the photographic medium into the cinematic image to blend temporal orders of past and present and reveal the decay that interpenetrates both, *Sayehha-ye Boland-e Bad*'s sonic composition emphasizes the unknown and upends a secular and visual logic of narrative cinema that focuses on plot and materiality. Of Iran's first sound films only five were made in Iran, establishing the medium as transnational from its conception (Naficy). Whereas earlier sound films in the genre of film-farsi relied on song (often mimicking a European style), the Iranian new wave created a use of sound that was experimental both at local and global levels of filmmaking. While certain film histories refer to the emergence of sound as an amplification of realist features, I suggest that the use of sound across many Iranian New Wave films manifests other-worldly features of the film, drawing the viewer into a realm beyond the "real."

Both *Shazdeh Ehtejab* and *Sayehha-ye Boland-e Bad*, which are now considered part of the Iranian New Wave, were produced at a time of heightened opposition to the Shah's repressive policies, and are interested in forms of power, both from the state and from occult forces. In my analysis of each film, I explore the way fragmentation, flashback and dreams afflict the cinematic image, creating new non-linear narrative forms, and how the use of diegetic and nondiegetic sound results in a manifestation of the immaterial undercurrents of the cinematic medium itself. By this, I mean that Farmanara's filmmaking traverses multiple meanings of the latent, including the photographic basis of the cinema, as well as the later-emerging experimentations with sound that invoke rituals of the invisible and other-worldly. This self-conscious experimentation with the cinematic medium only amplifies the filmmaker's openness to other operative forms of uncanniness. These films, which were made nearly two decades after the coup, are formally structured by the material conditions of disorder, including paranoia, trauma, possession, and the absurd, which serve as both the conditions that precede and structure both the medium and the viewer's experience. Instead of imposing symbolic meanings onto images or scenes that would determine them by moral or ideological ends (as the logic of the censors might do), these films require readings attuned to the cinematic form as a technological medium fundamentally formed by that which is repressed, other, and uncanny. In a chilling moment of "recognition," Farmanara realized that the censors had also picked up on the necessity of reading/seeing not only for content, but also, for form. In 1980, after *Tall Shadows of the Wind* received permission to screen in theaters, Farmanara went through a nine-hour interrogation about this film, but the censors also referred to the rest of his corpus, saying that his films were anti-religion. When Farmanara asked how he could say that, the censor replied that in *Shazdeh Ehtejab*, he had a "parallel cut of a religious ceremony with the masturbation of a whore," this language of "parallel cut" suggested that someone from the cinema industry was feeding the censors technical language that

guided the censor to the power of form.¹⁴⁵ And yet while this reflects a frightening development in the sophistication of censors, I argue that these films resist deterministic readings in their attention to the formal and psychic manifestations of the uncanny.

Sigmund Freud's classic 1919 essay explores the experience of the uncanny as a predicament unfamiliar and unknown, and, at the same time, familiar and intimately linked to what is homely. At the beginning of the essay, Freud articulates a need to "awaken" in himself the possibility of experiencing the uncanny feeling because it is generalized by the "times in which we live" referring to the moments immediately after World War I. To do so, Freud conducts an archaeology through language in order to stage the intrinsic tensions within the term. Freud does not consolidate the uncanny into a single definition but reveals the strangeness of the uncanny within language itself, allowing the opacity and familiarity around the term to come to produce its meaning as something that is experienced rather than oriented towards a specific definition or object. Building from Freud's conception of the uncanny, which rests on an internal ambiguity, I extend my analysis to filmic examples outside of Freud's analytic lens, which displays the ways in which the uncanny's uncertainty around "verisimilitude" goes hand in hand with cinema's suspension of disbelief. For Freud, "*unheimlich* [uncanny] is the name for everything that ought to have remained... secret and hidden but has come to light."¹⁴⁶ The German prefix *un-* marks, morphologically, repression, but of course, not all repressed pre-histories are uncanny. Freud differentiates the uncanny of "real experiences" with those experienced through uncanny effects in the realm of the aesthetic, indeed, he positions the latter as richer and therefore less expected than what we know from life experience. This is in part because, as Freud argues, many experiences that would be uncanny in real life are not uncanny in the aesthetic realm; the fictionality of aesthetics, which rests on an accepted ambiguity between fiction and reality, affords opportunities to achieve uncanny effects that are absent in real life. The description of the uncanny as an effect, one that appears differently in the realm of the aesthetic than in everyday life is important because while the uncanny is overlaid by the representation of dead bodies, revenants, spirits, and ghosts, the mere presence of these beings does not make an uncanny experience (what is frightening is not immediately uncanny) but is instead informed by the unconscious encounters between the living and the dead. Freud's description of the uncanny experience does not result in a definitive theory but emerges through an analysis of scenarios that emphasize the ambiguity of the uncanny. In emphasizing the significance of formal experimentation in the uncanny's appearance, Freud positions the aesthetic as formally amenable to surfacing "the omnipotence of thoughts, instantaneous wish-fulfillment, secret harmful forces and the return of the dead,"¹⁴⁷ but also as a fundamental play on reality and the world beyond it. The aesthetic has the capacity to take a "common reality" and "trick" the reader/spectator with a series of returns to the superstitious or supernatural world it has supposedly surmounted in the rationality of "real life."¹⁴⁸ In this regard, the uncanny element is not necessarily something new or strange, "but something that was long familiar to the psyche and was estranged from it through being repressed."¹⁴⁹ This can occur in the form of doubles, dream-states, or unintended returns. A formal and narrative gravitation towards the uncanny—that is, the strange, the untimely, and the unknown in the realm of the familiar—undergirds the cinematic experimentation of the Iranian New Wave of the 60s and 70s. Hamid Naficy identifies "the marriage

¹⁴⁵ Bahman Farmanara describes this experience in an interview with Hamid Dabashi (Dabashi, 125-26). For the full interview, see: Hamid Dabashi. *Close Up Iranian Cinema: Past, Present and Future*. (Verso Books, 2001).

¹⁴⁶ Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny," (1919), 132.

¹⁴⁷ Freud, 154.

¹⁴⁸ Freud, 157-58.

¹⁴⁹ Freud, 148.

of gritty realism and uncanny surrealism (such as a man becoming a cow) as a hallmark feature of some of the key new-wave films.”¹⁵⁰ These films, Naficy argues, “interjected fantasy into the realistic plots and narratives” and were driven by the “psychology and internal urges of diegetic characters.”¹⁵¹ Taking my cue from Naficy’s proposition of an uncanny sensibility in Iranian new wave films, I deliberately draw on Freud’s examination of the term as both an experience of witnessing, sensing, and feeling, as well as an effect produced in the realities of everyday occurrences, or, more relevant to my analysis, through aesthetic devices. Therefore, my analysis of the uncanny is not limited to the film’s storyline but extends to the film’s (im)material composition through an analysis of its kinetic and sonic manifestations.

The Time of the Uncanny: *Shazdeh Ehtejab*

Shazdeh Ehtejab is organized around the psychic and material world of a titular protagonist: Prince Ehtejab, a member of the fallen Qajar dynasty¹⁵² who is dying of tuberculosis. The plot moves between the present in which the ailing Prince sits in his dark chambers left only with the remaining servants and decaying objects, both of which serve as remnants of the past and reminders of a languishing present. This present is punctured by a series of flashbacks, or hauntings, of a domestic and dynastic history replete with violence. The narrative is a dizzying one where psychic madness meets physical illness, drawing together multiple temporalities and experiences of psychic, political, and physical decay. Moving between the past’s multiple iterations and its bearing on the present, the narrative is nonlinear, disjointed, and difficult to follow. Part of this difficulty is tied to the sheer range of members of the Qajar family, a feature Farmanara and Golshiri worked together to simplify in the process of adapting the novella for the screen. Indeed, the textual version and its use of stream of consciousness shifts between many more generations of the Qajar dynasty, whereas the film shifts only between three: the prince, his father, and his grandfather. Adding to the disordered narrative experience is the plot’s references to repetitive acts of terror committed by several generations of Qajar dynastic rule. As we follow the protagonist’s memories of the past, we learn that Prince Ehtejab’s grandfather murdered his own mother and brother (among others within and outside of their family). In one of the film’s flashback scenes, we see the grandfather choking his half-brother with a pillow, which he then sits on as he ruthlessly drops his cigarette ash into the dead man’s hands, showing the ease with which Qajar leaders could kill. Indeed, the only visual cue that offers distinguishing features

¹⁵⁰ Naficy, 340. Surrealism’s specific historical context of emergence as a collective of artists and thinkers formed by the conditions of modernization in Europe takes on another dimension when confronted with the struggles for and against monarchical power in Iran. It should be noted that while this particular history of surrealism assumes secular underpinnings, my analysis of *Tall Shadows of the Wind* points to an alternative landscape where other-worldly, supernatural, and divine beliefs are neither part of an organized system of religion nor part of a Euro-American trajectory of secular modernity. Other films Naficy includes in this characterization are Ebrahim Golestan’s *The Secrets of the Treasure of the Jenni Valley* (*Asrar-e Ganj-e Darreh-ye Jenni*, 1972), Parviz Kimiavi’s *The Mongols* (*Mogholha*, 1973) Bahram Beyzai’s *Stranger and the Fog* (*Gharibeh va Meh*, 1975), Bahman Farmanara’s *Tall Shadows of the Wind* (*Sayehha-ye Boland-e Bad*, 1978), and Kimiavi’s *O.K. Mister* (1978).

¹⁵¹ Naficy, 340.

¹⁵² The Qajar dynasty ruled over Iran from 1789-1925. For more on the origins and transformations of the Qajars, see: Abbas Amanat, *The Pivot of the Universe: Nasir Al-Din Shah Qajar and the Iranian Monarchy, 1831–1896*, I. B. Tauris, pp 2–3; “In the 126 years between the fall of the Safavid state in 1722 and the accession of Nasir al-Din Shah, the Qajars evolved from a shepherd-warrior tribe with strongholds in northern Iran into a Persian dynasty.”

between the various chronological points of the protagonist's life are his hair color, which alternates between the bright black of his youth and a faded silver to mark his old age. The film's use of lighting also adds to this effect: early scenes of Qajar power are submerged in bright light and scenes that depict the prince's progressive decaying state are framed in dark shadows. The protagonist's physical and psychic disarray is acutely connected to the weight of history, which is reflected in the haunting memories that produce a pathological experience of the present. The temporality produced is pathological in the sense that it fails to distinguish between past, present, and future. The film's psychopathological temporality is tied to the demise of the recently fallen Qajar dynasty,¹⁵³ which was often taken up by artists and members of the modernist literati as a vehicle through which to produce critiques of the present while avoiding censorship.¹⁵⁴ The critical wounds opened by *Shazdeh Ehtejab* speak not only to the inherited affliction of the Qajars but also to the contemporary period of the film's production, pointing to the continued violence of dynastic power during the Shah's regime. This political critique is tied to a blurring of temporalities, in which the protagonist's spiraling disorder calls upon the spectator to ask not only *where* we are but *when* we are.

In a hallucinatory scene that appears as part of the film's opening sequence, we see the prince enter a room full of clocks. His wife Fakhr al-Nessa and the house maid, Fakhri, begin to wind the numerous clocks in the room. The prince joins them and the camera crosscuts between each of their hands as they adjust each of the clocks, which vary in shape and style (some with hands and others with pendulums, among other details). Most importantly, each is markedly set to a different time from the others. As the cacophony of ticking increases, the camera cuts between each clock, focusing on the various marks of time represented. The sound of each clock accumulates and creates a discordant symphony of dings, alarms, and cuckoo sounds. As the sound of many different times becomes maddening, the prince turns to Fakhr al-Nessa and exclaims: "man daram kalafe misham" (I am becoming mad/bewildered). In a shot-reverse-shot that moves between the prince's bewildered reaction and his wife, Fakhr al-Nessa begins to laugh hysterically, a sound that recurs in other instances of these hallucinatory scenes, positioning the prince as a ridiculous figure with little, if any, remaining power. Even more humiliating, as the clocks continue to tick and the pendulums swing back and forth, Fakhri joins in on the laughter, leaving the prince at the center of their mockery. Along with the repetitions, hallucinations, flashbacks, and repeated inclusion of memories sparked by photographs, this scene establishes *Shazdeh Ehtejab's* fixation with time, and the many times that weigh heavily on the present.

The scene described above is markedly attuned to multiple temporalities but also with the way these times are linked with power. As we will see in the relationship between Prince Ehtejab and his wife, Fakhr al-Nessa, her presence serves as a recurring reminder of his violent ancestral past and impotent leadership. Throughout the film, she embodies a distant and mocking relationship towards her husband's power, ridiculing him and undermining his position in the lineage of Qajar power. In a scene mid-way through the film, Fakhr al-Nessa is seen sitting at a table across from her husband reading a memoir, she chronicles to her husband the legacies of ancestral power, the position of women and hunting, reminding her husband how little knowledge he carries as well as his minimal power in comparison to previous leaders. As she opens the book to read a passage from it, the screen

¹⁵³ In his documentary on the lost cinema of the Iranian New Wave. Jamshid Akrami observes, "*Prince Ehtejab* is a concise story of a time which no longer exists, a story of the dawn of an aristocratic family in an era which has ended. It is an honest reflection of a corrupt inheritance." Kino Lober, 2019.

¹⁵⁴ Fereshteh Daftari. *Persia Reframed: Iranian Visions of Modern and Contemporary Art*. (I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, New York, 2019), 157.

cuts to a montage of photographs of Qajar hunting scenes amplified by the sound of a gunshot as each image emerges on the screen (I will return to this chilling use of photographic images and the sonic later in my analysis). These shots serve as jolts to the Prince's psyche and establish Fakhr al-Nessa as a looming figure of power and desire for the Prince. Following this scene, Fakhri the servant comes forth and the Prince directs his gaze towards her. This scene is significant because it brings Fakhr al-Nessa and Fakhri together to establish the double facets of power and subservience, which as we will see later in the film, the prince seeks to reverse in an act of conflating the two women. In a chilling scene in which Fakhr al-Nessa is dying of illness, Prince Ehtejab forces Fakhri the servant to take the place of his wife in name, appearance, and social place.¹⁵⁵ This violent act of conflating the two women of varying social strata serves as a place in which Prince Ehtejab acts out his frustrated desire for his aristocratic wife by aggressively imposing it unto Fakhri who has no choice but to accept the position and identity in which he molds for her. Whereas Fakhr al-Nessa commands the Prince to face his own atrocities, the imitation Fakhri as Fakhr al-Nessa allows the Prince one final display of masculine Qajar power, even as he remains haunted by the voice of Fakhr al-Nessa's reminders.

The film's formal concern with time is most visibly demonstrated through the recurring series of still Qajar photographs that interrupt the moving image. The photographs, which total 30, are part of a reconstitution of archival footage within the filmic reel; as such, they both invoke a historical moment while reconstituting that moment in the present. The series of photographs appear in dark moments when the present-day protagonist is most tormented by his haunted past. The first instance in which the photographs appear is an early scene when the ailing protagonist enters an empty palace room; he lays his head into the palm of his hands and his body cowers in the darkness. The sonic supplements the scene: we hear the persistent ringing of clocks in the background and the prince's coughing fit is foregrounded as the central interrupting sound. From here, the scene cuts to the photographs, presented as stills one after the other, progressing at a slow and funereal pace. We encounter several photographs of now deceased Qajar family members. The sound of the protagonist's dry cough continues into the voice-over, infusing the stillness of the photographs with an uncanny presence. What is dead and of another time is revived, converging the wounds of the past with those of the present. It should be noted that "revivification" comes about as the protagonist is dying. The photographs too—as artifacts of a past moment that represent the death of the instant—portend the protagonist's imminent death and reflect what Susan Sontag named photography's proclivity towards death: "Photography [also] converts the whole world into a cemetery. Photographers, connoisseurs of beauty, are also—wittingly or unwittingly—the recording-angels of death. The photograph-as-photograph shows death."¹⁵⁶ The film's use of photographs intentionally transcends the Qajar desire to use photography as a vehicle of mythmaking, marked by a temporality of stasis and eternity. In linking the psychic life of the protagonist to the material decay of the images, including discolored and distressed photographic objects amplified by the extra-diegetic sound, the film exposes the otherwise "dead" temporalities of each image. This interpenetration of temporal moments, the past stillness of the photographic image in relation to the moving image, as well as the remaining voice-over that persists into the photographic sequence indicates that it isn't only the Qajars

¹⁵⁵ This scene in *Shazdeh Ehtejab* where the prince forces Fakhri to take the place of Fakhr al-Nessa is reminiscent of Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958) especially the scene in which the character Judy fulfills the transformation of becoming Madeline (the woman who she had pretended to be for the first half of the film). In both filmic examples, Farmanara and Hitchcock position the male protagonists in their films with a directorial power to violently conflate one woman with another, abstracting their individual identities as portable placeholders to be filled and manipulated by men.

¹⁵⁶ Susan Sontag. Introduction to Peter Hujar's *Portraits in Life and Death*. (Da Capo Press, 1976).

who have come to haunt the sickly prince but that this meeting of times equally imposes the disease of the present onto the past, giving the spectator a sense of intergenerational affliction across times.

Focusing primarily on the narrative plot, Hamid Dabashi reads *Shazdeh Ehtejab* (both its literary and filmic versions) as a dream narration, or what in our consciousness remains inaccessible because of a repression.¹⁵⁷ He argues that Golshiri and Farmanara call Prince Ehtejab “out of the collective grave of his ancestors for one last, though this time expurgatorial, torment...to both excavate these memories, from their very unsuccessful repression and bury them again—this time for good.”¹⁵⁸ This reading suggests that Prince Ehtejab excavates the nightmarish memories of the past in order to exorcize them—and yet I wonder if exorcism is not the end, and if Farmanara is pointing to the inability to exorcize the wounds of this violent past and its permutation in the present (*Tall Shadows of the Wind* deals even more clearly with the inability to exorcize the unlocatable forces that possess the villagers). By attending to the formal qualities of the film my reading illuminates exposure and decay as central currents of the film’s psychic work and therefore as enduring in the modern temporality of the film’s production. By this I mean that the use of photographs in the film serves as a productive, material site for visualizing the past, while at the same time reckoning with its decomposition and partiality. In his reading of *Shazdeh Ehtejab*, Dabashi conflates Farmanara’s film with Golshiri’s novella as though their aesthetic experience is one and the same. This blurring of forms reduces their aesthetic effects to storyline rather than attending to the way each medium formally projects that which is unseen, or that which refuses to be seen. Yet their distinct forms do interact with history and psychic repression differently and their distinct attention to the specific features of cinematic and photographic materiality necessitate a reading beyond exorcism and closure. The placement of photography’s stillness within the continuum of the moving image interrupts the photograph’s indexicality to a single time and place moving it toward the durational time of the cinematic medium. Furthermore, the slow pace of the recurring photographs further registers the stilled image as part of the filmstrip, thus, pointing to two latencies: the first being that of the haunting political regime (never named or referenced, but felt), and the other tied to photography as the underpinning of cinema.

While Golshiri’s novella employs the recurrence of photographs as part of the narrative’s summoning of hauntings and past lives, it is the film’s use of and attention to photographic materiality that produces the attention to decay in the film. Photographs that accumulate dust or arise suddenly to reflect the prince’s haunting give texture to the film’s untimely “return of the repressed.” The photographs are marked not solely by what they represent but by a reflexive attention to the medium as one that activates a rhythm of return (albeit limited in its frame) and in doing so, conjures the past as a haunting. While much of the dialogue is transplanted from the novella to the film, the transition from script to screen activates formal features of the cinematic medium, replacing Golshiri’s vivid language with scenes that do not rely on description but on the open-ended composition of images and experience. In the first sequence of the Qajar photographs on the screen, the camera pans into the photographs, focusing on the eerie frame of each royal subject. Each new image accumulates in its sense of decay, especially the last two photos of the series, which have their eyes torn out. In this reconstitution of Qajar images, decay is not merely a “natural” phenomenon that happens to photographs with time, it occurs as something that can be enacted. The puncturing of the eyes rather than another part of the photograph marks another component of the photograph’s connection to visual perception. And while the violent absence of eyes marks sight as an important feature of the

¹⁵⁷ Hamid Dabashi. *Masters & Masterpieces of Iranian Cinema*: “Bahman Farmanara: Prince Ehtejab,” 190.

¹⁵⁸ Dabashi, 190.

medium, it also points to what is occluded from that vision; as spectators we are invited into what cannot be seen and what is made invisible, by the apparatus of the camera as well as in the eyes of forces of power. To create an image of something is to document or create a lasting recording of it. But beyond these “remains” of the past, the torn-out eyes also point to what is not shown, what exists outside of the Qajar perspective and its political monopoly over the photographic medium. Destruction thus also carries a critical agency to reopen the naturalized temporality and stillness of the photographic image in order to both see and hear what exists beyond.

