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ARTICLE

Materiality of Traumatic Experience and the Limits of Representation in Hassan Bani Ameri's *Gonjeshkha Behesht ra Mifahmand* (Sparrows Understand Heaven)

Maryam Ghodrati

Emerson College, Boston, United States
Email: maghodrati@gmail.com

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Abstract

This paper examines the materialization of trauma as both a narrative and embodied phenomenon in Hassan Bani Ameri's 2006 novel, *Gonjeshkha Behesht ra Mifahmand*, using contemporary narrative and trauma theory. The postmodernist narrative, told from the perspective of a photojournalist, reconstructs events surrounding the death of a celebrated Iran-Iraq War commander. I argue that traumatic truths resist full integration into conventional frameworks of understanding, evident in the novel's non-linear, fragmented narrative and its shift from visual realism to confessional surrealism in an ending that challenges traditional storytelling and historical documentation. By vividly simulating the sensory processing of traumatic memories, the novel emphasizes the material reality of trauma that demands to be seen, heard, and physically felt, thus negating celebratory institutional narratives around the culture of war and martyrdom.

Key words: Trauma; memory; embodiment; sensory experience; postmodernism; visual storytelling; photojournalism; surrealism

> As a relation to events, testimony seems to be composed of bits and pieces of a memory that has been overwhelmed by occurrences that have not been settled into understanding or remembrance, acts that cannot be construed as knowledge nor assimilated into full recognition, events in excess of our frames of reference.[1]

> Photographs are a way of imprisoning reality… One can't possess reality, one can possess images – one can't possess the present but one can possess the past.[2]

Introduction

There is a distinction between normal memory, which involves the act of constructing a coherent narrative, and traumatic memory, which manifests as a frozen fixation on an event that has not yet been comprehended and sorted as a linear and meaningful story. To achieve psychological integration, an event must assimilate into one's personal narrative.

[1] Shoshana Felman, "Education and Crisis," in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 16.

[2] Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1977), 163.

However, traumatic events often result in fragmented memories, flashbacks, and intrusive thoughts that resist this assimilation. Unlike ordinary memories, trauma memories are stored in brain regions associated with emotions and sensations rather than language, leading to a lack of verbal narrative and contextual framing, causing these memories to manifest as vivid sensations and images.[3] Psychological theories and clinical practices, as noted by Bessel van der Kolk and Rita Fisler, highlight that traumatic memories develop more slowly and are initially difficult to articulate.[4] Cognitive neuroscientists suggest that traumatic events are stored in the image-based memory (SAM) system rather than the verbally accessible memory (VAM) system due to narrowed attention during the event. This embodied and sensory nature of trauma contrasts sharply with verbal, linear narratives.[5]

This fundamental psychophysiological distinction between trauma and normal memory forms the basis for understanding the unique challenges representing traumatic memory in Hassan Bani Ameri's 2006 war novel *Gonjeshkha Behesht ra Miifahmand* (Sparrows Understand Heaven). The novel uses postmodern techniques – including metafiction, intertextuality, pastiche, and temporal distortion – to mimic the disjointed, sensory nature of personal traumatic memory against the more linear, often nationalist collective memory of national trauma. Within this juxtaposition, achieved through postmodernist elements and visual language, the author esoterically challenges traditional ideological narratives of war, emphasizing the physical reality of violence and exploring the profound impact of trauma on perception.[6] By presenting a complex stream-of-consciousness narrative, Bani Ameri underscores the difficulty of representing traumatic experiences and the gap between idealized interpretation and the harsh realities of war. This approach not only highlights the embodied nature of trauma but also complicates conventional notions of "martyrdom" and "holiness" by revealing how trauma is experienced and remembered in ways that defy traditional narrative structures. Thus, *Gonjeshkha Behesht ra Miifahmand* engages readers with the tangible consequences of historical violence, challenging the abstract concepts of truth and martyrdom in war.