Farmanara’s use of the photographic medium moves beyond its instrumental use as it was used to reflect Qajar dynastic power and instead draws out the medium’s concurrent animacy and decay, that is, how photographs in the film are used to channel the memories of dynastic violence while also exposing these memories in their state of active deterioration in the present. This rhythm of decay is embodied in the materiality of the photograph itself as well as in the dying body of the prince. For the remainder of my analysis of *Shazdeh Ehtejab*, I will discuss the ways in which the self-conscious use of photography within the film establishes an uncanny medium that both subverts the conventional use of the medium as it was commonly used in Qajar-era photographs and produces a reflection on forms of power, temporal disorder, and psychic wounds.

Photography’s Untimely Recurrence

Arriving in Iran in the 19th century as a result of the Qajars’ travels in Europe, photography quickly became a prevalent technological medium of the Qajar dynasty serving as both a representation and consolidation of monarchical power.¹⁵⁹ Qajar rulers embraced the use of portrait photography as a means of preserving and archiving their state power. The uncanny resurgence of Qajar photographs in the film defamiliarize the typical use of these photographs to produce an eerie and haunting effect. In *Shazdeh Ehtejab*, these photographs become uncanny because they are exposed to the estranging and defamiliarizing forces of violence that haunt the fallen Qajar prince in the present. The uncanny’s “unhomely” quality in psychoanalytic discourse derives from its prompting the subject to remember that the familiar haunting is a return of something that is mortally close. Whereas the state’s use of the photographic mechanism embalms images of power, the film engages in an act of unsettling the photographs’ intended use by way of displaying each photograph through what I argue is a repetition-compulsion that unwraps the bandages that preserve order. This return shatters the domestic order, and in this case, because the domestic is also the dynastic, the order of state power. Rather than preserving power, though, the return of each photograph is accompanied by more dust and decay, as well as the parallel narrative of a prince gone mad. Indeed, just after the first instance of recurring photographs, and before the maddening scene with the clocks, Fakh al-Nessa glides her fingertips over a photograph sitting on the mantle, a gesture that as spectators we are meant to notice: the camera focuses on her finger moving across the photograph, attending both to the accumulated dust on the image’s surface, which also points to an accumulation of time, as well as the gesture itself as an act of unearthing and activating the worlds that exist in and beyond the congealed temporality of the photograph. This scene is therefore not just interested in the photograph’s ability to activate other times as a tool of mere referentiality, but also in the interaction of the photograph and the moving-image that draws the viewer’s attention to photography’s artifactual quality.

¹⁵⁹ Layla S Diba. “Images of Power and the Power of Images: Intention and Response in Early Qajar Painting (1785-1834).”

As a time-based medium, photography's power lies in its ability to "capture" and "reproduce" a moment in time. The early photographic processes of the daguerreotype were valued for their new and hyper-real claim to reality, offering "true" scientific representations of the world and its subjects, albeit staged and manipulated. The exposure of these images marked both a representational and temporal indexicality, which carried over into the transition into the moving-image.¹⁶⁰ The cinematic image activates the photographic still, and, as a result, carries with it photography's radical "pastness." *Shahzadeh Ehtejab* conjures the dead images of the past not to resuscitate them in the present but to expose both their fundamental and lingering decomposition. The repeated indexing of photographs throughout the film invokes what Siegfried Kracauer calls the ghostlike character of the reproduced image.¹⁶¹ If as Kracauer suggests the photographic camera loses itself in the prototype, the cinematic image carries the capacity to cut, expand, activate, and transform the dominant subjects of early photographic portraits. Indeed, Farmanara defamiliarizes the photographs by supplementing them with cinematic effects, including sound and focused frames, and thereby expands their referentiality from the state's project of archival commemoration and surfaces the haunting character of the doubly psychic and political latencies previously repressed in these images. The referentiality enacted by the film in no way reduces the photograph to its original use. Instead, the temporality of the photograph's arrestedness is activating, manifesting the already lost presence of the original and the presence of the moving image, creating an entirely other experience of "presence" for the photographs and the time they reflect.

Whereas photography embodies a focused frame in order to capture a shot of a single moment, the moving image—characterized by the passage of time—permits a series of shots that expand the sensory experiences attributed to the image. This is accompanied by the filmmaker's ability to supplement the experience of the image with external sounds; in *Shahzadeh Ehtejab*, this often includes sonic dimensions outside of the film's diegesis, or at times, only in the psychic world of the prince. In yet another moment in which a sequence of Qajar photographs recurs in the film, images of rulers and their hunting escapades are put on full display, with groups of the Qajar family holding their catch for the camera. The camera begins by showing the full frame of the photograph and then abruptly pans into a focused framing of the weapon or faces to focus on the expressions that come with killing a living being. The camera's movement is supplemented with the sound of puncturing gunshots, which accompany each of the photographs in the series that follows. Whereas these photographs would normally be displayed by Qajar rulers as a mark of strength, virility and conquest, their re-presentation in the film is imbued with a sinister dimension that illuminates the violent nature of the regime.

Time Out of Joint: Where the Past Meets the Present

There is no document of culture that is not at the same time a document of barbarism. - Walter Benjamin

Shahzadeh Ehtejab is no doubt interested in the way in which "documents of culture," as Walter Benjamin asserted in the "Theses on the Philosophy of History," are "at the same time, documents of barbarism." The accumulated time of history is therefore always accompanied with the various legacies and inheritance of barbarism. By mobilizing the decaying and destructive qualities of each image, Farmanara displays the ways in which Qajar portrait photography comprises one such document. The juxtaposition of the scenes of Qajar violence alongside the camera following the bodies of those massacred by authorities recalls the images of the Shah's secret police, Sāzemān-e

¹⁶⁰ Laura Mulvey. *Death 24x a Second*. (Reaktion Books, 2006).

¹⁶¹ Siegfried Kracauer. *The Past's Threshold: Essays on Photography*. (Diaphanes, 2014).

Ettela'at va Amniyat-e Keshvar (SAVAK) shooting down protestors in 1963. The “stillness” of the dead bodies is given depth with the camera’s movement, while the episodic scenes of Qajar brutality put forth the violence as intrinsic to the regime’s composition. These “scenes,” “episodes,” and “stills” of violence are equally haunted by the unseen—that is, the 1963 demonstrations in Iran (known as 15 Khordad) in which protestors demonstrated against the arrest of Khomeini (he was arrested for speaking out against the Shah and the state of Israel). Within days, the protestors were met with force by the military and SAVAK (trained by the Israeli Defense Force), which unsurprisingly, repressed the demands of the people, and solidified a regime of power to assure that there would be no such “eruptions” again. These protests were significant because they were the first display of civil unrest following the July Uprising (*Sijeh Tir*, the 30th of Tir), which preceded the coup. In the case of ’63—the violent abstraction of lives massacred as well as the elision that followed, namely, the evasion of accounting for the number of people massacred—a number still unknown today—serves as a violent tool of the state. In light of this state-led concealment, we can understand Farmanara’s use of images not as providing a “fuller” picture, but rather as pointing to the constitutive ways images, frames, and narratives obfuscate history. In other words, *Shazdeh Ehtejab* allows the spectator to reflect not only on what is seen but equally on what isn’t. Furthermore, the photographs as they are re-presented in *Shazdeh Ehtejab* become more than just a register of indexicality to a particular moment in time and space. By calling the spectator’s attention to the material decay of each photograph and by amplifying this decay with the use of sound, Farmanara encodes the images with multiple temporalities of their original capture, of what is omitted, and what is more, the continued temporality of destruction and decay.

In addition to these local conditions, a consideration of the global festival circuit and transnational resistance movements of the time is useful in understanding the filmic and political landscape within which *Shazdeh Ehtejab* was produced. In a comprehensive study of Bahman Farmanara’s life and works, Reza Dorostkar and Said Aghighi situate the film within a trend of “anti-fascist” films.¹⁶² Indeed, the film was awarded at the Tehran Film Festival in 1973; among the jury was Gilo Pontecorvo, Alain Robbe-Grillet, Shadi Abdolsalam, among other global filmmakers. Hushang Golshiri recounts a moment in which Abolhassan Najafi, the modernist writer and translator who co-published the literary journal *Jong-e Esfahan* (Esfahan Anthology),¹⁶³ asked him why he wrote *Shazdeh Ehtejab*, and in response Golshiri points to a newspaper with the cover of the current Shah of Iran and says: “This. This is what I wanted to show.”¹⁶⁴ Curiously, within the same conversation, Golshiri reverses the certainty of his indexical claim and says to himself and his interlocutor: “That was a temporary effect. Even at that time, I said it was not worth condemning the Shah (this is a loose translation of Persian phrase that literally translates to “gripping someone by their collar,” which can

¹⁶² Reza Dorostkar; Said Aghighi. *Bahman Farmanara: Zendegi va Asar* (Life and Works). (Tehran: Nashr Nogreh, 2002/1381), 22-25.

¹⁶³ *Jong-e Esfahan* was an avant-garde literary journal founded in Esfahan in 1965 by a circle of male literary figures who sought a forum for experimental exchanges in literary culture, rather than continuing the traditional forms inherited from the classical literary tradition. The formation of the journal was a direct result of the suppressive post-coup political scene in which many progressive non-governmental literary gatherings were banned and faced heightened state censorship. The anthology was a pivotal first step in the proliferation of other avant-garde literary journals across Iran. For more on *Jong* and its impact on contemporary Iranian literary culture see: Idem, *Ba ‘d aq̄ ḡebel sāl* (after forty years), on *Jong-e Esfahan* (Esfahan anthology), formerly available online at haftan.khabgard.com/literature.

¹⁶⁴ Dorostkar and Aghighi, pg 23.

mean to expose them, condemn them, or hold them accountable). It is also not worth it for a writer to scrutinize a tiny moment in his/her society's history. Isn't it better if your story still holds a grip onto the collar even if the subject's face changes? If the Shah's face changes, his collar should remain gripped in the palm of your hands."¹⁶⁵¹⁶⁶ This commitment to a portable grip across time clearly forms both Golshiri's narrative and Farmanara's filmic imagery.

Shazdeh Ehtejab draws the viewer to the ways cultural documents are bound to and formed by the historical-material legacies of barbarism Benjamin pointed to; beyond being tied to a single time, the film uses materiality to expand beyond an indexical relationship to the singular, and allows for a critical perspective, as suggested by Golshiri and Farmanara's aesthetics, that actively engages the barbarism of the past, the present, and the future. Thus far I have traced the way Farmanara's embedding of Qajar photography within the moving-image draws the spectator's attention to the paradoxical form of images as both mechanisms of capture and as a medium for understanding historical and psychic structures of decay and deterioration. For what remains of this chapter, I turn my focus from the photographic temporality of stillness and how it is animated by the moving image to the more-heavily foregrounded character of the sonic in Farmanara's later film, *Tall Shadows of the Wind*, in order to analyze another way in which Farmanara is interested in latency as constitutive of both the cinematic medium and the social-historical world from which the film emerges. In this next section I argue that sound produces a radical temporality of presence that invokes the time of the spectator. All the while, the open temporal and spatial landscape of the film gestures towards a cosmology of otherworldly powers that resists an enclosed logic of indexicality or symbolic reference. By emphasizing the unlocatable and invisible, the film manifests other times, present, past, and future.

Manifesting the Strange: *Tall Shadows of the Wind*

In comparison to the non-linear temporality of *Shazdeh Ehtejab*, *Tall Shadows of the Wind* follows a relatively simple plot about a series of strange events that takes place in a village.¹⁶⁷ A group of villagers erect a scarecrow (Persian: *matarsak*) with the intent of bringing protection to their community, but as the film unfolds, their own creation becomes the source of their torment. When the central character of the film, Abdullah, adds facial features and a hat to the scarecrow and thus causes it to resemble him, his seemingly mundane acts set into motion supernatural and otherworldly

¹⁶⁵ Farzaneh Taheri, *Hamra ba Shazdeh Ehtejab* (Along with Prince Ehtejab). (Tehran). This book recounts the exchange between Hushang Golshiri and Kaveh Golestan.

¹⁶⁶ The entirety of this passage relies on the Persian idiom "*yagheb gereftan*" (literally "to grab by the collar"), which doesn't easily translate its meaning from Persian to English. As I explained, the literal translation doesn't directly carry the multiple meanings of holding accountable, condemning, criticizing, or denouncing, etc. These various meanings rely on the context in which the idiom is used in order to inflect the particular texture of significance. Golshiri uses the phrase three times to advance his claim. In my translation, I changed the idiom to reflect its meaning in English and kept a literal translation in the following two uses where it did not make sense to sacrifice the metaphor. The original Persian reads as such:

¹⁶⁷ *Tall Shadows of the Wind* can be read as part of a village topoi that emerged as a common landscape in new wave films, shifting away from the centrality of metropolitan centers, focusing on the lives of everyday people, and also at times, offering a realist canvas that could then spill over into surrealist and uncanny elements. As Naficy recounts in *A Social History of Iranian Cinema*, "The film [*The Cow*] established a kind of modernist 'village genre' in which the drama of self and other, Iran and the West, could unfold in favor of Iranian authenticity." (339).

forces that possess various townspeople one after another, gradually producing an atmosphere of fear and paranoia. The film follows the increasing disturbance to stability and tranquility within the village, showing that the return to normalcy is not only an impossibility, but that this strange force leaves ineradicable marks on the village.¹⁶⁸ The suspense around the scarecrow's uncertain effects along with the mystical possibilities around it are marked by the film's distinct emphasis on sound, both diegetic and non-diegetic. From the moment Abdullah decorates the scarecrow, the spectator hears the sound of crystals rustling in the background, suggestive of an occult happening that remains latent in the film's diegesis. By marking the scarecrow with human features, Abdullah activates or summons powers. That which is *heimlich* and simply familiar (the scarecrow and the added features that resemble Abdullah) become *unheimlich* and uncanny. In other words, the scarecrow is imbued with ghostly and unknown powers, transmuting its material knowability into a portal of unknown forces that afflict, possess, and degenerate the village and its people.

Made at the end of the Shah's regime as a co-production between Farmanara and the Ministry of Culture and Television, the film, like *Shazdeh Ehtejab* offers a critique of forces of power: how people create idols and what becomes of those idols. The film's political reception has cast a weight on the way critics have engaged the film's aesthetic features, generating a series of readings in which certain pivotal scenes are connected to symbolic referents. Naficy, for instance, suggests that it is testimony to "the power of symbolic filmmaking" that the film was viewed with disapproval by both the Pahlavi regime and the Islamic Republic.¹⁶⁹ I want to suggest that rather than being easily absorbed into predetermined readings, socially conscious or not, the film curiously oscillates between a network of potential symbols and elements of abstraction including sound, landscape, and composition that cannot simply be elided through the former. While the scarecrow is an example of a totem-like figure throughout the film, there are equally elements—especially in the sonic realm—that evade the visual referentiality of symbolist readings and require a form of attunement that attends to the invisible. It bears noting that the film itself is not distinguished by any clear markers of time, generating an open sense of temporality that could extend to a multiplicity of times. Unlike *Shazdeh Ehtejab*, which refers to distinct moments in national and trans-imperial historical time through the invocation of photographic images (even if this invocation is disjointed and schizophrenic in its unfolding), *Tall Shadows* rests on a relatively unmarked landscape, without situating where or when we are. The film's abstracted spatio-temporality did not protect it from becoming entrapped by the state's ideological categorizations. Indeed, the film was banned upon its release by both the Shah's government and later the Islamic government. Each state saw its own shadow in the film's political commentary, showing the film's potential for a multiplicity of interpretations. And yet, of course, neither state seeks to open

¹⁶⁸ The theme of the "stranger" or figure of intrusion has been a prevalent one in Iranian modernist aesthetics across both literary and filmic works. Gholam Hossein Saedi's collections of short stories, "Mourners of Bayal" ("Azadaran-e Bayal," 1964) and "Fear and Trembling" ("Tars o Larz," 1968) grapple with the multiple contours of alterity including racial, psychic, political and supernatural forms of "otherness." As mentioned earlier, the former was adapted into Dariush Mehrjui's *The Cow* (*Gav*, 1969), which also deals with the fear of intruders from another village in addition to the madness that ensues from radical loss. Other new wave films of this variety, which grapple with questions about political icons and surveillance include Bahram Beyzai's *The Stranger and the Fog* (*Gharibeh va Meh*, 1976) and the subject of this chapter, Farmanara's *Tall Shadows of the Wind* (*Sayehaye Boland-e Bad*), 1978.

¹⁶⁹ Naficy reads the film as a staging of the way traditional societies turn to religious or mystical forces for guidance, paralleling what takes place in the film with what takes place in the nation. In his reading of the dream scene, which I discuss later, he emphasizes the prescient conflict between Islamists and Marxists, and the film's ambiguous attention to the role of the intellectual. See: *A Social History of Iranian Cinema, Volume 2*, 377-80.

up interpretation, but rather, to foreclose the possibility of any critique of the state. The vision of the state's censors approaches the abstracted viscosity of the film through the knowable lens of the state's repressive apparatus. But what is lost here is a critical engagement with the film's formal experimentation. The film emphasizes what is radically unknowable, drawing the viewer into a world of latent and uncertain happenings.

Tall Shadows of the Wind invokes the invisible in its title with a visualization of the wind's shadow, exposing the paradox of summoning an elemental trace that resists visualization and remains immaterial. By immaterial I refer to the occurrences that are felt or heard but not seen. There is from the onset an invitation to encounter the film beyond its surface, and more precisely, beyond the realm of the visible. While the scarecrow serves as an important centering icon within the film, the power that emanates from it is felt beyond its physical or material presence. This is tied to the villager's foundational belief in the scarecrow's power; there is within the lifeworld of the village a fundamental belief in the scarecrow's potential animacy, one that begins with a hope in its protective capacity. According to Freud, the question of animacy (such as the impression that a lifeless object might be animate) is important in arousing an uncanny effect within the reader or spectator. And yet, while intellectual uncertainty around animacy might be a feature of an uncanny experience, it is important that uncertainty alone not remain the central focus of these experiences. If uncertainty is the fundamental feature behind aesthetic uncanniness, then resolution would easily dissipate the experience.¹⁷⁰ Thus, while *Tall Shadows of the Wind* begins with an atmosphere of doubt regarding the ominous scarecrow, its uncanniness is not limited to the uncertainty of whether the scarecrow is animate or inanimate. The question of animacy is from the onset folded into the devotional landscape of the film. The scarecrow generates an increasing power over the village, and what is most significant in producing the uncanny experience is the *unintended* and *undetermined* result of that power.

Sounding the Supernatural

The opening credits are set against an open field of grass, which rather than reflecting a motionless landscape is infused with the movement of wind throughout the field. The nondiegetic music that accompanies the opening scene begins with a playful and wondrous melody, and later turns into a fearful and foreboding sound. From these opening sounds, the film cuts to a vast ensemble of women and men facing the camera and enters the diegetic sound of the film. The camera pans from left to right, passing over each individual face and revealing the many bodies that make up the collective outside of the frame. Each face appears in a prayer pose, with the camera positioned as the object of devotion. The eerie quality of this scene is accentuated by the continuous sound of wind, which is amplified in the film's diegesis. The sound of wind is further amplified when it is suddenly punctured as the scene cuts to a striking sunset overlaid with the sound of people chanting. The scene is filled with silent and motionless bodies surrounded by the natural and supernatural presence of winds that draw the spectator's attention to another cosmology. The second scene reverses this by drawing the spectator's attention to an empty landscape filled with a human chorus of chants. By disassociating the sound of villagers from the villagers themselves, and again by doing so with the winds and their landscape, the film's composition of sound and image creates a disconnected relationship between the act and object of worship. In Freudian terms, this scene establishes an emphasis in drives over their objects.

The calm sound of wind rustling over the quiet devotional bodies cuts to the sound of collective chanting that sounds somewhere between an incantation and a wacry. If *Shazdeh Ehtejab* is composed of a series of returns, it is *Tall Shadows'* manifestation or activation of unknown futures that

¹⁷⁰ Sigmund Freud. "The Uncanny," 135-36.

powers its cinematic narrative. The wind of the previous scene serves as a threshold that manifests the invisible, or the not-yet-present. These voices appear to call upon a power, or a messianic force to come:

Beshavad ke oo be yari-e ma ayad	May he come to help us
Beshavad ke oo baraye goshayesh-e ma ayad	May he come to solve our riddle
Beshavad ke oo baraye dast siri-e ma ayad	May he come to care for us
Beshavad ke oo baraye delsuzi ma ayad	May he come to comfort us
Beshavad ke oo baraye charch-ye ma ayad	May he come to untie our knots
Beshavad ke oo baraye piruzi-ye ma ayad	May he come for our victory
Beshavad ke oo baraye sa'dat-e ma ayad	May he come for our happiness
Beshavad ke oo baraye dad gari-e ma ayad	May he come for our justice

This collective chanting emanates in the form of voice-over, overlaying an empty landscape with a gradient sunrise, which then cuts to a group of men digging a hole and then again, the camera cuts to a dark alley. The camera pans slowly into the alley, exposing its frame until the camera is fully subsumed by darkness; in a moment the camera cuts back to the luminated sunrise from before—this time, in total silence. From here, the camera returns to the scene of villagers digging a hole and we see they are erecting the scarecrow. The camera returns to the alley, but from a distanced perspective, and the collective chanting resurfaces in the voice-over. The installation of the scarecrow is paralleled with the ominous dark alley, signifying a relationship to the unknown, which both carries fear along with a paradoxical sense of faith and possibility in what powers will emerge. These anxiety-inducing panning shots of alleys and doorways or stills of the village or darkened fields emerge frequently throughout the film, interrupting the narrative chatter, and drawing the spectator's attention to the invisible movement passing through the village. The exquisite camerawork and juxtaposition of scenes culminates in Abdullah walking over to the scarecrow and anthropomorphizing it by drawing a face and giving it a hat, almost as though he has given his soul over to the scarecrow.

From here, the film proceeds in a building of anxiety around the figure of the scarecrow, a force that is felt through a magnetic field but never witnessed. This begins with the villagers' idle conversations around what they deem Abdullah's childishness in playing with the scarecrow. It is as though there is a fermenting awareness that interacting with the scarecrow might activate some unknown power. The consequences remain indistinct until Naneh Soghra (an old woman in the village) is possessed by unknown forces tied to the recently anthropomorphized scarecrow. The villagers attempt to locate the source of her affliction, all pointing to Abdullah who is accused of causing the frenzy because he was seen putting a belt on the scarecrow. All of a sudden, Naneh Soghra begins screaming at the sight of a crow and falls to the ground. In the midst of villagers encircling her, she gets up as though summoned by a supernatural force, picks up her bundle of sticks and walks along her way. This is the first episode of possession in the film, beginning a ripple effect, indicating the expanding reach of the scarecrow's power over the village people. While Abdullah initially dismisses any supernatural powers attributed to the scarecrow, the audience is invited into an audible world that lays the grounds for his consciousness to come into contact with what is brewing beneath the surface.

The foregrounding of sound over visuality is most clearly depicted in a scene that lasts almost eight minutes in which a villager is walking through the woods at night. The spectator hears a cacophony of sounds including the sound of water flowing through a creek, birds chirping, unidentifiable creatures croaking and the man's footsteps rustling through the leaves. The frame is almost entirely dark with only a stream of light coming from the creek and from the shadows atop tree trunks. As the camera pans to a medium close-up of the man struggling to light his cigarette and

then his lantern, the spectator bears witness to the invisible movement of wind and its connection to other supernatural powers. The struggle to find light builds into the suspense of the scene, which suddenly cuts to a dead bird. The seizing paranoia and fear of the villager's surroundings is sounded through the score, which takes on a suspenseful rhythm. Farmanara uses music to advance the plot, not just as an amplification of the occurrences on the screen but as an invisible character. Music suggests a psychic preoccupation, as part of the character's unconscious that is not fully apparent to the character themselves, thus, reflecting an experience of alterity. As something that cannot be communicated through language, Farmanara foregrounds music and other sonic elements as part of the film's unfolding. In this scene, the nondiegetic sound blurs with the diegetic conveying an ambiguous experience of the sonic and its reference to supernatural forces to the viewer. Nonetheless, it emphasizes the experience of possession through the sonic rather than the visual. As the villager runs blindly through the woods, he encounters the scarecrow, who is only partially exposed to the viewer. The villager runs out of the woods and the camera pans to a long shot of the village from an unspecified angle. He then runs into a home in which a transference occurs, suggesting that in becoming possessed he has also become a vector for the forces that possess him. The pregnant woman stares at him and screams. What ensues is Farmanara's camera work, which traverses several angles, moving in a shot-reverse-shot between the man and the woman and then horizontally from one end of the open terrace to the other, and then again through tree trunks¹⁷¹ in which all of the subjects are framed, including the man and woman and the villagers that surround them. These movements create a spatial vortex in which the transference of possessive forces is invisibly played out through the camera movements. The man lays possessed on the ground and the woman loses her baby in a miscarriage. These scenes show the way camera movement and the composition of diegetic and non-diegetic sound amplify the experience of the spectator to attend to the invisible.

Within the film, the world of spirit possession and supernatural forces is not opposed to one of rationality per se, but the film reveals that the preceding belief in superstitions enables the villager's fear of the possessive forces that have arrived. These are forces guided and felt by an attunement to invisible structures throughout the film. The immaterial presence of wind serves as a textured and sonic manifestation of supernatural forces in the visual and audible realm of the film's cinematic gaze.¹⁷² The blending of diegetic and nondiegetic sound transfers the experience of possession felt by the characters to the viewer. Additionally, the non-diegetic sound amplifies the senses experienced through the film. Beyond any physical evidence of the possessed body, sound is what communicates the experience of possession or affliction to the spectator. Upending a secular image associated with narrative film, the use of non-diegetic sound shifts the temporal, spatial, and cosmological coordinates of the film's realism, drawing the spectator into the realm of the supernatural.

Dreams of Revolt: Other Times, Other Worlds

After Abdullah attempts to confront the scarecrow—a confrontation that is made invisible to the spectator and only appears through a dark lens overlaid with the sound of a howl—he is physically afflicted by demonic forces, which manifest as a flesh-eating disease on one of his legs. The doctor prescribes an immediate amputation of his afflicted leg in order to survive. Realizing that this amputation would result in his full metamorphosis as a single-legged scarecrow, Abdullah refuses and

¹⁷¹ The colors, angles and framing of these tree trunks remain focused enough within the frame to recall Sohrab Sepehri's oil on canvas 'Tree Trunk' series from 1970-79. These abstract paintings are colored with earth tones and are characterized by their thick, textured brush strokes.

¹⁷² This technique is not unique to *Tall Shadows of the Wind*; we see this in earlier examples of the New Wave in both Nasser Taghva'i's *Bad-i Jinn* and Dariush Mehrjui's *Gav*.

the town schoolteacher states on his behalf “Abdullah doesn’t want to have one leg like... ‘it.’” The doctor asks: “who is ‘it’”? Without answering, the characters turn towards the window, signaling towards the outside. The scarecrow, which was of their own creation, has now become entirely alien to the townspeople. Rather than functioning as a clearly recognizable icon or symbol, the scarecrow is a force that acts upon the village all while its exact power remains both indiscernible and unanticipated. The emphasis on the scarecrow’s multiplying power throughout the film is brought to the fore in an iconic dream scene in which Abdullah leads the other villagers in a confrontation to oust the colony of scarecrows that have taken over the village. Positioned near the end of the film, as Abdullah has accepted his fate of death, the dream-scene offers a liberatory possibility against the propagating powers of the scarecrow. The scene begins with the camera panning from left to right, shaking as though moved by the wind. With each movement, an additional scarecrow is exposed, revealing the dozens of scarecrows that have multiplied across the field. From this angle, in the distance, the frame is filled with villagers approaching holding torches and red flags dressed in bright red robes.¹⁷³ The non-diegetic sound is composed of martial music with the cadence of the percussion matching the collective marching of the villagers. The power of this scene has extended beyond its revelation as an unfulfilled dream within the film’s narrative, becoming a focal point of attention by critics and censors in part connected to the censor’s fear of what it might incite in the spectator. The scene concludes with Abdullah waking up in silence, an affirmation that soon he will be taken by the flesh-eating disease. The camera pans to a dark window, expressing a surrendering to narrative darkness over narrative expression through language.

The film doesn’t end with a clear exorcism of the supernatural powers that possess the characters on the screen, however, the film’s non-prescriptive ending suggests that if there were a cure, it would exist in the dream-space. This revolt is not presented as the narrative conclusion that provides the villagers and spectators with a sense of closure; indeed, it punctures the “real” unfolding of events and is somewhat deflated of its power when revealed as merely a dream. But what then do we make of this pivotal scene? One could read *Tall Shadows* as a future forestalled with what follows the dream-scene as a deflation, or, as a future that does not hold. But while these readings are indeed formed by their post-revolutionary reception, the film is itself less invested in a storyline than in a series of impressions, or sensibilities. If in other scenes, *Tall Shadows* is formed by a series of unlocatable landscapes, the revolt scene fills the emptiness of that space suggesting that this revolutionary manifestation is always already mobilizing beneath the surface. The landscape, shot from above, appears as an amphitheater, a site for revolutionary performance, such that when we return to the empty landscape, we remember that its emptiness is not a determination of barrenness but gestures towards the latent and invisible powers that exist therein. Rather than materializing a paranoid-symbolic reading imposed by censors, the scene offers a meditation on the boundaries of visibility and invisibility as well as presence and absence. The still shots of landscapes, empty or filled with various angles of the village, serve as portable offerings for spectators to imagine what might have taken place therein, or as a temporal chasm that opens the world to what is yet to come.

¹⁷³ While my discussion of the film focuses on sound, the dream scene is also amplified by Farmanara’s use of color. Originally, scenes were filmed in black and white and then color was added later in the editing process. This sharpened the appearance of the villagers and the red flags they carried in contrast to the muted landscape, giving the viewer an augmented experience of color on the screen. Again, Farmanara’s layering of early cinema’s black and white technology with color adds another detail to the medium’s temporal disjointedness by making this use of black and white invisible and serving as an example of the way in which reality is mediated. Black and white cinema carries the mediation of reality within its form in that it converts life in color to black and white, and so the composition of this scene is also tied to multiple technological moments in the history of cinema.

Between the Orders and Disorders of Abstraction

My readings have aimed to conduct a formal analysis of each film's medium-specific features to show how visual and sonic currents are tied to both a historical "return of the repressed" and carried out through a self-reflexive engagement with the cinematic medium, paralleling the chronology of photography as the basis of the film strip and sound as a later feature of the moving-image. These returns are expressed and experienced differently in the two films, but each is connected to formal means of abstraction and concerns around symbolism and indexicality that plague the aesthetic and political terrain. The visual materiality of *Shazdeh Ehtejab* produces a transhistorical experience in which multiple temporalities meet, afflicting one another, therefore demanding a critical reading of the present on the part of the spectator. The visualization of multiple times and orders of power is supplemented by the time of the present in which the Shah's reign enters into the screen as another invisible object of critique. The cinematic apparatus in *Shazdeh Ehtejab* turns to the photographic medium to activate the narratives of multiple generations of power while additionally pointing to their interpenetrating decay. This relationship to visual technology as both a device that frames and chronicles at the same time that it captures a single moment and obscures what is left outside of the frame is intrinsic to the multiple critiques opened up by the film. Indeed, for the storyline of *Shazdeh Ehtejab*, the transformation of Golshiri's novella into a film was an important component of its reception, culminating in greater audience circulation in its film form. In comparing the reception of Golshiri's novella to Farmanara's filmic rendering, we see that the film also enlisted greater scrutiny from state censors. Golshiri was actually arrested after the release of the film, rather than through the publication of his novella which was released four years prior. The distribution of the film created an interest in the text, thus re-enlivening a life around the text that had previously remained dormant and outside the purview of state censors.

Instead of assuming the logic of censors that approach images, signs, and movements through the image of their own reflection, my readings have suggested that while Farmanara's films engage with a series of indexical referents, his moving-images are formed by a temporal and spatial abstraction that allow them to carry multiple critical perspectives. In other words, both films are not determined by pre-conceived symbolic referents as the state might claim but tend towards a visual and audible abstraction that remains open to the multiple times and forms of power that have plagued the 20th century. Whereas early modernists in the global canon carried forward an understanding of abstraction as a lack of reference, the concept of abstraction I describe carries the potential of referring to multiple objects and experiences of power, speaking across times within a transnational landscape. This open referentiality is neither entrapped by symbols nor can it be wholly removed from its history of emergence but is constituted by internal and external movements. This oscillating movement between symbolic referents and plays in abstraction (temporal, spatial, and formal) serve as an occupying current of the new wave films at large and emphasize the limits of locating a critique of the nation solely within allegorical narratives. In an attempt to narrate or visualize an alternative experience of Iranian modernity, these films de-naturalize the linear and entangled trajectories of Iran's experiences of repetitive despotic regimes and colonial modernity, in order to attend to the latent psychic experiences that avoid containment, and therefore also carry resounding echoes in other temporal and geographic contexts. Farmanara's commitment to producing a vision of Iranian modernity positioned within an anti-fascist global film culture of the 60s and 70s alongside a directorial attunement to the history of the visual form exposes the limits of the nation as the absolute referent and marks a commitment to intersecting frames of aesthetic modernism.

Chapter 4: Possession as Form: The Modernist Temporality of Zār

On the notion of modernity. It is a vexed question. Is not every era "modern" in relation to the preceding one? It seems that at least one of the components of "our" modernity is the spread of the awareness we have of it. The awareness of our awareness (the double, the second degree) is our source of strength and our torment.

Édouard Glissant

The nocturnal world is dominated by antagonistic forces engaged in unrelenting conflict. Against each power is opposed another capable of undoing what the first has created. You can recognize power by its capacity to introduce itself among its subjects, to "mount" them, take possession of them, including of their body and above all of their "double." It is this taking of possession that makes of power a true force.

Achille

Mbembe

Modernism's Possessive Powers

Affliction suggests capture or entanglement with external occupying forces of a political, psychic, or supernatural variety. Across modern Iranian film and fiction, the affliction of modernity has been registered as madness, hysteria, or possession.¹⁷⁴ The relationship between affliction, the Persian *gereftāri*,¹⁷⁵ to be captured, seized, or captivated, and modernity, as a temporal period formed by aesthetic, political and cultural processes, is one that has plagued the Iranian experience at both the level of the individual psyche and the collective. Through a close reading of the short story "Sutra,"¹⁷⁶ written in the decade prior to the Islamic Revolution of 1979, by Iranian author, translator, and scholar Simin Daneshvar (1921-2012), this chapter analyzes how Daneshvar's formal and temporal configurations of possession stage a multi-temporal experience of modernity and offers a framework for understanding the political, national, and cultural projects that consumed 20th century Iran. The stylistic use of spirit possession exists both within "Sutra" and in other instances of modernist film and fiction to draw the reader into the realm of immaterial supernatural forces and the political and material experiences of being overcome by spirits as I will discuss below. "Sutra" is the hallucinatory account of Nakhoda Abdol, an Indo-Iranian captain who has recently lost his ship in a sea accident. Afflicted by the melancholic memories of his violent past, Abdol undergoes a zār ritual to find inner peace. Zār is a collective Afro-Iranian ritual practiced in southern Iranian port-cities (and in East Africa) through which local healers help tame winds that have taken over the body of the afflicted to come to terms with the winds that have possessed them. The ritual involves participants sitting in a circle around the possessed, beating drums, chanting and connecting the individual possessed subject with the expanded psychic worlds of community members who aid in channeling spirits in natural and supernatural forces. As Abdol goes through the ritual, he recalls non-chronological fragmented memories of his past, punctuated by the sound of drums and movement

¹⁷⁴ Hamid Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema, Volume 2: The Industrializing Years, 1941-1978*, (Duke University Press: 2011), 341.

¹⁷⁵ *Gereftāri* also conveys the form of snarl or knot, encompassing both a relation of power as in meaning of affliction in English but also as a form of entanglement.

¹⁷⁶ Simin Daneshvar, *Be Ki Salām Konām (To Whom Do I Say Hello), Sutra*. (Tehran, Iran: 1980), 231-257.

In Daneshvar's poetics, possession forms the narrative structure of the text by drawing the reader into both the embodied rhythm of the ritual as well as the protagonist's psychic past: "I sway to the rhythm of the drum. I was moving and I didn't know it."¹⁷⁷ The parallel between the possessed protagonist and the effect of possession on the form of the text constructs the multi-temporal and multi-sited experience of the narrative: "The beat of the drums and the words they're singing carry my thoughts to a thousand places."¹⁷⁸ Unlike examples of European modernism in which stream of consciousness is used as a means of accessing the individual's psyche, "Sutra's" access to these thoughts is mediated through the Afro-Iranian *zār*¹⁷⁹ ritual, which is a collective and publicly practiced ritual and a belief system in supernatural "winds" or "spirits" local to the southern port-cities of Iran¹⁸⁰. This experience is rendered in Daneshvar's prose: "Suddenly they begin beating the drums again, and my heart sinks. The singing roars in the wilderness and the plain and over the sea. All the terrors of life are massed in my soul."¹⁸¹ The entanglement of the ritual and the immaterial forces expand the protagonist's soul and connect it to the collective histories of Iran's past: its "semi-colonial" experience of being occupied by Western forces, its elided history of slavery, and post- coup politics, which formed the atmosphere of paranoia and fomented the political trajectories of Iran until the Islamic Revolution. The experience of spirit possession includes a compromised will to power moved by forces external to the self. Achille Mbembe develops this notion in the context of the way in which Blackness, and the figure of the slave as the first iteration of capitalism, came to be endowed with the power struggles of invisible forces in the nocturnal world, "dominated by antagonistic forces engaged in unrelenting conflict"¹⁸². Possession is therefore not simply the narrative condition but is a condition of relating between subjects and encounters with forces of power displaying the way in which the nation-state can both be subjected to external colonial forces and the agent of subjection. In this chapter, I foreground the effects of the Afro-Iranian *zār* ritual local to the south of Iran on the shaping of the narrative structure of "Sutra." My reading locates the text within a tradition of intermedial modernist Iranian aesthetic forms; it then turns to the way *zār* produces an entanglement of abstract and realist modes of narration that respond to Daneshvar's own call to create aesthetic forms of narrativity that are attuned to historical-political conditions. Beyond anthropological perspectives that render *zār* as the object of a modernist gaze, it becomes a narrative vehicle for staging a critique of the temporal and psychic conditions of modernity itself.

¹⁷⁷ Daneshvar, 160.

¹⁷⁸ Daneshvar, 161.

¹⁷⁹ While my use of *zār* refers predominantly to the ritual practice of taming winds (of which *zār* is also a type), the meanings of the word "zār" in Persian include desolate, feeble, languid, and weak; according to Boddy (1989), the term *zār* carries etymological roots from the Persian use of the Arabic *zahr*, meaning 'he visited.' The term is pronounced *zahr*, meaning 'he became visible, perceptible, or manifest.' It also carries similar etymological roots to the term "*zāri*," which implies a bodily act of weeping. Each of these roots carries into the context of spirit possession, where spirits become visible by entering the human realm through the body, displacing the *ruh* (soul) of the body.

¹⁸⁰ As a ritual bound to culture and geography, *zār* manifests in different ways based on its local culture meaning that even if *zār* exists in Somalia and in Iran, the spirits and their patterns of behavior would manifest differently in each region. Studies about the cultural legacy of *zār* in Iran have garnered research interest in Iranian studies in the last several years, and yet its origins have remained somewhat ambiguous and contested, with some scholars arguing that *zār* came to Iran from East Africa, while others argue that the ritual preexisted the arrival of Africans in Iran.

¹⁸¹ Daneshvar, 170.

¹⁸² Achille Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, (Duke University Press: 2013). 136.

I begin with a discussion of the dominant discourses of modernity that consumed political thinkers and literati of 20th-century Iran, namely the debate between western influence and local traditions. Bridging a conception of possession bound to power dynamics and imperial forces, my engagement with *zār* builds from the literati's fascination with the Iranian south and aesthetic depictions of *zār*. These earlier visual, literary, and anthropological renderings combine a modernist drive towards the "other" with an ethnographic sensibility to document coastal cultures at the nation's peripheries and how these regions ethnic, linguistic, and cultural composition disrupt the uniformity attributed to the nation's metropolitan center. Finally, I provide close readings of "Sutra" to focus on the ways in which Daneshvar's aesthetic rendering of *zār* as a form moves between individual and collective psychic registers as a means of working through Iran's experience of modernity.

In thinking about possession, I am attentive to its multiple meanings, both in relation to supernatural and elemental forces that consume the psyche, the body, and the soul, as well as to possession's proprietary meanings, which form the temporal and ideological orders of modernity's founding structures of violence. The project of colonial modernity begins with a territorial conquest, the enslavement of bodies, the time of progress possessing and displacing the time of the past, the old, the mythic, and the other. As an epistemic project modernity has also been possessed with philosophical ideas and their reflections in political, historical, and aesthetic movements. In addition to the psychic forces of possession in the realm of the supernatural, possession is also a feature of the political realm. Iran's 20th century was possessed by two major revolutions: *Enghelāb-e Mashrūteh* (the Constitutional Revolution, 1905-1911),¹⁸³ which led to the establishment of a Parliamentary government in Iran and opened Iran to a period characterized by industrialization reforms, technological advances, and increased literacy. The development of print media created more contact between cities, increasing the spread of literary periodicals including a surge of translations of European literary and philosophical works and subsequently, a search for "new aesthetic principles"¹⁸⁴ in the form of new poetic forms, Iranian novels and short stories. With these developments also came modernity's global ordering systems: increased homogenization, militarization, and a new form of authoritarian rule. The Shah's repressive trajectory of modernization laid the ground for dissenting political factions including Marxists, Islamists, and Constitutionalists, with divisions and overlaps across each of these groups. Of course, many of these tensions led to the Islamic Revolution of 1979, whose revolutionary ideals have gone through decades of transfiguration and continue to organize Iran's contemporary political landscape. These internal transformations were, from the beginning, shaped by and entangled with external forces of power, cultural and imperial.