With the onset of the Iran-Iraq War in 1980, war literature developed as a genre within Iranian literary circles, providing a space for writers and poets to both recount personal experiences of the war as well as depict it from a secondary, removed perspective.[7] However, this movement soon evolved into "Holy Defense Literature," a state-sponsored apparatus designed to promote the government's Shiite and anti-imperialist ideology while suppressing dissenting narratives. Known also as the Literature of Resistance, or Sacred Defense, these government-endorsed works employed symbolic representations to imbue the nation's suffering with spiritual meaning. Death in war was portrayed as a passage to eternal life in heaven, and the term *shahādat*, symbolizing martyrdom, became central to Sacred Defense culture. Additionally, *shahādat* also signifies the spiritual or political testimony to truth, embodying both the ultimate sacrifice and a profound declaration of ideological commitment. Through this lens, the narrative of martyrdom was not only a celebration

[3] For further reading, see Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence–From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York: Basic Books, 1997).

[4] Bessel A. van der Kolk and Rita Fisler, "Dissociation and the fragmentary nature of traumatic memories: Overview and exploratory study," *Journal of Traumatic Stress* 8, no. 4 (1995): 505–525.

[5] See Chris R. Brewin et al., "Intrusive Images in Psychological Disorders: Characteristics, Neural Mechanisms, and Treatment Implications." *Psychological Review* 117, no. 1 (2010): 210–232.

[6] See M. Mehdi Khorrami and Amir Moosavi, eds., *Losing Our Minds, Coming to Our Senses: Sensory Readings of Persian Literature and Culture* (Leiden: Leiden University Press), 2021. This book challenges traditional, linear approaches that focus primarily on political and allegorical interpretations by highlighting the importance of sensory engagement in understanding Persian literature.

[7] For more on the duality of fictional and documentary truth, see Goulia Ghardashkhani-Otter, "Narrative Geometry in ʿAli Reza Gholami's Divar (The Wall): New Developments in Iranian War Literature," *Iranian Studies* 53, no. 5–6 (2020): 873–892. Ghardashkhani examines the duality between documentary truth and fictional narratives in the context of Iranian war literature. The study highlights how Iranian war narratives often blur the lines between reality and fiction, creating a complex interplay that questions the nature of truth and memory in the representation of war experiences.

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of individual heroism, but also a reinforcement of the government's ideological narrative.[8] Women were depicted in supportive roles, exemplifying loyalty and sacrifice, while men's resistance was framed as a continuation of the martyrdom of the third Shiite Imam and his family at the Battle of Karbala in 680 AD.[9] This portrayal served to align contemporary struggles with historical martyrdom, reinforcing the perceived legitimacy and sanctity of the government's cause. Through these symbolic representations, the literature of this period both reflected and shaped the collective consciousness, intertwining personal sacrifice with national ideology.

Amidst the evolving literary and ideological landscape of post-revolutionary Iran, Hassan Bani Ameri, born in Shiraz in 1967, emerged as a significant voice in Iranian war literature. Bani Ameri initially worked in theater and journalism before eventually turning his focus to the war themes that would define his literary career. His debut, *Injā Majnun Ast, beh Gusham* (Here is Majnun, Do You Copy!), published in 1995, explores the life and martyrdom of a prominent war commander, setting the tone for subsequent works.[10] His acclaimed collections, *Dalqak beh Dalqak Nemikhandad* (A Clown Doesn't Laugh at a Clown, 2000) and *Lālāyi-e Leylā* (Lullaby of Leila, 2001), further established Bani Ameri's reputation.[11]