Never formally colonized, Iran's experience with colonial powers is not easily placed within conventional narratives of postcoloniality, and yet a relationship to these external powers marked both individual and collective psychic formations. Iran's oil-rich land made it vulnerable to the extended

¹⁸³ For more on how the constitution changed Iran's history of modernity, see: Ervand Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran*. (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 45-49 and *Iran Between Two Revolutions*, Princeton University Press, 1982.

¹⁸⁴ Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak charts the way the Constitutional Revolution of 1905-11 produced a national effort to search for new aesthetic principles, resulting in a surge of translations. The Constitutional Revolution was linked to the French Revolution and thus produced a major curiosity towards nineteenth century French literature among other later emerging European translations (101-102). The larger aims of the book, *Recasting Persian Poetry: Scenarios of Poetic Modernity in Iran* (1995), seeks to trouble the vast gulf drawn between modernist and traditional literary forms. Specifically, Karimi-Hakkak argues that where *shehr-e naw* (new poetry) was presented in literary historiography as a radical departure from classical poetic forms bound to rhyme and meter, these new forms maintained constant engagement with classical and traditional styles.

reach of British and Soviet imperialism, with the Soviets taking control of the north and the British active in the south.¹⁸⁵ Entering the scene later, the Americans collaborated with the British in order to take control of Iranian oil plants in Bushehr, leading to the *coup d'état* of 1953,¹⁸⁶ a key historical rupture that consumed the political atmosphere of the time. For Iran, the semi-colonial experience meant being possessed by both external and internal forces, specifically the monarchical powers of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi whose political vision of bringing Iran to the world stage was tied to the establishment of the militarized force of SAVAK (*Sāzeman-e Ettelâ'at va Amniyat-e Keshvar*, "National Organization for Security and Intelligence"), also known as the Shah's secret police, and political concessions that gave the west power in determining Iran's project of modernization in the shape of influence over the military, culture, and natural resources. As a result, Iran's 20th-century landscape staged these often contestatory struggles and visions of modernity. Modernity became the condition of possibility for progress and development, while its forced imposition was felt, by those outside of the ruling elite, as a source of affliction.

Among words used to refer to the general sense of possession or affliction in "Sutra" are *asir shodan*, which also means to be taken prisoner, *dargir shodan* (to be involved or entangled), or *gereftār shodan* (to be occupied). These various forms of possession— which gesture toward imprisonment, colonial domination, and the experience of enslavement—are disclosed to the reader in the larger frame of the narrative's ebbs and flows, itself driven by the temporal movements of affliction and healing. Possession produces a multi-temporal experience, which encounters psychic elements of the past within the embodied presence of the ritual. Expanding the concept of modernity beyond a site or epoch of origin, Daneshvar's use of cyclical and elementally powered metaphors in "Sutra" drives our understanding of modernity as a recurrent experience that happens again and again, in all of its transhistorical and global currents. This embodied experience of the now also manifests dormant capacities that shape the relationship to the future. Rather than tend toward a conception of modernity as an endless pursuit of novelty, this relationship to history recalls Walter Benjamin's model of modernity as eternal return.¹⁸⁷

Modernism's concern with temporality has produced countless auto-critiques that rethink the question of what, when, and where constitutes the modern. In his essay "The End of Temporality,"¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁵ Iran's semi-colonial experience does not fit into the prevailing state narratives of postcolonial temporality, which are marked by colonization as the beginning, followed by a period of anticolonial resistance, and finally, independence struggle and national sovereignty. This telos of emancipation has of course, been debunked by scholars of postcolonial studies including Ella Shohat, Talal Asad, Gayatri Spivak, David Scott, Stuart Hall, among others, many of whom have argued for a conception of postcoloniality as a contestatory site of knowing with various trajectories and politics of location. Nonetheless, Iran's experience of semi-coloniality has received little attention in postcolonial scholarship perhaps in part due to the ambiguity and the novelty around the "semi" as an experience of colonial rule. The prefix itself invokes the meanings of "partial," "incomplete," "quasi," "half," emphasizing at once the spatial and temporal forms of encroaching imperial powers, as well as the extent to which local forces maintained power or prevented "total" colonial rule.

¹⁸⁶ The 1953 *coup d'état* and the ongoing unveiling of the US and British involvement in it has produced a real atmosphere of distrust and paranoia against western powers, the US in particular. The coup in Iran was the beginning of a new reign of imperial power orchestrated by both Britain and the US; the US has continued to topple governments with neither the expenditure nor territorial occupation required of conventional forms of colonial rule. For more on the British and American role in the coup, see Taghi Amirani's 2019 documentary film *Coup 53*.

¹⁸⁷ Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," (*Illuminations*, 1940).

¹⁸⁸ Fredric Jameson, "The End of Temporality," (*Critical Inquiry*. 2003).

Fredric Jameson articulates an account of modernism that emphasizes its incompleteness, centering an "uneven development," which he argues foregrounds its occupation with time. Where modernization assumes a technologically driven, forward-moving rhythm, even its heyday, "only a minute percentage of the social and physical space of the West could be considered either fully modern in technology or production or substantially bourgeois in its class culture."¹⁸⁹ This "incompleteness" revises previous historic conceptions of modernism and exposes the partially industrialized and semi-feudal conditions that brought on the emergence of varying modernisms across the globe. Thus, within the aesthetic and philosophical fields of various modernisms, the artist is occupied with a world that is in flux and asynchronous. And yet, Jameson's proposition assumes that there is such a thing as a "complete" modernism, an "end" in sight, so to speak. Bound to a dialectical model, Jameson's assertion attempts to provincialize Europe's experience of modernity by locating the multiple experiences of time within the geographic confines of the city and the village. And yet this structure of belatedness fails to fully reckon with the effects of modernity amid these spaces beyond the frame of "completed" modernity. Against both colonially derived models of modernity and nationally-bound narratives of rupture, revolution, and progress, which have both been widely critiqued by scholars of postcolonial studies, Iran's 20th-century aesthetic movements produced alternative narratives of modernity that were formed by the shifting cultural understandings of the old and the new, of order and disorder, while refashioning traditions that link the past to the present. Artists, filmmakers and writers produced literature, films, and artworks that meditated on modernist temporal experiences, while also attuning these works to the loss of life-worlds, traditions, and material conditions of the past.

A dominating struggle in Iran's relationship to modernity was the threat of *Gharbzadegi*¹⁹⁰ (Westoxication, or Occidentosis), which was conceived as a social illness encroaching on Iran's intellectual, cultural, and political sovereignty. The theory of westoxication was developed in the polemical monograph of the same title by Jalal Al-e Ahmad (1923-1969), who was a novelist, short story writer, political thinker, sociologist, and also Simin Daneshvar's husband. As Mehrzad Boroujerdi explains in his book *Iranian Intellectuals and the West: The Tormented Triumph of Nativism* (1996), there is no consensus on the exact translation of the monograph. Al-e Ahmad's *Gharbzadegi* has been translated as "Weststruckness," "Occidentosis," "Plagued by the West," "Western-mania," "Euromania," "Xenomania," "Westitis," "Westamination," and, finally, "Westoxication." Each of these instances refers to the predominance of the west as an imperial force and the resulting pathological relationship that emerged in Iran, which entailed an obsession with and a privileging of western culture, knowledge, and systems of belief. With varying degrees of emphasis, each of these translations attempts to carry over the medical metaphor that denotes Iran's relationship to the west as a social illness. The monograph raised consequential philosophical ideas on discourses of nativism and *gharbzadegi*, as well as orientalism and occidentalism, functioning as an Iranian antecedent of Edward Said's *Orientalism*. Daneshvar and Al-e Ahmad's partnership undoubtedly entangled her in more ways than one with *gharbzadegi*'s philosophical and sociological project that diagnosed the 20th-century predominance of the West's cultural, historical, and political project as an illness that plagued the non-west, and specifically Iran. It was the circulation of these critiques of the hegemonic power of the west as well as an imagining of a "return to the roots" that emerged as a politics of populist Islam that many believe led to the Islamic Revolution of 1979.¹⁹¹

¹⁸⁹ Ibid, 699.

¹⁹⁰ Jalal Al-e Ahmad, *Gharbzadegi*. (Tehran: Nashr-e Jameh-Daran, 2006/1384).

¹⁹¹ For more on the political visions of Islamic modernity that shaped intellectual and popular discourse preceding the Islamic Revolution, see: Ali Mirsepassi's *Intellectual Discourse and the Politics of*

In an interview¹⁹² with Simin Daneshvar conducted by the influential fiction writer, critic, and editor Hushang Golshiri (1938-2000), these two figures of the Iranian literati engage in a broad conversation about prevailing philosophical trends within Persian literary history and global examples that mark the way literary texts reflect the temporal moments from which they emerge. In conversation with Golshiri, Daneshvar argued that while mysticism was the prevailing structure of literature from the time of Attar to Hafiz, it was *gharbzadegi* — an engagement with occupying western powers, their operative structures of dispossession as well as cultural influence — that became the dominating framework during her time. Despite serving as Al-e Ahmad's primary intellectual confidant, Daneshvar's work reflects a distinct set of ideas and relationship to form that departed from Al-e Ahmad's rigid sense of politically committed literature. While her literary production was unavoidably bound up in the historical and political concerns of the era, it was her insistence upon the way a text could both reflect a world and create it through its style that allowed her work to endure beyond the political ideologies that permeated her time.

Daneshvar's canonical and best-selling realist novel *Suvashun* (The Mourning of Siyavash) is grounded in the political realities of the everyday, with attention to the domestic spheres of women and a representation of colloquial uses of language, particularly the local Shirazi dialect. With an awareness of the social, national, and colonial orders of the time, the novel responds to some of the political concerns raised in Al-e Ahmad's *Gharbzadegi*, while also focusing on the domestic realities and capacities of women in a way that departs from Al-e Ahmad's exclusively masculine vision of nation-building.¹⁹³ Its lyrical prose, however, surpasses the realm of political documentary and privileges aesthetic style. The novel is conventionally interpreted as an anti-colonial narrative addressing both British occupation of the south of Iran and major shifts in land reform. The narrative focuses on the female protagonist Zari, and her inner struggles and anxieties are presented in prose colored with sensory and experiential description. After her husband is murdered for his political ideals, Zari defiantly holds a burial ceremony despite the state's order to suppress her husband's funeral procession. In this ceremonial act of resistance, Zari, who within the first half of the novel acts primarily within the domain of domestic space, broadens her agentive capacity to a public act of mourning in Shiraz's central and iconic shrine Shah Cheragh.¹⁹⁴ The loss experienced here is felt at the level of both family and nation; public, private, and personal loss blend together, creating a final poetic

Modernization: Negotiating Modernity in Iran (2000) and Mehrzad Boroujerdi's *Iranian Intellectuals and the West: The Tormented Triumph of Nativism* (1996).

¹⁹² Hushang Golshiri, *Jedal-e naqd ba naqqash dar asar-e Simin Daneshvar* (The encounter of the artist and the art in the work of Simin Daneshvar), (Tehran, 1997).

¹⁹³ For more on gender dynamics in Iranian discourses of nationalism, see: Nasrin Rahimieh's "Women and Domesticity in Modern Persian Literature" *New Horizons: Commentaries on Modern Iran* (March 4, 2010).

¹⁹⁴ Zari's insistence on a public performance of burial as a form of state resistance brings to mind Sophocles's Antigone who also participates in public mourning as an act of defiance against the state. In *Antigone's Claim: Kinship Between Life and Death* (2012), Judith Butler registers the impossibility of mourning within Antigone's public act, describing the act as a melancholic gesture: "Her melancholia, if we can call it that, seems to consist in this refusal to grieve that is accomplished through the very public terms by which she insists on her right to grieve. Her claim to entitlement may well be the sign of a melancholia at work in her speech. Her loud proclamations of grief presuppose a domain of the ungrievable." In Daneshvar's *Suvashun*, Zari's subversive public act of grieving serves as an invitation to mourn, like Antigone's mourning, the fact that conditions of the possibility of this mourning remain radically uncertain. Daneshvar lays out the precariousness of mourning as an end, exposing a resistance to becoming assimilated into national narratives of closure.

image of sisterhood and solidarity in the face of that loss. Against a political backdrop of semi-colonial occupation and changes brought on by the Shah's modernization efforts, *Suvashun* presents Zari's agentive power through collective mourning as a defiant act of resistance on behalf of her family, and subsequently the nation. These dynamics have made *Suvashun* a classic narrative of Iran's struggle for self-determination, but the novel's formal stylistics go beyond mere representation, a characterization Daneshvar herself has resisted.¹⁹⁵

Though *Suvashun* has been lauded within national narratives as well as literary histories of contemporary Iranian fiction for its symbolic power and historical-political significance, Daneshvar's corpus of short stories, including the collections *Shabri Chun Behesht* (A City Like Paradise) and *Be Ki Salaam Konam?* (To Whom Should I Say Hello?) has received much less critical attention. This relative neglect is likely due to the way these stories both aesthetically and formally disrupt a stable narrative of the nation. Daneshvar's short stories are peopled with marginal figures who are radically excluded from both the family structure and the nation-state, including slaves, abused domestic workers, newly married women who want to leave their husbands, lost or abandoned children, or, as in "Sutra," a sailor possessed by spirits (or, winds). While the novel is often thought of as the primary literary form through which the nation is imagined as a "whole,"¹⁹⁶ Daneshvar's short stories rupture this wholeness and instead serve as shards that enter from the nation's edges. Daneshvar's ideas about literature were informed by governing theories of committed literature, the autonomy of a work of art, and the role of the author. Her short stories operate as fragments that entered the inner worlds of characters, fragments she hoped would collectively reflect the dynamism of Iranian society, as she herself notes Balzac had done so effectively in depicting 19th-century France.

A native of Shiraz, Daneshvar set much of her writing in the south of Iran. "Sutra," which takes place in the Persian Gulf region, emerges from a trend in modernist Iranian aesthetics that decentered Tehran-centric metropolitan narratives and turned to the stories of ethnic, racial, and cultural others within Iran's borders. This maritime setting is formed by Iran's history of trade, transregional encounters, and semi-colonial experiences throughout the 20th-century, in contrast to the many accounts of Iran's modern history which focus on the nation's metropolitan centers. Indeed, it was the West's obsession with taking control of Iran's oil fields, located mostly in the southern region, that motivated the US- and British-led coup, which shaped not only the continuing political conditions in the post-'53 era, but also fueled the political imaginaries that led to the Islamic Revolution. Situated between land and sea with several significant port-cities, including Abadan, Bushehr, Bandar Abbas, and islands off the coast like Qeshm, Hormuz, and Kish, the region is central to cross-cultural encounters that call for a study of Iran beyond the nation and draw attention to the relations between national and extra-national structuring powers. Committed to the role of the

¹⁹⁵ See Simin Daneshvar's conversation (*goftegoo*) with Hushang Golshiri in *Jedal-e naqd ba naqqash dar asar-e Simin Daneshvar* (The encounter of the artist and the art in the work of Simin Daneshvar), where she rebukes the writer and critic's "surface" (*sat-i*) readings of realist narratives, which include to some extent, *Suvashun*, but mostly Mahmoud Dowlatabadi's *Kelidar* as a text that is uncritically dismissed as mostly "descriptive" rather than literary in style.

¹⁹⁶ Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* draws a comparison between the historical chronology of serialized newspapers in urban metropolises and the form of the novel, which represents simultaneous actions in "homogenous empty time" (194). Like the print media that produced national consciousness, novels bound to historical frames and sociological settings were tied to a national model of historical unfolding. As Anderson describes: "The cosmic clocking which had made intelligible our synchronic transoceanic pairings were increasingly felt to entail a wholly intramundane, *serial* view of social causality; and this sense of the world was now speedily deepening its grip on Western imaginations" (194).

contemporary author as a “witness” to modern society, Daneshvar’s writing was bound up with ethical intentions that involved the uncovering of modernity’s historical wounds.

In a speech she gave at the Iran-German Cultural Centre on the problems of modern art (*masa’el-e honar-e mu’aser*)¹⁹⁷ in 1977,¹⁹⁸ Daneshvar expresses a rejection of abstraction and individualism in modern literary form. These criticisms of modernism are crystallized for her in Franz Kafka (1883-1924) whom she calls a quintessential modern, or “pioneer” (*pishkesvat*) of the movement. Daneshvar disavows what she considers modernism’s overwhelming psychic individualism, a feature she identifies as culminating in a retreat from the social realm, as clearly depicted in her analysis of Kafka’s “The Metamorphosis” (1915). In Daneshvar’s view, this alienated subject came into being through Kafka’s creation of a character,

“who loses hope and has no purpose in life. [This character] turns away from reality to seek refuge in a subjective world filled with loneliness, anxiety and nihilism (*hich engari*). [This character’s] life passes with a feeling of absolute apathy.”¹⁹⁹

Rather than creating a feeling of connectedness (*ham peyvastegi*) through narrative, Daneshvar argues, Kafka’s prose is devoid of such possibility and instead creates a hollowed experience of the realities of the social world.

Furthermore, Daneshvar argues that modernism’s stylistic emphasis on abstraction dilutes “reality” and even in cases where modernists engage with political reality, their depiction is so deeply anxiety-ridden, it becomes impossible to imagine another world from the perceived nightmare. This emphasis on subjective alienation, Daneshvar argues, necessarily forecloses an engagement with contemporary political concerns. It should be noted that Daneshvar’s disapproving comments about “modern art” were made in the company of fellow writers and poets, as well as an audience well aware of the Shah’s tightened censorship, creating unpredictable conditions for writing. As Rivanne Sandler points out, “For some three decades, the mainstream of the literary community had devoted itself, not without difficulty and a certain degree of danger, to the twin issues of literary commitment to social (and political) progress and protection of the indigenous culture.”²⁰⁰

While “Sutra” is not discussed in the speech, Daneshvar refers to the story in conversation with Hushang Golshiri as a clear stylistic departure from the greater literati’s occupation with westoxication as the central social and cultural force to be grappled with. For all her misgivings about Kafka’s modernity, her own fiction and the worlds she depicts reflect an engagement with an emerging modernity in Iran, even as it is admittedly expressed in a different form than we see in Kafka. In Persian, *honar-e mu’aser*, which can be translated as contemporary or modern art is a temporally laden term that can be used interchangeably with what we might call aesthetic modernism. The use of *mu’aser* in Persian ranged from literature to artworks that were of the here and now, undermining the narrative frame of belatedness or derivativeness ascribed to non-western 20th-century art and artists. Surprisingly, Daneshvar’s use of “*honar-e mu’aser*” resides primarily in a definition of modernism as a distinctive period and aesthetic style located in and emerging from Europe. Another curious point is

¹⁹⁷ Simin Daneshvar, “Masa’el-e honar-e mu’aser,” *Dah shab, Shabha-ye sha eran va nevisandegan dar anjoman-e fabangi-ye Iran-Alman*, (Tehran, Amir Kabir, 1357/1978), 11-15. Hereafter *Masa-el*.

¹⁹⁸ The speech was a part of ten nights of readings, talks, and discussions between writers, poets, artists, and intellectuals in what was a markedly open exchange of conversation and ideas among the literati and members of the public.

¹⁹⁹ *Masa’el*, 14. This translation is my own.

²⁰⁰ Rivanne Sandler, “Simin Daneshvar’s ‘Model’: A Literary Sign of Modernity,” (Istituto per l’Oriente C. A. Nallino, 2003), 197-218.

the fact that throughout this speech, she references only “western” thinkers (Hegel, Heidegger, Balzac, Aristotle, Lukacs, etc) while advocating for a literary style that incorporates Iranian traditions and histories. There is almost something of an unspoken assertion that these are global thinkers available for all, and yet, she doesn’t fully grapple with this disjuncture.

Curiously, she doesn’t discuss Iran’s engagement with modernist aesthetics whether in the more temporally bounded and canonically “modernist” writings of Sadegh Hedayat or in an understanding of modernism that is constituted by multiple and divergent temporalities; such omissions are in line with positioning modernism as an external encroaching force, perhaps more tied to the political pressures of modernization than to imaginative possibilities within aesthetic form. Daneshvar would likely not have considered herself a modernist at any point in her career, but, I argue, her use of *zār* in “Sutra,” particularly the investment in alterity as a reflection on power and as a constitutive feature of the text’s form expands upon a legacy of Iranian aesthetic modernism that turned to the cultural forms of the nation’s “others.” This turn inadvertently positions “Sutra” not only within a body of work from the Iranian milieu but also within the transnational stylistic registers of global modernist forms, including an American appropriation of Black dialect²⁰¹, Latin American uses of local or folk art, or, contrastingly, Picasso’s famous fascination with African masks. Daneshvar’s rejection of “modernism”—which again, only engages one variety of aesthetic modernism—proposes that this is not an empty term but has carried divergent political and aesthetic meanings for various locales.

Against this model of aesthetic modernism, Daneshvar proclaims herself a social realist, a genre she differentiates from socialist realism, which pre-determines political ends within the narrative frame. What is of utmost concern to Daneshvar in Western examples of modernism is the increasing distancing effect between individual psychic anxieties and collective political formations. This profound compulsion to represent human alienation is rooted, she writes, in the psychoanalytic tradition, specifically the writings of Freud. Daneshvar critiques these literary and philosophical renderings of the modern human subject whose alienated state only drives them to turn further inward, deepening their psychic withdrawal from societal problems instead of turning this alienation into an interrogation of the external world. While Daneshvar’s comments reveal a prevailing political sensibility of commitment among the intellectuals of her time, it bears repeating that her writing does not merely represent the conditions around her but engages in the psychic worlds of her characters even as it links their individual subjectivities to the social world. Her concluding remarks in the speech on the problem of modern art discuss the dominating forces that have shaped “third world” authors, including colonialism (*este’mar*), proximity (*naẓdiki-ye rah-ha*), media (*nofooz-e vasayel-e ertebat-e ja’mi*), translations (*tarjome-ha*), and becoming westoxicated (*gharbẓadeh shode-and*). These modern changes, she argues, have contributed to the vanishing of fundamental Iranian traditions and pasts as part of the project of forging new political and aesthetic possibilities in the future. While Daneshvar does not theoretically develop this final assertion, an analysis of “Sutra” shows the way *zār* is used as a narrative mechanism that stages a modernist aesthetic rooted in Iranian traditions and transhistorical histories. *Zār* also provides a broader temporal frame to analyze the concurrent local and global forces of history, time, and memory that have shaped Iranian experiences of modernity. The foregrounding of *zār* in the narrative exemplifies a local Iranian context of emergence, engaging the traditions and rituals of the local southern region, while at the same time presenting a transnational array of modernist encounters that dissolves a strict sense of national boundaries. Furthermore, the centrality of the *zār* ritual in framing “Sutra”’s narrative facilitates a real engagement with the individual psyche—which on its own Daneshvar was quite critical of as an aesthetic project—with a social and collective psyche,

²⁰¹ Michael North, *The Dialect of Modernism: Race, Language & Twentieth Century Literature*. (Oxford University Press, 1994).

drawing the individual from a place of psychic retreat to political action. At the same time, even while the aestheticization of *zār* lends itself to the convergence of individual and collective psychic formations, Daneshvar does not engage with the historicity or subjectivity of the Afro-Iranian experience in the narrative, leaving it in its fragmented form. Instead, *zār* is used to produce a theater of possession, serving as a formal, historical, and psychic tool of disclosure that bridges multiple temporalities and allows the contradistinctive meanings of possession to flow between individual and collective psychic realms.

From the City to the Sea: A Modernist Drive Towards Alterity

This section traces a turn in Iran's modernist aesthetics from a focus on the city to the coastal maritimes borders of the Persian Gulf, while explicating the undercurrents of alterity, racial and spiritual, that *zār* provides modernists. The recurrence of *zār* in mid-20th century ethnography, film, literature, and psychiatric writing stages an encounter with the "outside" and the "other" emphasizing a modernist sensitivity towards the supernatural and unknown, while also enabling an understanding of the subjective psyche. The *zār* ritual is animated by a relationship to winds classified into various "types," with *zār* on one end of a continuum as most powerful and man on the other end.²⁰² As immaterial forces of alterity, the winds of *zār* typically possess seafarers, and Black people, women, and young people are particularly susceptible to its powers.²⁰³ The presence of *zār* in Iranian aesthetics reassembles the story of modernity and how it is told by orienting the reader (or viewer) into the *longue durée* of this practice and its local manifestation across East Africa, the Persian Gulf, and the Indian Ocean.²⁰⁴ In emphasizing these non-western nodes of relation, *zār* not only opens up the poetic possibilities of modernism through the multiple, polycentric, and recurrent modernities that exist across the globe at various moments in time; it also foregrounds the question of power in rituals of possession. *Zār* is formed by a relation of power (*qodrat*), between possessed subject and spirits, among spirits themselves, between the winds and the earth, and as a historical index of the subjugation of Black people through the slave trade.²⁰⁵ In these cults of possession, power manifests itself in the way winds can occupy human beings and exercise control over man's physical and psychic health, as well as their destinies. The manifestation of power in possession is also rendered by Daneshvar through the racial imaginary, where Blackness de facto expresses a hierarchy of power in the narrative of Iranian and global modernity.

Blackness and race have played multiple roles in the imaginaries of European societies ... the two have always occupied a central place – simultaneously, or at least in parallel – within modern knowledge and discourse about man (and therefore about humanism and humanity). ... Blackness and race, the one and the other, represent twin figures of the delirium produced by modernity.²⁰⁶

²⁰² Kaveh Safa's 1988 article "Reading Saedi's *Ahl-e Havā*: Pattern and Significance in Spirit Possession Beliefs on the Southern Coasts of Iran" in *Culture, Medicine, and Psychiatry* examines the play of categories between various possessing spirits and possessed and how they are negotiated in rituals of possession based on a reading of Gholam Hossein Saedi's ethnographic monograph *Ahl-e Hava* (1966, Tehran).

²⁰³ Gholam Hossein Saedi, *Ahl-e Havā* (1966), 31-32.

²⁰⁴ Ibid, 31-32.

²⁰⁵ Ibid, 31-32.

²⁰⁶ Achille Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, trans. Laurent Dubois (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 1-2.

As Mbembe illuminates, the centrality of Blackness and the racialized other in narratives of modernity, are not only marks of history, but more actively reflect an aesthetic foil for the way in which knowledge, humanity, and power are imagined. In the Iranian context zār's role as an object of visual and literary attention in modernist aesthetic production rests on this claim. The extent of Iran's involvement in the Arab Slave Trade remains a question, in part due to the state's distance from narratives of enslavement and complicated by murky or absent archives.²⁰⁷ The studies that have emerged shed light on Iran's involvement²⁰⁸ and how the slave trade was also entangled with British influence, which included a monopoly over enslaved Africans and a desired control over economic trade in other parts of the world. Although aesthetic renderings of zār do not illuminate more clearly the historical particularities of this elided history, they do point to the global dimensions of slavery and the formation of communities whose stories reside outside the dominant narrative of plantation slavery within transatlantic studies. My analysis wrestles with this history of ambiguous origins to think beyond a historical or sociological understanding of zār and instead with the aesthetic, cultural, and psychic manifestations of possession and how it temporalizes the reader's experience. Daneshvar's rendering of zār emerges from the cinematic avant-garde's interest in the ritual, but even before zār was visualized for the screen, it was in the writings of Gholam Hossein-Saedi that it was first captured and introduced to the modernist scene in Iran.

Saedi's ethnographic study of southern peoples, *Ahl-e Havā (The People of the Winds)*, published in 1345 (1966), emerged at a momentous period within Iran's modernist aesthetics and served to establish an interest in zār within the modernist terrain. Saedi²⁰⁹ is well-known as a modernist fiction writer and playwright but he was also both an ethnographer and psychiatrist, both of which informed his more "clinical" or "ethnographic" ways of seeing the world. In conversation with Golshiri, Daneshvar refers to Saedi as a writer who was deeply influenced by Al-e Ahmad's cultural imperative in *Gharbzadegi* to engage with Iranian cultural traditions before they are lost to encroaching western epistemologies.²¹⁰ *Ahl-e Havā* took this to task and was significant to the trajectory of his later works; for instance, his collection of interconnected short stories published in 1984, *Tars o Larz (Fear and Trembling)*, in which Saedi depicts surreal and dream-like vignettes of life in the south of Iran is heavily inspired by the spirit rituals and Afro-Iranian cultures he describes in the ethnography. *Ahl-e Havā* begins by describing the lack of research on the inhabitants and cultures of the Persian Gulf region. His writing carries a tone of urgency around the recording of these practices, urgency charged with the fear of imminent loss of these traditions from Iranian collective memory. For Saedi, zār exists in

²⁰⁷ Parisa Vaziri explores the relationship between zār and the unresolved history of Indian ocean slavery in the Iranian context in her essay, "Windridden: On the Nonvalue of Nonidentification," (*Liquid Blackness*, vol. 3, no. 6, 2017), 66-79.

²⁰⁸ Iran's participation in the Arab slave trade had greatly diminished by the late 19th century; however, the official abolition of slavery came in 1929. In one of the first full-length books to cover the history and decline of slavery in Iran, Behnaz A. Mirzai's *A History of Slavery and Emancipation in Iran, 1800-1929*, (University of Texas Press: 2017) tracks the internal and external factions that influenced these processes.

²⁰⁹ Gholam Hossein Saedi was a prolific modernist writer of fiction, theater, and cinematic screenplays. He is well-known for writing the screenplay for Dariush Mehjui's *Gaav* (The Cow), a film that's considered the magnum opus of the Iranian New Wave. The film focuses on the ruined landscape of an anonymous village and follows a man and his loving relationship to his cow; the film ultimately leads to an interrogation of madness when the cow dies and the man slowly turns from man to animal, becoming the cow, and being ostracized from his community as a result.

²¹⁰ Golshiri, *Jadal-e Naghsb ba Naghsb*, "Goftegoo" (Conversation), 165.

a state of ruin—it reflects a waning culture under the threat of being forgotten and lost to time. His writings are thus laden with the ethnographic drive towards knowledge production and preservation, especially with that which is considered “other,” or unknown. As a result, *Ahl-e Havā* assumes the form of traditional early ethnography, with very little reflection on the author himself, or the methodology; his findings are relayed as scientific fact. The monograph, Saedi writes, is divided into two main parts. The first part is composed of memories from his travels to the south of Iran on the inhabitants of the port-cities, including the languages spoken in the region (Persian with an Arabic or Swahili accent). The second part is a taxonomy of the different kinds of winds that possess the “ahl-e havā” (people of the winds), along with elements of myth and some of the fantastic sea-creatures of the southern waters. At the time of his writing, Saedi was concerned with the minimal critical work that had been done to document the cultures of the Persian Gulf; namely, that while there has been political, geographic and historical work, there had not yet been enough social or cultural studies of the region.²¹¹

Saedi's turn to aestheticizing his research about the inhabitants of the Persian Gulf region indicates a creative fascination beyond a historical chronicling of these cultural practices. This fictional writing builds on his background as a psychiatrist and deepens an interest in the psychic lives, including the psychological traumas and disorders, of the villagers he writes about. No doubt, Saedi's novella *Tars o Larz*²¹² (*Fear and Trembling*), builds from *Ahl-e Havā*'s ethnographic impulse and forms these worlds into a fictional narrative of the characters and cultural practices of the south. Emerging from a community of writers who thought literature should reveal societal ills, Saedi tended towards realism, although his attention to the psyche transfigured his writing into the allegorical and the surreal, where characters straddle a state of alienation and madness, having lost faith in the social and spiritual worlds that surround them. *Tars o Larz* is divided into six montage-like stories and exposes the psychic struggles of people living in the suffocating heat of the fishing villages off the Persian Gulf coast. Elemental forces including the sea and the desert, as well as planetary forces like the sun, the moon and the sky, serve as forbidding and foreboding expanses that define the villagers' sense of fear and precarity. While the stories are inspired by rituals of possession and supernatural beliefs from the south, they are laden with a sense of dislocation and alienation, qualities that transmit a sense of uncertainty to the reader and reflect a series of episodes on madness and alterity. In some of the stories, alterity is symbolized through racial or ethnic stereotypes, including an unnamed Black man, a Jewish physician, and an Armenian, while at other moments, alterity is figured through invading winds from the sea or Western intruders by way of the arrival of a ship. The sea is thus charged with a constant relationship of dependence, integral to the villagers' life-worlds, while it also symbolizes a channel by which these invading forces arrive and drive the inhabitants into a state of panic. The first and third stories are particularly formed by the supernatural forces of possession and wind rituals described in *Ahl-e Havā*. Plagued by fear, in the first “story,” Salem Ahmed discovers an “intruder” (“the Black”/*siyah*) who he fears will possess him and cause him to fall ill. His fear is so consuming he begins to experience sensations of madness and the villagers call upon a shaman named Zahed to cure him and expel the “intruder” who they fear will afflict them all. The story locates alterity and invasive possessive forces in the figure of the Black man, eliding the supernatural with Blackness. Given Saedi's own writing on the beliefs of Afro-Iranians, there is a sense of a deliberate abstraction in producing the Black man (along with other racialized minorities in later stories) as the intruding figures of pathologizing alterity, and yet this blurred abstraction results in the production of a racist stereotype

²¹¹ Saedi includes a footnote here that references one of Jalal Al-e Ahmad's ethnographic type writings entitled, “Kharg: The unique pearl of the Persian Gulf,” where Al-e Ahmad writes about the Persian Gulf Island but only with respect to its oil production.

²¹² Gholam Hossein, Saedi, “Tars-o-Larz”. (Tehran, Iran, 1347/1968).

rather than a critical perspective on tradition and alterity. Fanon reads such racialized projections as part of a white collective catharsis that aims to release collective aggressiveness, in which “the Wolf, the Devil, the Wicked, Genie, Evil, and the Savage are always represented by Blacks or Indians.”²¹³ The anonymous Black character is presented as emerging from the sea, thus entangling this racialized and elemental relationship to the unknown and uncertain, “*gereftār shode... chizi aẓ dur mi ashoft, engar Salem ra aẓ darya seda mi kardand*” (14). (“He’s been possessed... something seemed to be howling Salem’s name from the sea” [5-6]). Zahed (the shaman) initiates a ritual to bring the Black man to the sea: “*bala bayad berim lab-e dariya dahl bekubim, shayad rahm kone va dar bere*” (“We must beat the drum by the shore. Maybe he’ll get scared and flee”). The villagers’ fears are given an increasing rhythm within the narrative as also marked by the presence of drums. There is an interconnection between the sounds of the sea, the winds, and the drums beating, “*bembeme darya bishtar shodeh bud, bad mi amad va dahl-ba milanidand* (19).” / “The sea had grown more clamorous; the wind raged as the drums moaned.” As suggested in these lines, the sea’s pounding is responding to the sound of drums beating, and the wind serves as a vessel between. Eventually, the shaman suggests Salem Ahmed be taken to the Black man to be cured, marking the figure as both “intruder” and healer. This shift in the narrative is also paralleled by Salem Ahmed’s relinquishing of fears associated with the sea, as the final lines of the story suggest he has been healed: “*Salem bi harkat ru be darya neshate bud, dariya mi ashoft va sedaye mehrabani aẓ dur oo ra seda miẓad*.” (“Salem sat motionless, facing the sea. The sea clamored. Far away, a kind voice was calling Salem’s name”). Saedi’s aim to record the cultures and histories of Afro-Iranians ultimately fell short of its goals in the literary rendering of *Tars o Larẓ*, which ends up producing ethnic others as abject subjects who encroach on the spiritual order of the village. Where the ethnographic writing of *Ahl-e Havā* was motivated by a fear of losing the cultural traditions of the south, *Tars o Larẓ* exploited this fear and projected it onto the Afro-Iranian subject to produce the impression that they were “intruders” when he had previously aimed to record the traditions of this region, which were derived from this community. In the imaginary realm, Saedi turns the Afro-Iranian into a foil for a general expression of alterity, and more violently, equating Blackness with the wild, the unknown, and that which can be subjected. While *Tars o Larẓ* reveals Saedi’s ambivalent relationship to Blackness, it also highlighted the ways in which race, alterity, and the otherworldly are entangled in a global modernist sensibility.

The publication of *Ahl-i Havā* brought zār to the foreground of modernist cultural production in Iran resulting in a collaboration between Saedi and one of the pioneering figures of the Iranian New Wave (*Monj-e Nam*), the southern filmmaker Nasser Taqvai, in the creation of the avant-garde documentary, *Bad-i Jinn (The Winds of Jinn)*, released only a few years after the publication of the ethnography in 1969. Taqvai even accompanied Saedi to the south of Iran, guiding him through the region and passing along his local knowledge. Along with *Bad-i Jinn*’s highly aestheticized depiction of zār, Taqvai also created a documentary on music from the Iranian south entitled *Musiqi-ye Junub (ẓār)* (*Southern Music: ẓār*) (1970), revealing an anthropological impulse in the early production of the Iranian avant-garde, while also marking a shared objective of “capture” in early anthropology and cinema. In addition to a modernist drive towards alterity and ruin, these films foregrounded materiality and embodiment as visual and sonic marks of the cinematic avant-garde. As Farbod Honarpisheh observes in a discussion of the ruin and the body in *Bad-i Jinn*’s possession scene, “The possession act in the *Wind of Jinn* encompasses one of the longest and earliest moments in the Iranian documentary cinema in which the human body seizes the center.”²¹⁴ Just as Honarpisheh notes in his analysis, the representation of bodies on screen and the convergence of the sonic elements of the film (percussive

²¹³ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, (Éditions du Seuil, 1952), 124-125.

²¹⁴ Farbod Honarpisheh, *Fragmented Allegories of National Authenticity: Art and Politics of the Iranian New Wave, 1960-79*. (2016).

instruments beating) cannot be reduced to mere materiality. The sonic presence of winds exists within a supernatural realm of the unknown, which cannot be easily absorbed into a logic of understanding.

According to Saedi, there are a number of winds within the Afro-Iranian tradition that can carry varying powers including *liva*, *mashayekh*, *pari*, *div*, and *ghoul*, *zār*, *nuban*, and *jinn*. Only the last three of this series feature in Daneshvar's "Sutra," but it is useful to place *zār*, *nuban*, and *jinn* within the broader framework that Saedi describes. These winds of the south work as a vessel for natural, spiritual, and historical forces; they are not simply imported from East Africa to Iran but circulate between and suggest a knot between the two regions. Thus, the winds become the moving force of a *longue durée* of history from the shores of East Africa to the Persian Gulf. Winds are described as having reciprocal and contingent relationships with the subjects they possess—they possess their subjects, but in this possession comes an eventual sense of autonomy to the possessed. This emerges in a capacity to gradually tame their feelings of possession; healing comes forth by altering the possessive powers of the winds from antagonistic to tranquil forces, rather than a complete expulsion. Some winds can become balanced forces that no longer occupy the body in an invasive sense but lie dormant, even providing the subject with the capacity to manifest winds into transformative powers.

Waters and winds emerge as interlocking forces that coalesce in the day-to-day lives of southern Iranians. These elements function both as a medium: as a channel that brings along the cultures and histories of the past, while also organizing narratives and life-worlds as a form: by measuring time either as natural constant or as reactive rupture. These various configurations of possession as both power and potential shape its material, historical, political, and supernatural transfigurations. In "Sutra," if possession is first introduced as illness, it is of the chronic variety: "*Afsaram daste ejneye darya oftade — een maraže zār ke miguyand man gerefteam bayad jinn-i aḡ ajneye darya bashad*."... I start to think sea sprites hold my reins. The affliction of *zār* they say I've caught must be one of the sea *jinn*...²¹⁵". *Zār*'s unknown origins are linked to the sea, a space opposed to landlocked ways of knowing, which holds "histories and cultures that are held in an inconclusive suspension."²¹⁶ The fluidity of the sea also recalls a state of being moved by rhythms and waves outside of our control. To that end, the experience of the *zār* ritual also carries some of this vulnerability and relinquishing of control. To become a people of the winds is not to vanquish spirits but to attain a capacity to quiet the external occupying forces, but never to forget their presence, or power.

To better understand the relationship between modernity's ordering drive and the modernist compulsion towards alterity, Parisa Vaziri discusses the anthropological drive in Iranian modernist aesthetics, and emphasizes *zār*'s racialized legacy within the Iranian landscape. Grounded in an analysis of Nasser Taqvai's *Bad-i Jinn*, Vaziri argues that the avant-garde's fascination with *zār* is connected to the way the thematic of slavery elaborates modernity's concerns of alienation in an increasingly industrialized and modernizing Iran. In her reading of the *zār* scene in *Bad-i Jinn*, Vaziri argues that the slave is abstracted to symbolize the suffering of the modern "Man"; "possession [here] visually indexes the Man's modern philosophical problem of the meaning of interiority and exteriority (how to define the self or individual in relation to the body and to the surrounding world; how to formulate a theory of subjectivity and objectivity)."²¹⁷ Where, for Vaziri, Taqvai's abstraction of *zār* in *Bad-i Jinn* is entangled with an erasure of *zār*'s historical legacy, there is an inherent abstraction in the history of *zār*'s emergence in southern Iran given the absence of substantial archival information. What is more,

²¹⁵ Daneshvar, 244.