Gonjeshkha Behesht ra Mifahmand is a work of fiction based on the historical reality of the Iran-Iraq War (1980–88), with the Kurdish region of Iran being the novel's primarily setting. Shortly after the Iran-Iraq War began, the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI), backed by Iraq, sought to establish "Kurdish liberated zones" in Iranian Kurdistan, equipped with Iraqi weapons and those seized from Iranian forces. However, by the end of 1981, Iranian forces had inflicted significant losses on Iraqi troops and launched devastating assaults on the KDPI, reducing the group to insignificance for the remainder of the conflict.[12] In *Gonjeshkha*, memories of betrayal and loyalty are narrated through the perspective of Iranian photojournalist Danial Delfam. Danial's narrative voice clashes with that of the author's avatar, who—like the narrator—seeks to reconstruct the tragic fate of Alijan, the narrator's best friend, half-brother, and commander. Alijan was shot and disappeared, his body lost while crossing the Arvand River during a military operation.[13] A small local hospital under siege by separatist Kurds is the focal point where Alijan and Danial, after passing through chaotic sites of horror and destruction in Kurdish neighborhoods, join other fighters and local Kurds including Ali Ashraf (Asoo), who later in the novel is discovered to be Danial and Alijan's half-brother.

[8] For more on the terminology of the Sacred Defense culture, see Hamid Dabashi, *Shi'ism: A Religion of Protest* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011). Dabashi explores the symbolic and political significance of martyrdom in Shi'a Islam, where *shahādat* serves as both testimony and a transformative event in history. See also, Ali Shariati, *Martyrdom: Arise and Bear Witness*, trans. Ali Asghar Ghassemy, Al-Islam.org, accessed 2023, https://www.al-islam.org/martyrdom-arise-and-bear-witness-ali-shariati.

[9] A significant event in Islamic history, particularly for Shiites, as it marks the martyrdom of Imam Hussein, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, and his companions. The battle occurred in Karbala, in present-day Iraq, and is commemorated annually during the observance of Ashura.

[10] This story describes the life and martyrdom of Seyed Hamid Mirafzali, a comrade of Mohammad Ebrahim Hemmat, an Iranian military leader and one of the highest-ranking officers of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps during the Iran-Iraq War.

[11] These works garnered significant critical acclaim, with stories such as "Dalqak beh Dalqak Nemikhandad" (A Clown Doesn't Laugh at a Clown) and "Bāz Ham Gharibeh Āmad" (The Stranger Came Again) from the first collection and "Lālāyi-e Leylā" and "'Aks Gereftan Bā Cheshm-e Gonjeshk" (Taking a Picture with a Sparrow's Eye) from the second recognized as standout pieces by the Houshang Golshiri Literary Awards. Other works by Bani Ameri include the novels *Bābāy-e Āhuy-e Man Bāsh* (Be My Deer's Dad, 2001), *Nafas Nakesh Bekhand Bego Salām* (Don't Breathe, Laugh and Say Hello, 2004), and *Āhesteh Vahshi Mishavam* (I Slowly Become Wild, 2005). Bani Ameri's *Fereshteh-hā Buye Porteqāl Mi-dahand* (Angels Smell Like Oranges) was named the best novel and winner of Press Book of the Year in 2007.

[12] See Nader Entessar, "The Kurdish Factor in Iran-Iraq Relations," The Middle East Institute, January 29, 2009, http://www.mei.edu/content/kurdish-factor-iran-iraq-relations.

[13] The Arvand Rood is a river that separates the southern borders of Iraq and Iran on the Persian Gulf coast.

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In *Gonjeshkha Behesht ra Mifahmand*, Bani Ameri presents a complex stream-of-consciousness narrative that has sparked debate among critics.[14] Some argue that his portrayal of spiritually uplifting fighters and extraordinarily courageous women aligns with the ideological framework of Sacred Defense literature, thus conflicting with a postmodernist thematic structure.[15] Others interpret his narrative as more neutral, balancing idealized martyrdom with the harsh realities of war.[16] I argue that this combination of unconventional form and themes, devoid of actual photographs or documentary evidence, instead relies on pictorial realism reconstructed through characters' traumatic memories. The interplay between pictorial realism and postmodernist elements underscores both the materiality and unrepresentability of violent traumatic encounters. Furthermore, the tension between realism and postmodernism esoterically confines the characters' humanness and ordinariness amidst the chaos of narrative construct, perhaps to evade the censorship of desacralization tendencies.[17] The postmodern chaos of the visual narrative, inspired by classical traditions of visual storytelling, both reveals and conceals how deeply even "martyrs" of sacred wars internalize the world through bodily experience, emphasizing the fictional aura of national and institutional war narratives.[18] Bani Ameri's interpretation of *shahādat* goes beyond the traditional view of physical sacrifice for eternal heavenly rewards and testimony to the truth of their cause. Instead, it suggests an ongoing return of the murdered, not martyred, individual to bear witness and confront the ethical dilemmas of war.[19] The novel's surrealist lack of closure challenges conventional notions of "holiness," suggesting that truth in war is rooted in lived experience rather than abstract ideals.