²¹⁶ Iain Chambers, *Mediterranean Crossings: The Politics of an Interrupted Modernity*. (Duke University Press, 2008), 24.

²¹⁷ Parisa Vaziri, "Pneumatics of Blackness: Nāṣir Taqvā's Bād-i Jin and Modernity's Anthropological Drive." (Chapter in Edited Volume, *Persian Literature and Modernity: Production and Reception*, 2018).

the extra-material element in *Bad-i Jinn* lies precisely in what Honarpisheh referred to as the unseeable alterity of the supernatural realm. The cinematic representation of the ritual lays bare the limits of representing the psyche through image or language as “fact” or “reality.” Interestingly, Vaziri attributes part of *Bad-i Jinn*’s success to its abstraction, its “loss of facticity,” which she suggests is also characteristic of a repression, or a voluntary forgetting in Iranian modernity’s relationship to its history of slavery.

What then do we make of the lack of public and scholarly attention to “Sutra”? The short story’s use of *zār* as a literary technique reflects an abstract departure from the symbolic realism of *Suvashun*, and yet, its achronological and fragmented ordering, which grapples with multiple (repressed) histories within Iran’s 20th century has received little critical engagement. Daneshvar’s literary imagining of *zār* builds off of these aesthetic depictions, engaging in a global symbolic register of modernist aesthetics including a local surrealist compulsion towards the “primitive,” to alterity, and to the psyche. “Sutra” uses *zār* as a narrative device that tells the story of the protagonist’s individual psychic world. But *zār* also reflects its own historical time, and the *abl-e havā* (people of the winds) carry this sense of history and relation to the past in the embodied and active ritual of song, dance, and remembering that *zār* activates. Daneshvar’s attunement to *zār*’s psychic power marks a drive to render experientially what was previously represented as a vanishing peripheral culture of the southern region, while also departing from documentary-type depictions in order to illuminate its effect on the psyche, the soul, and the imagination. In spite of Daneshvar’s pejorative comments about abstraction, the text approaches various material histories, specifically of Iran’s history of slavery, as a trace, evacuated of its history. Therefore, while the text’s aestheticization of *zār* emphasizes the temporal and performative experiences of the ritual, “Sutra”’s use of *zār* is more interested in the subjectivity of a man as both possessor and possessed and a narrative composed of multiple times than it is about interrogating Iran’s history of slavery. The experience of the ritual as the predominant form through which the text is encountered allows the reader to attend to the repressed elements of narrative, subjective and historical, as well as the changing shape of Iranian nation-state via modernization and the flow of global capital.

Possession as Form

In this section, I discuss the multiple ways in which possession forms the narrative structure in “Sutra,” ranging from its relationship to time, and through variable structures of power, material and otherworldly. The achronological, fragmented, and disordered psychic recollections of the narrative reflect one aspect of possession’s operative forces on the form of the narrative, possession also functions on another level as a system of power between various subjects, historical, and material. While Nakhoda Abdol is the possessed figure of the narrative, he also acts as a possessor on multiple fronts as a slave owner and through the subjugation of his wife. *Nakhoda* used in the original Persian is translated to captain, but also refers specifically to the master of a native Indian vessel. The etymology comes from a combination of old Persian and Sanskrit, *nāv* meaning boat (from old Persian and akin to the Sanskrit *nau* ship) and *khudā* (from middle Persian *khutāi*, meaning master). Through the *zār* ritual’s ability to encounter the past, we discover that Nakhoda Abdol is both possessor and possessed, and the story flows between these two conditions. The theater of the *zār* ritual begins with an affliction of an unknown origin and fragmented identity:

Baba zār calmly pounds the drums and the play begins. I, Captain Abdol, have apparently become Nuban’s mount. This Nuban is usually caught by poor sailors, but right now I’m the poorest of the poor in the world. Or maybe I’m stricken with *zār*. Baba *zār* wants to bring down the rider and heal my wasted soul. I have come from Madras, but that seems like a thousand years

ago. My friends say, “Captain Abdol is Indian and a Buddhist.” Well, what’s the difference? I belong everywhere and nowhere... My Indian friends say that only when zār or Nuban, who have nested in my body like jinn, are overcome and my soul is set free, will I become one of the “airy” ones.

بابا زار آرام میزند روی طبل و بازی شروع میشود. من، ناخدا عبدل، ظاهراً مرکب نوبان شده ام. این نوبان را معمولاً جاشوهای فقیر می گیرند، اما فعلاً من هم فقیرترین فقیرهای جهانم. شاید هم زار گرفته ام. بابا زار می خواهد مرکب مرا به زیر بیاورد و جانم را که تباه شده شفا بدهد. از مدرس آمدم، اما انگار هزار سال پیش بوده. دوستان میگویند ناخدا عبدل هندی است، بودایی هم هست. اما چه فرق می کند؟ همه جایی و هیچ جایی هستم... دوستان هندی میگویند وقتی زار یا نوبر که مثل جن در تن من لانه کرده به زیر آمد و جانم خلاص شد، تازه اهل هوا میشوم.²¹⁸

Nakhoda Abdol has “apparently” (*ẓāheran*) become “Nuban’s mount” (*markab-e²¹⁹ nuban²²⁰*). The protagonist announces a narrative ambiguity with respect to the source of his affliction, wondering if he has been struck with zār or with “the madness of the whole world²²¹”? Daneshvar intentionally expands the narrative focus from a close-up of Nakhoda Abdol’s individual bodily and psychic experience to the collective madness experienced by the whole world. According to both *Ahl-e Havā* and “Sutra,” fisherman and sailors are of the populations most vulnerable to the menacing forces of winds,²²² thus drawing a connection between the elided experiences of trauma that consume “the whole world” and the sea as the site of elided histories, an oceanic space that defies representational form in its tracelessness. In a description of his affliction, Nakhoda Abdol announces a sense of temporal displacement while also straddling the lines between multiple schemas of identity and none at all. These lines follow the setting of the *mise en scène* and the beating of drums gives rise to the psychic movements of the narrative. While the narrative opening and closure are paralleled with the beginning and end of the ritual, the plot itself traverses different memories and allusions to Nakhoda Abdol’s past, including recollections of his time at sea, his family in India, his encounters with British colonial figures, his relationship to his slave Rostam, and his time in prison, among other experiences that are relayed to the reader in a disjointed and non-linear order. Given the plot’s achronological ordering, it bears clarification that the shipwreck is folded into the zār ritual and is only revealed to the reader midway through the narrative as part of Nakhoda Abdol’s psychic search induced by zār. While these various memories emerge in a somewhat “automatic” sense, as events occurring in the present temporality of the narrative, a retrospective re-assembling of the fragmented plot suggests that each

²¹⁸ Daneshvar, 234.

²¹⁹ *Markab* carries the dual meaning of an animal for riding or for saddling (such as a horse or camel) or a ship or vessel.

²²⁰ Nuban is another type of wind that can possess the body, but unlike zār, which is considered a heathen (*kāfar*) wind, nuban, like the mashayekh wind, is a Muslim wind and therefore carries certain holy (*moghadas*) attributes. According to Saedi’s *Ahl-e Hava* various winds and their tameability are classified by whether they are Muslim or non-Muslim (Saedi, 83). Rituals to tame nuban include evocations of God, the Prophet Muhammad, and other Quranic figures such as Solomon and Elias (Saedi, 102-3), as we see referenced in “Sutra”. Creating even more ambiguity, Saedi writes that even non-Muslim winds share Islamic beliefs and practices due to their local manifestation. Of the various winds, zār and nuban are most commonly found in the coasts of Persian Gulf, which is likely why Daneshvar chose to invoke those winds in her story.

²²¹ Daneshvar, 176.

²²² Saedi, 32-33. 1968.

disjointed event is a repressed memory of the past brought to the surface of the text through the activating powers of the ritual.

Possession neither acts unilaterally nor is its healing a unidirectional process from doctor to patient. Instead, it serves as a channel between the known and unknown, inside and outside, self and other, thus drawing our attention to the scissions that presuppose these relations. Nakhoda Abdol finds himself in the port city of Bandar Abbas, surrounded by Baba zār and Mama zār, two Afro-Iranian healers who will conduct a zār ritual in an attempt to heal him. To his right sits “Baba Zār”²²³ and to the left, “Baba Nuban”; next to them are drums (*tabl*), which act as a medium into the world of winds. According to Saedi, the percussion of drums is what awakens the winds in the body of the afflicted. These drums summon the winds, creating a channel of communication between human and non-human elements. “The remedy for these pains [affliction/possession] are drums (*dubul*) and tambourines (*tambire*) not medicine and needles,” states Baba Ayoud, a subject of Saedi’s ethnographic monograph.²²⁴ The recurrent beating of drums throughout the narrative is both a means of framing the text as ritual and of alluding to the latent and unknown forces of winds, thus, folding each component of the narrative into the flows of the unconscious.

Where, in Taghvaei’s new wave film *Wind of Jinn*, the presence of drums remains the object of the spectator’s gaze in a relatively linear composition of images, in “Sutra” the tapping of drums opens the ritual and marks the beginning of the multi-temporal and multi-sited narrative. The sounds of drums beating begin, end, and periodically punctuate the narrative, serving as a framing device that also fades in and out of prominence throughout the text in a reflection of the healing ritual. The effect of zār on the temporal experience of the text is twofold: it channels the narrator’s disjointed experience of the past, subsequently shaping the experience of the reader, while also indexing the elided narratives in Iran’s recent transnational history. The aestheticization of zār renders the ceremony as a spiritual, psychic, and political force of channeling history’s wreckage as a capacity for future movement. “Healing” exists as a desired “end” of the ritual, but zār cannot be expelled from the body. This alternative relationship to means and ends troubles a unidirectional trajectory of healing and produces a relationship of living with affliction, rather than expelling it. In other words, the healing entailed in the zār ritual is a question of whether possession attains total control over the afflicted or whether it can be channeled into a capacity to enable an encounter with the unconscious, the supernatural, and the other. Where zār turns to the past to channel its forces, shipwreck acts as a catalyzing force that moves between ruin and reconstruction. Both zār and shipwreck are fundamental to the narrative’s formation of narrative ambiguity. Each of these ruptures serves a foundational crack and yet they also mobilize the narrative in a kind of psychic work. It is this affliction, and doubly, the awareness of it that opens the scene of engaging with the psyche.

Nakhoda Abdol’s recollections are composed of moments of his life involving questionable, and often, plainly unethical or immoral behaviors; they reflect both a situatedness and partiality of narrative voice. The structuring power of zār opens the narrative to multiple registers through which the first-person narrative is uttered. Nakhoda Abdol’s ego traverses dejected memories and exalted fantasies with no explicit connective tissue that ties these moments together. As the ritual progresses, there are moments where memories take on a confessional tone even if only tenuously connected to

²²³ The use of honorifics “Baba” and “Mama” are given to Afro-Iranian village leaders to signify the spiritual power they hold in relation to wind spirits—specifically, the capacities they hold in channeling these forces through the zār ritual. Since leaders have previously been struck by zār, they can now communicate with the winds and can help others in dealing with their affliction. Within the ritual, Baba and Mama zār serve as mediums between the possessed and the winds.

²²⁴ Gholam Hossein Saedi, *Ahl-i Havā*. “*Alaj-e in dard-bai dhal va “tambire” ast na dava va suzan.*” (Tehran: Intisharat-i Amir Kabir, 1976), 32.

truth. In a chain of thoughts that begin with Rostam and turn into the flashing eyes of a mermaid, Nakhoda Abdol reveals in vivid description when he first came to own Rostam:

“Rostam lived with me from the time he was a child—the same time that I vowed to devote my life to the sea. I had bought an old launch. Rostam’s father gave me his hand and said, “Sold, for one hundred tumans.” “Done,” I said. His father said, “I wish you joy of him.” Rostam cried. He asked, “What are you going to do to me now?” “Cut my head off?” I didn’t touch him for a while. Once he was housebroken...”²²⁵

*“Rostam as bachegi pishe man amad, haman vaghti ke a’d kardam zendegim ra dar darya kholase bokonam. Yek lenj-e kobne kharide budam. Pedarash dastesh ra dar dastam gozasht va goft: forookhtam be sad tooman. Goftam: kharidam, pedar Rostam goft: kheirash ra bebini. Rostam geriye kard. Porsid: hala chekaram mikoni? Saram ra mibori? Ta modati dast bebesht nazadam, ram ke shod...”*²²⁶

The moment in which Rostam is possessed emerges at the same time that Nakhoda Abdol devoted his life to the sea. The description of this painful and yet quick exchange is laden with sexual undertones; Rostam’s question “what are you going to do to me now” is not answered in any clear or explicit manner but is instead given an ominous sense of what might come, “I didn’t touch him for a while. Once he was housebroken...” Possession here operates in the violent relation of enslavement, while “taming,” too emerges on another front, not just in the taming of winds, but in the way the elemental otherness of winds comes to stand in for other forms of alterity, including the enslaved subject. The Persian *ram* can be translated as “housebroken,” signifying its multiple meanings as domestic, tame, and docile. The ellipses at the end of the passage conveys a narrative omission as well as an obscuring of information. In addition to conveying a break with time, the ellipsis, as a form of punctuation that marks the absence of language, stands in for the ensuing sexualized domination between Nakhoda Abdol and Rostam. The narrative’s lack of explicit re-presentation of Iran’s history of slavery, and especially the absence of voice for Rostam, instead emphasizes a radical absence in this history. This is further amplified in the following passage which turns from the ellipses to the figure of the mermaid, a mythological figure wrapped in sexual desire and the impossibility of actualizing such desire:

The mermaid was covered in shiny scales, like the dress that the Arab dancer had worn when the men were cheering, but my eyes were on the door, waiting for Rostam to come... She pleaded with me: “Marry me, before my brother comes.” I said, “I’m not one for marriage and that sort of thing. The sea is my wife and child, and Rostam is the source of my delight.”²²⁷

*Tan-e feleshaye derakhsban dasht. Shabiye lebas ba dale-yi ke aan raghaase-ye Arab dar adn pushide bud va mard-ha hel hel-e mikardan ama man cheshmam be dar bud ke Rostam key miayad?... Ghasmam dad ke ta baradarhayam nayamadeand, ezdevaj konim. Goftam ahl ezdevaj va injur cheez nistam. Dariya zan va bacheye man ast va Rostam ham delkehoshim.”*²²⁸

The description of the mermaid’s physical attributes and allure act in conjunction with the omissions in the earlier reference to Rostam. Later in the text, as in the above passage, the mermaid is more

²²⁵ Daneshvar, 177-78. Trans. Javadi and Neshati.

²²⁶ Daneshvar, 248-249.

²²⁷ Daneshvar, 178-79. Trans. Javadi and Neshati.

²²⁸ Daneshvar, 249-50.

explicitly brought into parallel with Rostam, and Nakhoda Abdol expresses his ultimate desire for Rostam. As a mythological creature of Nakhoda Abdol's unconscious, the mermaid offers a forgiving escape, allowing him to transcend the judgment and disappointment of those he has failed. But even while "Sutra" gives space to the unconscious of such figures and the ways in which "her eyes flashed like those of someone Nakhoda Abdol [I] knew," her existence is also undermined by an anonymous "they." "Whatever became of her hair, which was in my hand? No one believes that she gave me her ring, that her hair was in my hand. They tell me, 'There was a bunch of seaweed in your hand.'" ²²⁹ "nafamidam muhayesh ke dar moshtam bud che shod? Ama hich kas bavar nakardi ke pari darya angoshtaresh ra be man dadeh, ke moohayesh dar chang-e man budeh, migooyand tooye moshtat meghdari khzeh darya bud."²³⁰ Rather than cast doubt on the narrator's recollections, these lines serve as examples of narrative collapse, or moments in which the inaccessibility of full memory is revealed as such. Despite Daneshvar's seemingly pejorative relationship to psychoanalytic theory, the ritual's link to the protagonist's psychic world as well as its historical abstraction lends itself to a psychoanalytic reading of the text. In his reading of Freud, Derrida maintains that psychical writing (the unconscious that precedes writing itself) cannot be read in terms of any code. While the lexicon of writing has produced its own coded interpretive schema, as Derrida states: "The dreamer invents his own grammar."²³¹ This claim draws into relief a preoccupation with indexical content and instead draws out an attunement to the spatial and temporal varieties of repression and how this is transformed in the individual and collective expressions of *zār*.

The use of *zār* as a stylistic technique of organizing the text is but one of the ways in which the ritual reconceives Iran's historical narrative of modernity, particularly the relationship between the unconscious and historical narratives. The aestheticization of *zār* indicates the ways in which literature can supplement historical narratives through imaginative renderings of embodied practices. In a discussion on "Black Time," Achille Mbembe discusses the way literary archives can provide epistemic and expressive parameters that have given way to Black critiques of time as well as modes of approaching colonial and postcolonial memory.²³² Mbembe discusses the imaginative renderings of embodied practices and the way they index memory, particularly those made inaccessible in a reading of conventional archives:

Memory and remembrance put into play a structure of organs, a nervous system, an economy of emotions centered necessarily on the body and everything that exceeds it. The [African] novel demonstrates how remembrance is activated through dance and music, or disguise, trance, and possession. All forms of memory therefore find consistent expression in the universe of the senses, imagination, and multiplicity.²³³

Zār's emphasis on the afflicted turns the individual into a site of multiple histories called up by the ritual as memory. While the narrative foregrounds Nakhoda Abdol's experience of being possessed, it also shifts between his subjective psychic experiences and the transhistorical manifestation of embodied experiences by the collective participants of the *zār* ritual. These fragmentations in the text produce an essential disjuncture in the temporal and psychic experiences with relationship to the experience of possession.

In "Sutra" the work of the psyche occurs at multiple levels. At the level of the narrative, the formal power of possession foregrounds a relationship to the past in such a way that presupposes

²²⁹ Daneshvar, 179. Trans. Javadi and Neshati.

²³⁰ Daneshvar, 50.

²³¹ Derrida, "Freud and the Scene of Writing," (1972). 89.

²³² Achille Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, (Duke University Press: 2013). 121.

²³³ Mbembe, 121.

rupture, and as such, the alterity that accompanies this breakage. The zār ritual does not culminate in a prescriptive exorcism of wounds. Instead, it alters the plane of relation, creating an invitation to rearticulate historical and personal wounds outside the bounds of individual and collective psychic experiences, thus charting a new concept of selfhood. Within zār, healing is not constituted by the exorcism of winds, or spirits, instead, healing emerges from a capacity to live with equilibrium among these elemental forces. And through this path of healing, the individual becomes part of a collective consciousness of airy ones, an *abl-e havā*. On another level, Daneshvar's writing of the text is itself a form of psychic work that invites the reader to rethink cohesive linear narratives of the nation and instead consider the latent, or repressed stories and figures that are always already a part of this narrative. Psychic work is therefore also a kind of historical work. The reading experience solicits a particular relationship to what constitutes the grounds of the unconscious while also moving outside of a subjective psychoanalytic frame to consider the collective psychic work of unknown histories. This transhistorical experience of modernist temporality is discussed in the next section.

Modernist Temporalities

Then and now, modernity is never one.

— Andreas Huyssen, "Geographies of Modernism in a Globalizing World"

The dynamism of "Sutra"'s aesthetic modernism lies in Daneshvar's ability to wed modernity's schismatic temporal structures. In "Sutra" the rhythms of the occult and the mechanistic movements of modernity are not treated as polarities but entangled as part of modernity's critical-reflexive relationship to tradition. Daneshvar's prose unifies these purportedly competing life-worlds by placing the ritual at the center of transnational commerce, cultural exchange, and Iran's experience of semi-coloniality and involvement in the Arab slave trade. While the story's discontinuous memories produce a somewhat dizzying reading experience, the narrative progression can be measured by the constant beating of drums that perforates the narrative flow. In the preceding section, I discuss the effects of drums on the narrative not only in terms of its formal mark, but also in terms of its function as a rhythmic and thus temporal feature of the narrative. As Nakhoda Abdol's stream of (un)consciousness takes the reader through multi-sited and trans-historical moments of his life, the sonic recurrence of drums beating reminds the reader of the frame of the text as a ritual. With a collapsed sense of beginning, middle, and end, the ritual offers a non-linear ordering function even as the remaining plot points depart from this order.

In addition to the activation of the unconscious that occurs through the zār ritual, the audible marks of the ritual in the narrative's recurring reference to drums beating is important because it draws the reader into the embodied and sensory experience of zār. The formation of the unconscious thus functions not only at the individual level of Nakhoda Abdol, but also as a call to listen for these embodied practices that reflect elided historical narratives. The beating of drums continues throughout the narrative, reminding the reader of Baba Zār and Mama Zār's power to initiate the ritual and channel the winds that will "heal" the captain's soul. The Captain recounts the soundscape of the drums, a rhythmic sound that parallels the ocean's currents, reminding the reader of the channels that brought zār to the south of Iran and a history uncovered only through the resounding continuation of drums beating.

The trance-inducing ritual is described with machine-like terminology, with bodies that move in repetitive, circular rhythms like "clock pendulums":

"The drums beat faster. They're singing. I want to burst into song myself. To sing only for Taher Khan, and for him to lower his head and say, "Oh my, oh my! What language are the

words? Arabic? Swahili?" My heart sinks. To myself I say, get up, start running and throw yourself into the sea; get up and go into the desert and cry out.

Baba zār looks at me, as though he's telling me with his eyes, "Be patient." I sway to the rhythm of the drum. I was moving and didn't know it. To my left, to my right, men and women are moving around me like clock pendulums. The sun disappeared a while ago."²³⁴

آهنگ طبلها تند شده. آواز میخوانند، دلم می خواهد خودم هم بزنم زیر آواز. فقط برای طاهر خان بخوانم و او سرش را بیندازد زیر و بگویدای داد و بیداد. شعرها به چه زبانی است؟ عربی است؟ سواحلی است؟ دلم فرو میریزد. با خودم میگویم پشوم پا بگذارم بدو و خودم را به دریا بیندازم. پشوم بروم در برهوت فریاد بزنم. بابا زار نگاهم می کند. انگار با چشمهایش می گوید: حوصله کن.

به آهنگ طبل تکان میخورم، تکان میخوردم و متوجهش نبودم. به راست و چپ و مردها و زنهای دور تا دورم مثل پاندول ساعت تکان میخورند. آفتاب مدتهاست پریده.

In these lines, Nakhoda Abdol links the rhythm of drums beating with the clock pendulum, which suggests a regulating movement, but also one that moves between extremities. Furthermore, he links the temporality of the clock with the disappearance of the sun, marking the relationship between the ritual and the passage of time. The strange unity of these seemingly paradoxical references to time produces a multi-rhythmic tableau of Iran's experience of modernity. Zār holds both the ritualistic temporality of the natural and supernatural as well as the external order produced by the forces of modernization. "Sutra" resists these simplified polarities by unifying these temporal experiences within the narrativized world of Nakhoda Abdol's consciousness. To draw a connection between mechanization and the ritual reflects the entangled forces that consumed 20th-century Iran without clearly defining either of their powers.

The leader of the zār ritual, Baba zār, invokes another time in his attunement to supernatural forces that exist outside of an anthropocentric temporal order. The ritual asks that Nakhoda Abdol surrender himself to the rhythm of the ritual and all of the temporalities it carries within it. To submit to these co-existing temporalities is not a total surrender but a movement with the winds that possess his soul, giving him the capacity to become *abl-e havā* (People of the Winds). Between the ebb and flow of the sea, and the smooth and striated space of the desert, Nakhoda Abdol sits at the center of an anonymous crowd of people gathered around him, as though he sits at the center of the clock, and their movements will bring him into their orbit. In this narrative image, the clock is formed by many bodies, pointing to the multiplicity of times manifested by the ritual, rather than the repeated regularity of the clock of secular time.

In addition to the image of bodies swaying back and forth, the narrative evokes the image of another cyclical force: the flour mill. In a sequence that shifts swiftly from the first person to the third person, the narrator (presumably Nakhoda Abdol referring to himself in the third person), observes a mother and daughter grinding wheat in a flour mill. He writes:

'They're grinding the wheat picked up from the road. I don't see the mill... Beneath the millstone of life, it is I who have been crushed. It seems I'm still floating, lost at sea on a bale of cotton.'²³⁵

²³⁴ Daneshvar, 160. Trans by Neshati and Javadi.

²³⁵ Daneshvar, 162.

دارند گندمی کنار جاده را آسیاب میکنند. آسیاب را نمی بینم... زیر چرخ آسیاب زندگی، این منم که له شده ام. انگار هنوز روی عدل پنبه در دریا سرگردانم (237).

In these lines, Nakhoda Abdol describes his own temporal rhythm as existing under the brutal pressure of the flour mill, a mechanism that crushes all that resists its tempo. The mill (*asijab*) reflects a temporal moment in Iran's ancient history in relation to a modern technological advance, while also alluding to societal shifts that took place in the early 20th-century, positioning the mill along with feudalism as a thing of the past. Dating back to the 3rd century, mills were commonly used across the Islamic world (specifically, contemporary Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan), and were powered by both wind and water. The device registers contemporary Iran's early 20th-century land reforms, which pushed the country towards technological modernization and away from feudalism. The mechanism is also empowered by the forces which affect Nakhoda Abdol: winds and waters. In the case of the mill, these oppositional forces are harnessed instead of being made contradictory. The mill assumes the power of both water and wind, to harness its force, producing a grinding effect. Daneshvar plays with this meaning to create a metaphor for Nakhoda Abdol's life, and yet within that metaphor, there is the hidden meaning of what it means to channel multiple forces at once.

In "Sutra," the clock pendulum, the flour mill, and even the *zār* ritual are figured as time-based, circularly orbiting mechanisms, and yet they exist in abstraction from the historical moments they represent. Daneshvar's aesthetic depictions of these modernist rhythms creates a mytho-poetics that does not locate them in any particular moment but foregrounds their transhistorical power. Contributing to this eternal sense of time, and an expansion of the modern beyond contemporary forms of machinic or epistemic domination, "Sutra" is also set against the deep time of the sea. Nakhoda Abdol laments, "It seems I'm still floating, lost at sea on a bale of cotton" (*engar hanuz rooye adl-e panbeh dar dariya sargardanam*); where the English translates *sargardam* to "lost," it would be more accurate to translate this as errant, wandering or itinerant, which emphasizes a temporal flow outside of modernity's telos-oriented direction. Indeed, the image of weightless cotton floating on the sea's surface is directionless while also moving with the flow of the sea's self-constituting direction. The sea brings forth its own temporal experience, transcending modernity's logic of affixing time and instead gravitating towards a flow of continuous movement drawn towards unconscious rhythms and forgotten moments of history. The sea's fluid time carries both the material histories of the past, in addition to the fantasies and dream-worlds of other times. In inscribing these transhistorical rhythms as a single narrative frame, and in the layered symbolism of the mill, Daneshvar exposes the coexistence of the modern and premodern within a conception of modernist times that is constantly taking shape, and channeling multiple forces at the same time.

The Allegorical Time of Shipwreck

Fragments of a vessel which are to be glued together must match one another in the smallest details, although they need not be like one another.²³⁶

Walter Benjamin

"Sutra" comes from the Sanskrit word meaning "thread," that is, a thread that holds messages and other fragments together. *Sutra* is where pieces meet, representing a junction or confluence. It signifies a fragmented and ephemeral set of thought-images, ideas, and experiences. The word *sutra* does not actually emerge within the language of the narrative: its meaning as the story's title evokes the symbolism of this small form from the Indian literary tradition, a reference no doubt to Nakhoda

²³⁶ Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," 1923.

Abdol's Indo-Iranian identity and his life as a sailor who moves between both spaces. While this seafaring experience produces an identity that transcends singular national identities, Nakhoda Abdol's memories are further unbounded and disordered as a result of shipwreck. While much of the stylistic errantry in "Sutra" is produced by zār's solicitation of the unconscious, it also emerges from the time and form of shipwreck, with both of these experiences working in parallel. Shipwreck serves as the foundational wound, a rupturing of time that creates a fragmented recollection of events; at times, the weight of this trauma collapses the narrator's claims. The result of fractured memory creates a narrator whose speech straddles the bounds of fiction and reality, an ambiguity induced by the experience of shipwreck. Nakhoda Abdol recounts images of his mother in her sari, memories of watching Indian cinema, and echoes of Sanskrit. These episodic memories emerge throughout the short story as relational flows between Madras in southern India, Bandar Abbas in southern Iran and the Arab gulf states, producing a narrative that can be thought of as a collection of memories. When woven together, they do not congeal into a defined or absolute meaning, but produce a world of conflicted meanings, much like the world produced by modernity's various threads, as well as its multiple beginnings and disparate centers. In a description of the constitutive partiality of memory Siegfried Kracauer writes: "Memory incorporates neither the total spatial nature of a state of affairs nor its total temporal course. Its recordings are, compared to photography, full of gaps."²³⁷ The protagonist's compromised positionality and scattered memories gives way to a narrative that expresses coexisting temporalities and symbolic images that evoke forgotten pasts. The breaks in the narrator's consciousness emerge primarily due to shipwreck, an event that in retrospect appears causal and yet does not emerge in the narrative until halfway through. Prior to discussing the force of the shipwreck in the narrative, I inform my discussions of the ship and wreckage by turning to the writings of Paul Gilroy and Édouard Glissant.

In *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, Paul Gilroy discusses the image of the ship as a central organizing symbol to account for the middle passage and its (dis)continuous transnational and intercultural experiences. This seminal text has become an important contribution in Black modernity and specifically, the constitutive and shared experience of the transatlantic, which includes British, American, and Caribbean experiences. Among Gilroy's central contributions is an identification of the violent systems of enslavement, migration, and colonialism that have created experiences of dislocation as a constitutive center of Western modernity. The Black Atlantic framework has been critiqued for its omission of histories of enslavement outside of the dominant transatlantic framework, including the Indian Ocean and Persian Gulf, among others. In the *Physics of Blackness*, Michelle Wright points to Gilroy's interpellation of entire Black collectives and the exclusion of identities outside of heteronormative experiences of Black progress. At the same time, Gilroy's meditations on the Black Atlantic world and its constitutive relationship to modernity created openings for thinking about diasporic histories of slavery outside of the Atlantic, as well as the primacy of the ship as the foundational experience of captivity.

The ship serves as a dynamic image, one that refers both to imperial and enslaved histories while also creating a space of dissidence. According to Gilroy, the ship is a chronotype (a Bakhtinian term to describe the relationship of space and time in language), that grounds Caribbean culture in narrative while also creating a figurative framework of self-fashioning and revision outside of colonial and enlightenment frames of knowledge. Gilroy describes the ship as "a living, micro-cultural, micro-political system in motion" that circulates "ideas and activists as well as the movement of key cultural and political artifacts: tracts, books, gramophone records, and choirs."²³⁸ The ship is both a symbol of

²³⁷ Siegfried Kracauer, *The Past's Threshold: Essays on Photography*, "Photography," (Diaphanes), 1921.

²³⁸ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, (Harvard University Press: 1993), 4.

movement and enclosure; its detachment from land-based systems of value and legal structures makes it a world-in-miniature—that is, an enclosed space with its own legal codes and political identities. Gilroy also emphasizes the cultural exchanges that ships bring, ranging from books and music to subversive political ideals and world-making possibilities. Gilroy's model necessarily narrates the violent forced migration across the Atlantic and the shared cultural experiences that emerge thereafter. This paradigmatic model declares this shared experience as the unifying experience of Black modernity, and yet it leaves out a range of other imperial and enslaved histories, namely, those that exist outside of the transatlantic passage.

Where for Gilroy the wreckage is the undercurrent that presupposes the transatlantic experience, for Édouard Glissant, it is precisely this moment of wreckage that is the critical moment of registering the sea's relationship to history. The experience of wreckage that looms over maritime narratives is integral to a theorization of modernity that tends towards a rhythm of forging and retracting rather than of radical departure from the past. An emphasis on wreckage brings the discontinuous experience of modernity into the fore, drawing us out of the linear structure of progress and into a recurrent pattern of return and reconstruction. The emphasis on the ship and the shipwreck within "Sutra" expands the paradigmatic transatlantic model of enslavement suggested by Gilroy and turns to the imperial and enslaved histories of the Arab slave trade and the bodies that moved from East Africa to the Persian Gulf and eastward to the Indian Ocean.

The narrative's modernist sensibility focuses equally on the networks of relation between non-western traditions, therefore exceeding the dominant paradigm of east-west relations that center the Euro-American's relations to the non-western world. The form of modernist staging decenters a commanding east-west study of "western influence" on non-western cultural production, or belatedness as a de facto temporal structure of non-western modernities and illuminates instead a set of south-south relations. In addition to zār's multiple local geographies, "Sutra" reveals historic exchanges between Iran and India, which pre-existed Iran's relation to the "west." In emphasizing these transregional connections, "Sutra" indexes a time where much of Iran's cultural and economic exchanges turned eastward. Nakhoda Abdol's travels between Bandar Abbas and Madras are suggestive of a time when the borders between these spaces were both materially and conceptually fluid. The sea's fluidity serves both as a parallel and channel for the flow of goods, bodies, and capital, as well as ideas, aesthetic forms, and politics, moved between these port-cities. As a contextual frame, the sea serves as a space of fluidity *par excellence*, where identities (including but not limited to citizenship and sexuality) are not fixed but boundless like the sea's open horizon. This is indeed why Nakhoda Abdol must confront his multiple identities at shore, a space that opposes the fluidity of the sea, while offering the possibility of reckoning with the wreckage at sea.

The storyline of the ship emerges in the narrative through a recollection of its wreckage, thus, launching the events of the plot with catastrophe. As an integral occurrence in the narrative of what happened before Nakhoda Abdol arrived on shore, the trauma of shipwreck compromises the literary narrative's claims of representing what took place. The shipwreck also becomes the moment of narrative collapse:

"Through my binoculars I could see the ship, *Dara*. She seemed half burned. They were towing her into Qeshm. I guessed the *Dara* had been bound for Dubai, too. I steered the launch to pass her by... I don't know what happened—the sun blinded my eyes so that I couldn't see, or I wasn't paying attention... we collided. A plank on the side of my launch was stove in, and another on the bottom. My launch had been punctured! Seamen and passengers alike set to bailing, returning the water to the sea in buckets. But what was the use? The sea had sought out the holes and was rushing in like a rampaging lunatic. A few passengers were retching. Two lay on the deck as water flowed over them.

My launch was everything to me. She glided over the seas like a bride, and the waves kissed her. My house, my country, everything I had to my name; my wife, my mother, my daughter—my launch was all of them...Where is my wife? Whatever happened to my daughter?"²³⁹

حدس زدم کشتی. با دوربین کشتی دارا را می دیدم. انگار نیمه سوخته بود. بکسلش کرده بودند و رو به قشم می کشیدندش "دارا هم به دویی می رفته. لنج را هدایت کردم که از کنار کشتی بگذرد... نفهمیدم چطور شد، آفتاب چشمم را زد و درست ندیدم یا حواسم پرت شد...تصادف کردم. یک تخت از دیوار لنج شکست. یک تخت هم از کاف آن و لنج من سوراخ شد و آب سوراخ را جست و حمله کرد. با جاشوها و مسافرها دست بکار شدیم و با سطل ها آب را به دریا پس میدادیم، اما چه فایده؟ آب حالا راهش را پیدا کرده بود و مثل دیوانها کلافه، هجوم میاورد. چندتا مسافر عاق میزدند. دو نفر کاف لنج دراز به دراز افتاده بودند و آب از رویشان می گذاشت

خانه ام، وطنم، دار و ندارم، زنم، مادرم، لنج من همه چیزم بود، مثل عروس در دریا می خرامید و موجها میبوسیدندش ²⁴⁰؟ دخترم، همین لنج بود... دارد غرق میشود... زنم کجاست؟ چه به سر دخترم آمده

The passage begins with Nakhoda Abdol gazing into binoculars, but instead of providing clarity he questions his perception of the events that took place: "I don't know what happened—the sun blinded my eyes so that I couldn't see." Casting doubt on what took place, he wonders if he was blinded by the sunlight or was not paying attention. Narrative collapse therefore occurs not only through the order in which events are recounted but also through this questioning of the narrator's own reliability in recollecting the various fragments of his past.

While "Sutra" moves between varying temporal and spatial settings, the order of Nakhoda Abdol's descriptions still carry a certain internal logic of unfolding. For instance, in the passage above, Nakhoda Abdol recounts the events that led to the collision of his beloved ship. His ship is his home, his country, and his *dar o nadar* (translated simply as "everything"), a Persian phrase that puts the dialectical meaning of *everything he possesses* in tandem with everything he doesn't possess. He describes the ship with a variety of feminine descriptors, as his bride, his wife, his mother, and his daughter,²⁴¹ which prefigures the narrative focus on Nakhoda Abdol's wife and daughter. The collision, which invites floods of water into the ship, parallels the narrator's stream of unconsciousness, which moves from memory to memory. The temporal order of these memories is not linearly recounted but connected through the recollection of these psychic experiences. Rather than recall these moments through the ship itself, the experience of wreckage is what solicits these memories in his unconscious mind as though it is wreckage that permits a retrieval and a re-membling of these previously repressed moments. Wreckage thus marks an important structure for encountering the historical unconscious.

In this later passage, Nakhoda Abdol recalls the experience of his ship sinking yet again, a recurring mark of this traumatic experience and of its calls back to memories associated with other traumatic events. These moments of recollection produce a ripple effect of other memories and sensations inaccessible and yet interconnected:

²³⁹ Daneshvar, 164-65. Trans by Neshati and Javadi.

²⁴⁰ Daneshvar, 239.

²⁴¹ It is perhaps due to Nakhoda Abdol's adoration towards his own ship that the translator chose to feminize the ship *Dara*, though it is worth noting that Persian is a genderless language and so the original refers to the ship with a gender-neutral pronoun.

"When the launch sank, I heard my mother's wailing. What became of the passengers and the twinkling of their star of hope? How did the sailors end up? God is all-great! Great is the God of Abraham! I heard these cries for a long time. Did they all last for a few hours on the cotton bales? Did the boatmen notice them and gather them up? How about the men who were towing the *Dara*?²⁴²

لنج که غرق شد صدای شیون مادرم می شنیدم. مسافرها با ندا چشمکی ستاره‌های امید چه شدند؟ چه به سر جاشوها آمد؟ الله و اکبر، بزرگست کهدیا ابراهیم، این فریادها را تا مدتها می شنیدم. آیا همشان روی ادلهی پنبه چند ساعتی دوام آوردند؟ آنها²⁴³ که کشتی دارا را بکسل کرده بودند چطور؟

The quoted passage follows a set of memories about Nakhoda Abdol's childhood experiences, living in poverty, going to Indian films,²⁴⁴ and waiting alongside his mother for his father (who was also a sailor), to return home from the sea. Nakhoda Abdol converges the feeling of helplessness in the disconnected memories of his daughter and his mother wailing at different times. These deeply wounded memories recall the sinking of his ship. As his consciousness summons another time, Nakhoda Abdol hears the sound of his mother's wailing in the memory of his ship sinking. Wailing goes from memory to memory, and sensations travel through time. The cries of various times create a resounding echo between memories. The crashing ship comes to reflect not only his own memories but the collective destinies of each sailor who settled on that ship, as well as the futures of migrants who had laid all their hopes and dreams in reaching their destinations.

While the reader might be compelled to reconstruct the narrative debris in an attempt to create order out of Nakhoda Abdol's recollections, the experience of radical dispossession that permeates the text forecloses this possibility. Although it is revealed midway through the narrative, the shipwreck is the narrative splinter that produces not only the internal recollections of the text, but also the entirety of the text's storyline. Nakhoda Abdol's ship sinks, he finds his way to shore, and the *zār* ritual commences. The significance of survival after shipwreck points to a hope for renewal while clinging on to the fragility of the last piece of debris. The impossibility of recovering what was lost is clear and yet the ensemble of the past in its destroyed form serves as a guiding force, psychically and materially. Because it both precedes the events of the text and reemerges as a catalyzing force throughout it, the shipwreck belatedly penetrates and reconstitutes the fractured elements of Nakhoda Abdol's unconscious throughout the ritual.

The disordered structure of the text affords reading and writing with a literary-critical power of collecting and re-collecting debris. Like the partiality of the modernist experience, the catastrophe of shipwreck and the echoes of catastrophe that precede and follow it carry a sense of redemption. Yet while "Sutra" might redeem Nakhoda Abdol (his fate is left unclear), not all of its characters receive this psychic redemption; specifically, his wife and daughter, who were abandoned and sold to other sailors, serve as a part of the wreckage that occurred on the ship prior to the event of Nakhoda Abdol's physical shipwreck. Tavus (his wife) and his daughter remain the irredeemable subjects of "Sutra"'s narrative, possessed and forgotten. These abandoned subjects show that no direction of modernity is left unscathed by the force of violence. "Sutra"'s entangling of the dystopian and utopian possibilities within crisis show that while violent moments of rupture create new ideas, lines of relation,

²⁴² Daneshvar, 174. Trans by Neshati and Javadi.