Haft Awrang: Gonjeshkha Behesht ra Mifahmand, Shamāyel Gardāni Bā Do Tāblo

Intertextual memory and singularity of traumatic truth: a visual story in two panels

The novel's opening pages deliver a visual jolt, confronting the reader with isolated statements drawn from classical and canonical Persian cultural heritage set against blank pages. These ambiguous lines, emphasized by their stark contrast with the surrounding

[14] The novel was originally published in 1997 by Sarir Publishing House, with the current analysis based on the second edition released by Niloofar Press in 2006.

[15] Some critics perceive a disconnect between Bani Ameri's postmodern writing style and apparent sympathy and reverence for the fighters and martyrs of war. See Alireza Sedighi and Mehdi Saidi, "Nāhamkhāni-e-Nazareiyeh va Neveshtār" [The Discordance of Theory and Writing in Sparrows Understand Heaven], *Research in Persian Language and Literature, Biannual Journal of Scientific Research*, no. 10 (2010): 195–216.

[16] Over time, authors developed diverse perspectives on the war and Sacred Defense, resulting in three main groups: those with a positive view, who praised the war, resistance, and perseverance of fighters, saw the war and warriors as holy; those with a critical view saw the war as futile and destructive, highlighting its dire consequences; and those who depicted both the achievements and challenges of the war. See Mohammad Hanif, *Jang Āz Seh Didgāh* [War from Three Perspectives] (Tehran: Nashre Sarir, 2008).

[17] In 1952, Leo Strauss published *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, in which he argued that serious writers employ esoteric methods, meaning they write with multiple or layered meanings, often concealed through irony, paradox, obscure references, or even intentional self-contradiction. Taking his bearings from the Islamic philosopher al-Farabi, Strauss wrote that esoteric writing shields the philosopher from potential retribution by the regime and protects the regime from philosophical challenges; it attracts readers who are discerning while repelling those who are not; and uncovering the hidden message is itself a form of philosophical reasoning. See Harvey C. Mansfield, "Strauss's Machiavelli," *Political Theory* 3, no. 4 (1975): 372–384; Leo Strauss, "Exoteric Teaching," ed. Hannes Kerber, in *Reorientation: Leo Strauss in the 1930s*, eds. Martin D. Yaffe and Richard S. Ruderman (New York: Palgrave, 2014), 275–289.

[18] For similarities and differences in the narrative strategies used in Persian literature to construct public memory and overcome the innate challenges of memorializing trauma, see Amir Khadem, "Endemic Pains and Pandemic Traumas: The Narrative Construction of Public Memory in Iran, Palestine, and the United States" (PhD diss., University of Alberta, 2017).

[19] Bani Ameri's novel may be influenced by Ahmad Dehghan's short story in which the narrator confesses to the killing of his friend and comrade on the battlefield in a letter addressed to the comrade's parents. See Ahmad Dheghan, *Man Ghatel-e-Pesaretan Hastam* [I am Your Son's Murderer] (Tehran, Ofogh, 2005).

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emptiness, stand out as key thematic anchors. This design not only underscores the authority and significance of these statements but also transforms them into visual symbols contributing to the narrative's depth. By employing this blend of intertextual references and visual storytelling, the novel immediately challenges traditional methods of representing traumatic events, compelling the reader to engage with the material on multiple levels.