²⁴³ Daneshvar, 246.

²⁴⁴ Daneshvar's short stories often occupy an ambiguous temporality, with many stories referencing time periods that precede her contemporary moment but are always in relation to it. The reference to films within the short story serves as a general signal of time for the story placing it within a general frame of the early to mid-20th century.

and new imaginaries, they are equally bound up with the possession of people, territories, cultures, and worlds, dispossessing what came before.

Politics as Possession, Politics as Disordering

The narrative frame of *zār* draws the reader's attention to possession as a force that has the capacity to consume, spellbind, and dominate. Possession functions on the plane of supernatural forces as well as in the material structures of domination that emerge alongside modernity's possessive powers over the 20th-century. In a discussion of modernity's oppositional forces of rebellion and capitulation, Susan Stanford Freidman suggests, "Modernity can enslave or free, shatter or exhilarate, displace or replace, dismantle or reassemble — thus, utopian and dystopian at once. Modernity is itself rupture: a paradigm shift, a geohistorical transformation on a large scale."²⁴⁵ This entanglement of dystopian and utopian structures motivates "Sutra"'s many various and entangled forms of possession. Modernity's recurrent operative force of change exists not only in the realm of the technological and the economic but also in the epistemic, the political, the aesthetic, and the cultural.

Without marking their distinct spatial features, the narrative moves between three sites that lend themselves to various forms of possession: the ship, the shore, and the prison. The narrative introduction of the prison blends its borders with the sea, converging their detached temporal realities from the ordering of time on land. The prison functions as an enclosed space of state power, in what might on the surface appear in opposition to the non-territorial expanse of the sea. But while certain subjectivities experience the sea as a space of resistance to state designated boundaries and rules of law, "Sutra" reveals that if one puts pressure on these seemingly defined categories, the sea's utopian possibilities also collide with violent subjugation and abuse. Staged against this contradictory experience of violence and emancipation, the narrative avoids depicting the hardships of confinement or the conditions of the prison. Rather than represent the prison as a site that enacts the force of law, the reader can only conjecture these repressed narrative experiences. In fact, through Nakhoda Abdol's memories, the narrative presents the prison as a site of emerging political consciousness. Both Nakhoda Abdol and the people he recalls from his memories are subjects who have fought against state power, most notably Taher Khan.

For those unfamiliar with the many figures and political factions that were influential at different phases of the resistance against the Shah's regime, the figure of Taher Khan might come across as an unplaceable character whose prison time is as ambiguous as the power he holds in gathering fellow prisoners around texts and ideas. Within "Sutra," Taher Khan serves as a prophetic figure whose life experiences and learned insights guide him in moments of total desolation. He speaks in proverbial phrases, passing along words of wisdom without disclosing personal details. His character lacks historical development, and yet he hovers over the narrator as a mystical force of sagacity. Through Nakhoda Abdol's memories, the narrative situates the prison as a site of intellectual exchange, camaraderie, and storytelling; furthermore, Taher Khan is figured as a guide whose teachings create a following, sometimes blurring the lines between a cultivation of the political imagination and blind submission.

While Taher Khan serves as an elusive character in Nakhoda Abdol's unconscious memories, the narrative's lack of explanatory or historical background on this character can be attributed both to the abstracted nature of the text's formal qualities and to the ways abstraction and literary subterfuge are tied to a politics of repression in Iran's post-coup and post-revolutionary landscape. Although Daneshvar constructs an imaginative aura around Taher Khan, his character does not reside solely in

²⁴⁵ Susan Stanford-Freidman, *Planetary Modernisms: Provocations on Modernity Across Time*. (Columbia University Press: 2015), 4.

the realm of fiction. In fact, this character represents one of the most prominent political activists of the '50s to the revolutionary era, Taher Ahmadzadeh (1921-2017). Ahmadzadeh, who was a self-proclaimed religious-nationalist and Mossadeghist, was in favor of political plurality. He had been actively resisting the Shah's government since the early 1950s and as alluded to in "Sutra," had spent 10 years in prison. He was an active participant and co-founder of the Center for the Propagation of Islamic Truth (*Kanun-e Nasr-e Haqayeq Islami*) along with Mohammad Taqi-Shariati (the father of Ali Shariati who would also attend the meetings). He also served as a founder of the Fadayan-e Khalq, the organization of Iranian Fedai Guerillas. Ahmadzadeh's sons, Masoud and Majid were killed by the Shah's secret police (SAVAK). Rather than present this backdrop as documentary information, Daneshvar folds it into the text in such a way that a reader without this information would also sense the political imagination and the movement created by the fictional Taher Khan. Daneshvar's representation of Taher Khan as a fictional character—which indexes Taher Ahmadzadeh's real role in the history of modern Iranian politics—brings to the fore the extinguished possibilities that inhered in the left political scene that, even in its dissolution, were formative to the revolutionary pulse of the Islamic Revolution that arose in 1979:

Taher Khan opened my eyes and ears. He gave me his books, and I read them and wondered to myself, How delightful reading books can be! And I've been ignorant of it. He'd call all the jailbirds together at night and read to them. He'd give us all lessons...Despairing of the sayyid, I spent most of my time with Taher Khan. With him I had a different view of life. I wanted to put my hand to something in the world so they'd write my story. I served him openly and unashamedly. I wanted to make him fish fricassee...I did this so he'd show me his world. I was happy to die to bring a smile to his lips. But how could he smile? Once I kissed his hand and said, "I'll do whatever you say." He said, "I'm no lord and master. Suddenly, they began beating the drums again, and my heart sinks."²⁴⁶

طاهر خان چشم و گوشم را باز کرد. کتابهایش را داد و خواندم و با خود گفتم عجب دنیایی دارد کتاب خواندن که من از آن بی خبر بودم. شبها زندانیان را جمع میکرد و برایشان کتاب میخواند. به همه مان درس می داد...از سید که نا امید شدم بیشتر وقتم با طاهر خان می گذشت. با او که بودم زندگی را به طور دیگری می دیدم. دلم می خواست در این دنیا دست به کاری بزنم که حکایت را بگویند. علنا خدمتش را می کردم. دلم می خواست برایش قلیه ماهی درست بکنم... این کارها را می کردم تا دنیایش را نشانم بدهد. دلم می خواست جانم را بدهم تا خنده به لب او بیاورم. اما او چطور می توانست بخندد؟ یک بار دستش را ماچ کردم و گفتم هر کاری که بگویی می کنم. گفت من که صاحب امر نیستم. ناگهان از نو بر طلبها می کوبند و دلم فرو میریزد

This passage along with other references to the prison signal the scale of the Shah's expanded punitive measures against political opposition, which particularly targeted leftist organizations and former Mossadeghists, and amassed political prisoners across Iran's prisons. Nakhoda Abdol's descriptions of intellectual activity promoted by Taher Khan give a sense of the political energy that permeated the prisons at the time. The above passage also reveals the power of charismatic educators, leaders, and activists, and a desire to surrender to the powers of the unknown, in particular, the kinds of socio-political changes that these lines of thought have the capacity to illuminate. As Nakhoda Abdol describes his interactions with Taher Khan served as moments of disclosure in which a world became expanded. Political activism, i.e., material action, is equated with participating in history, and thus, becoming history, through stories. But what these lines signify are not only the story of a person who attains political consciousness, but also, the quickness with which that "consciousness"—which remains ambiguous, and thus, untethered to a clear end—is tied to a desire to serve and be possessed,

²⁴⁶ Daneshvar, 169-170. Trans by Neshati and Javadi.

rather than to a political vision, suggesting the ways politics can be misunderstood as bound to the charisma of a political leader rather than the ideals or imaginings of the political project. There is thus always a risk at this axis. Indeed, beyond the historical symbolism of this passage, Taher Khan's utterance: "I'm no lord and master" (*man ke saheb-e omr nistam*) show how Nakhoda Abdol previously sees the world of human experience as a series of master-slave relationships, until Taher Khan rejects this relation. Traversing these tensions, "Sutra" blurs the coexisting powers of political consciousness and the expanses of the imagination. The narrative's final emphasis on political consciousness suggests a parallel to the prescriptive possibilities within the political realm to address the maladies of its time:

"In the prison of Borazjan, Taher Khan used to say, 'Illusions, dreams, and visions are all aspects of reality. Even the reflection that you see of yourself in the mirror is a form of reality.' The doctor in Shiraz used to say, 'Captain, you had a bad fright. Be thankful you found a plank by chance and managed to get yourself to shore.' However, many times I swore that the mermaid had given me the plank so I could escape her brothers' clutches, the doctor didn't believe me. He wrote me a prescription; some of the medicine couldn't be found. I don't know why the doctor, the exorcist, and all my friends were trying to take away the greatest pleasure I had ever enjoyed in my life."²⁴⁷

توی زندان برازجان، طاهر خان می گفت: خیال، خواب و رویا همه‌شان صورتهایی از واقعیت هستند، حتی عکس را که در آینه میبینی، از هم یک صورت واقعیت است. دکتر شیراز می گفت: تو بدجوری ترسیده بودی ناخدا، تازه شکر کن که تصادفاً یک تخت گیر آورده‌ای و به ساحل رسیده‌ای. هر چه قسم خوردم که تخته را پری دریا به من داد که از چنگ برادر هایش در بروم، باورش نشد. و یک نسخه برایم نوشت که دو سه تا قلم دعوا پیدایش نشد. نمیدانم را که به عمرم کرده بودم از من بگیرند چرا دکتر و دعا نویس و دوستان همه شان سعی داشتند قشنگترین خشیهایی

In this passage, Daneshvar's earlier discussion on the necessity of authors to represent the life-worlds of their contemporary realities can be expanded in light of Taher Khan's remarks on the expansiveness of "reality." These lines recall André Breton's call in *The Manifestoes of Surrealism* (1924) to "resolve the previously contradictory conditions of dream and reality into an absolute reality, a super-reality, or *surreality*."²⁴⁸ The invocation of *kehiyaal* (imagination), *khaab* (dream), and *roya* (vision) as various facets of reality exist as escape and salvation. But Daneshvar's dream-world is not the unconscious dream-play of the surrealists, even if Nakhoda Abdol's psychic world ventures into the individualized streams of desire as is brought forth in the recurring figure of the mermaid. The doctor wrote him a prescription and "some of the medicine couldn't be found," "*do se ta ghalam dama peydash nashod*." These lines reflect a resistance to traditional forms of prescriptive temporalities and orders of healing. The reprieve from alienation Nakhoda Abdol describes in his encounters with the mermaid as well as the irretrievability of the medicine suggest a destabilization of the supposed mastery of these more conventional healing orders.

At the end of the ritual, which also constitutes the end of the story, the narrator is surrounded by his Indian friends who await the message of what has occurred. Rostam helps Nakhoda Abdol get up and Baba zār looks to Nakhoda Abdol and says: "Thank goodness, your rider has dismounted" successfully and another woman emerges to congratulate him on, ²⁴⁹ *مرکبت به زیر آمد* خدا را شکر، entering the circle of the "ahl-e hava" (airy). Nakhoda Abdol turns to Rostam and the first question he asks is about Taher Khan, a recurring voice that emerged throughout the ritual. He then says: "

²⁴⁷ Daneshvar, 167-168. Trans by Neshati and Javadi.

²⁴⁸ André Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1969).

²⁴⁹ Daneshvar, 257.

Rostam, I set you free. From now on you're free as the birds in the air." از حالا مثل مرغان هوا آزادی²⁵⁰.

In the final lines of the story, he says: "It's clear as day to me that Taher Khan's followers are waiting for me. I'll set off first thing tomorrow morning."²⁵¹ [مثل روز برایم روشن است که هواخواهان طاهر] ²⁵² Rather than search for Taher Khan, Nakhoda Abdol sets out to find his هواخواهان (translated as followers) giving the closing moments of the narrative a sense that what was before a singular journey shifts into a collective one. The final gesture carries an embryonic suggestion of the political, and what might be an anticipatory signal of Nakhoda Abdol's inevitable participation in the realm of politics. But beyond a clear trajectory of politicization, it seems important to meditate on the word هواخواهان, which carries the root word هوا (*havā*) as in اهل هوا (people of the winds, also meaning "airy"). In Persian, *havā* refers to weather, climate and air, as well as an atmosphere and an air (melody and tune). Another meaning it carries is desire, fondness, and passion, spelled هوی (*havā*). In Daneshvar's prose, these multiple meanings of *havā* converge its atmospheric associations with its manifestations of desire, thus creating a thread between the *havā* as follower or disciple and a people of the winds. Daneshvar's *zār* ritual performs a theater of the soul in which through Nakhoda Abdol, as readers we bear witness to the life-drive and death-drive of his desires. This is evident when jinn emerge in the narrative drawing our attention to a radical external alterity that is intimately bound to the soul. In a discussion of the perplexing borders of possession and piety, Stefania Pandolfo discusses the irreality or the "ontological untruth" of the world of the jinn as an "'extimate' alterity of desire in the human soul"; within it exists the risk of a hollowing of life into the world of simulacra.²⁵³ Beyond a Freudian or Lacanian psychoanalytic frame that focuses on desire's relationship to the human subject, the vast entanglement of *zār* and jinn specifically to the supernatural realm brings forth a "dangerous challenge of intimate exteriority."²⁵⁴ *Zār*'s unfolding vicissitudes are extended from a local or particular coastal tradition to the shared atmospheric qualities that possessed the time, beyond the southern shores. The signification of *abl-e havā* itself undergoes a transformation and comes to inhabit a spiritual renewal as well as a political awakening.

This final moment brings us back to the larger aims of the ritual, which entails a *collective* healing of the possessed individual. The collective also gives way to the possibility of political collectivity and draws Nakhoda Abdol's alienated psychic experience outward such that "healing" is not solely linked to the individual but also connected to a collective healing. The relationship between affliction and liberation is important to note as *zār* can shift from affliction to capacity within the body. Possession is not a static or determined form, rather it is malleable, shifting its directions and forces. During the *zār* ritual, the possessed can attain autonomy with respect to the spirit or wind; they can attain a capacity to gradually tame the spirit's powers. Some winds can become balanced forces that no longer occupy the body in an invasive sense but lie dormant and even transform into healing power. As an embodied ritual, *zār* focuses both on the individual psyche, while also drawing the individual into the orbit of people of the winds. There is an active movement between individual and social orders that further emphasizes modernism's oscillating concern between the individual subject and collectivity. The *zār* rituals underlines the interstice of the psyche: the uncertainty of the psyche emerges from multi-temporal episodes of catastrophe that hold on to the possibility of yielding change through a

²⁵⁰ Ibid.

²⁵¹ Daneshvar, 189. Trans by Neshati and Javadi.

²⁵² Daneshvar, 257.

²⁵³ Stefania Pandolfo, *Knot of the Soul: Madness, Psychoanalysis, Islam*. (The University of Chicago Press, 2018).

²⁵⁴ Ibid, 317.

manifestation of forces. To be "healed" is not to forget the past or to dispel the winds that have occupied the soul; instead healing emerges from a capacity to channel the forces of these winds, to transform them from burden to capacity. The end of the narrative does not fully reveal how Nakhoda Abdol relates to the recurring psychic wounds of his past, but there is clear revelation that results in releasing a violent attachment to his own possessions and joining a collective movement. The converging forces of becoming an ahl-e havā and joining a political movement suggests a link between the warding off of jinns and the despotic regimes of power.

Daneshvar's invocation of Taher Ahmadzadeh as the prophetic leader of the movement suggests a hopeful vision of what a democratic-nationalist sensibility could bring to the newly founded powers that took over the nation in 1979, and in so doing, charted a radically new direction for Iranian politics. And yet this possibility exists only as a fracture. The scene of writing produced by "Sutra" is one in which this represented possibility is already vanquished, therefore leaving the reader with a trajectory splintered by both US and British intervention in Iranian modernity as well as repeated despotic powers within the nation. In the same interview referenced earlier with Hushang Golshiri, Daneshvar refers to "Sutra" as an example of her writing not consumed with the prevailing narrative of westoxication. The implication is that "Sutra" transcends the ideological obsession with east and west and instead presents the occupying political concerns of the time through a multi-temporal expression of various forms of power both individually and collectively. The comingling of multiple temporalities and axes of power, all within the zār ritual prioritizes a play with aesthetic form, and how this disjunctive and psychically bound form presents the experiences of modernity, over a realist representation of reality.

Sutra: A Thread of Iran's Modernist Story

This is why we stay with poetry. And despite our consenting to all the indisputable technologies; despite seeing the political leap that must be managed, the horror of hunger and ignorance, torture and massacre to be conquered, the full load of knowledge to be tamed, the weight of every piece of machinery that we shall finally control, and the exhausting flashes as we pass from one era to another—from forest to city, from story to computer—at the bow there is still something we now share: this murmur, cloud or rain or peaceful smoke. We know ourselves as part and as crowd, in an unknown that does not terrify. We cry our cry of poetry. Our boats are open, and we sail them for everyone.²⁵⁵

Édouard Glissant

To conclude, I return to Glissant's poetics of relation because it provides a theoretical framework for discussing modernity's multi-sited and multi-temporal experiences with an attention to form. The emphasis on poetry is at once a call to meditate on the specificity of experience as much as it also calls outward to the universal, the abstract, and the collective. Glissant's oscillation between these two forms illuminates the way local movements are at once products of local culture and entangled with global forces. In the above passage, Glissant describes the accelerating rhythms of modernity, the machines and technologies, the apparatuses of violence, and the structures of time that possess our notion of the modern. These are the identifiable and anticipated structures of "progress," and yet there are also these other shared realms unknown to us in their power: "this murmur, cloud or rain or peaceful smoke." For Glissant, poetics is not just a reference to the form of poetry (although it can include this), it is an ethics of attunement, a mode of relating to the world of modernity that carries the unconscious tremors of the past and nodes of relation that exist between differing

²⁵⁵ Glissant, Édouard. *Poétique de la Relation*. 1990. Pg 8-9.

epistemologies. Above all, this attunement obscures a narrative of modernity bound to origin stories and technological “progress” alone.

"Sutra" ruptures conventional narratives of modernism from Jameson's notion of a "singular modernity" as well as studies that reproduce the European-centered structure of center and periphery. In the speech Daneshvar gave at the Goethe Institute in Tehran, she articulated a vision of a uniquely Iranian artistic tradition. Daneshvar's assertion of modernism's limitations are in fact addressing a particular understanding of modernism as an aesthetic and philosophical movement that emerged in late 19th century and early 20th century Europe. Without naming her contemporary aesthetic production as “modernist” as such, she charts the emergent modernism of Iran's 20th century experiences. For Daneshvar, the modern subject has a dynamic inner subjective world and is also a part of a collective. While still exploring the profound alienation and wound of modernity, it is this convergence of the individual and the collective that Daneshvar's writing projects as part of her vision of Iranian modernism, one that still holds the possibility of redemption. Therein lies a reflective impulse that centers the formal powers of "local traditions" and how these traditions structure Iran's modernist experience. This chapter has approached "Sutra" as an offering on multiple planes—its aphoristic quality shakes the ground of global modernist discourses which seek to systematize the globe into periods or national canons. In resisting a single prevailing narrative of modernism's "origins," "Sutra" instead emphasizes its multiple temporalities, shifting periods, as well as the global connections that go beyond east-west paradigms.

The theoretical and historical implications of *zār* as a modernist practice can be understood as an important psychic force that both rearranges the wounds of colonialism, slavery, and revolution, and destabilizes their meanings by containing them within the narrative frame of the ritual, thereby exemplifying this troubled containment. In its attunement to the latent, the *zār* ritual creates an experience of time that renders the trace of Iran's history of slavery, constellating past and present, fictive and real, and the fluid moral and identitarian shifts between land and sea. In the absence of an Afro-Iranian subject position (Rostam only speaks in relation to Nakhoda and that is a relationship of subjection, while both Baba *Zār* and Mama *Zār* speak only in relation to the ritual), the *zār* ritual serves as a performative utterance that carries the legacies of this Indo-Persian history of slavery. As a view into Nakhoda Abdol's psyche, *zār* produces various disconnected layers of Nakhoda Abdol's psychic movements, thereby acting as the instrument of the narrative's temporal movements. The *zār* ritual is not "represented" as an event within the narrative, but rather, it undulates as the forces beneath the narrative's unfolding. *Zār*'s approach to affliction as an arena in which spirits can be channeled as alternative capacities rather than wholly exorcized registers contradictions without aiming to resolve them. "Sutra" unleashes the pulse of modernist critique, a projection of fragment upon fragment, without seeking to affix any of its pieces. This world within the narrative frame consists of multiple planes emerging from the elemental and supernatural manifestations of *zār*, in the memory work of the unconscious, and writing as an aesthetico-political project to come.

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