The novel introduces its complex themes and structure with the line, "Haft Awrang: *Gonjeshkha Behesht ra Mifahmand,* Shamāyel Gardāni Bā Do Tāblo," which translates to "Seven Thrones: Sparrows Understand Heaven, a Canvas in Two Panels."[20] The reference to "Haft Awrang" (Seven Thrones), not only alludes to the seven stars that form the Big Dipper but also links to Jami's famously illustrated 15th-century poetry.[21] This allusion merges modern historical events with the literary and visual representation of those events. This symbolic intertextual reference blends the literary with the visual, the real with the imaginary, and the present with the past. The novel thus blurs the boundaries between mythical and historical, exploring the haziness between reality and fiction.

The second reference in the line, "Shamāyel Gardāni Bā Do Tāblo," highlights another aspect of classical visual culture: the practice of *Shamāyel Gardāni*, an illustrated form of public storytelling.[22] Originating in the 16th century, this art involved the display of images on canvas or glass narrating the tragic fate of the martyrs at the Battle of Karbala. This method of storytelling, akin to the theatrical *Taʿzieh* or *Naqqāli*, transforms the reader into an observer of a visual narrative encapsulating communal memory.[23] By incorporating this traditional form, the novel further suggests a fusion of visual storytelling and textual narrative that deepens the exploration of personal and collective memory and trauma. It positions the reader not just as a passive consumer of the text, but as an active participant in a narrative experience that resonates with historical and cultural significance. This integration of *Shamāyel Gardāni* into the novel's structure emphasizes the enduring impact of historical events and traditions on personal and collective identities, bridging the gap between past and present through a rich tapestry of imagery and text.

The novel's epigraph – a single line in quotation marks – captures the reader's attention with a modified excerpt from "Sonnet 184" by the 14th-century Persian poet Hafez, establishing the narrative's thematic tone.[24] Hafez originally explored the plurality of interpretations of the true path to God and ensuing sectarian divides, arguing for a singular truth.[25] The novel echoes this theme by adapting Hafez's poem: "since truth *I* could not see, the path of myths I took."[26] In the

[20] This novel has not been translated into English. All translations provided here are my own, and therefore all references are to the original novel.

[21] This 15th-century collection, comprising seven books filled with love stories and moral anecdotes, was famously rendered in an illustrated version between 1556–1565, becoming a masterpiece of Persian miniature art. The illustrated classic is now in the Freer Gallery of Art and is known as the Freer Jami.

[22] Don Rubin et al., eds., *World Encyclopedia of Contemporary Theatre: Asia Pacific* (London: Routledge, 2014), 193.

[23] *Taʿzieh* refers to comfort, condolence, or the expression of grief, and stems from the root *aza*, which signifies mourning. The term is most commonly associated with passion plays depicting the Battle of Karbala and its surrounding events. *Naqqāli*, or narrating an illustrated story, was performed in coffee houses. Coffee houses in Iran began during the Safavid Dynasty in the 15th century and reached their peak during the Qajar Dynasty in the 17th century. By the time of the Constitutional Revolution (1905–1911), such coffee houses had evolved into centers for illustrated storytelling and narrative paintings, serving as educational spaces where people learned about history, religion, and culture. These paintings, which were divided into secular and religious themes, often featured Persian legends and epic tales, with Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* being a popular subject. Religious artworks typically depicted important figures such as the Prophet Mohammad and significant events such as the Battle of Karbala. For further reading, see Farshid Emami, "Coffeehouses, Urban Spaces, and the Formation of a Public Sphere in Safavid Isfahan," *Muqarnas* 33, no. 1 (2016): 177–220.

[24] Hafez, "Chon Nadidand Haqiqat Rah-e Afsāneh Zadand" [Sonnet 184].

[25] See Roy Mottahedeh, "Pluralism and Islamic Traditions of Sectarian Divisions," in *Diversity and Pluralism in Islam: Historical and Contemporary Discourses*, ed. Zulfikar Hirji (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010). Mottahedeh's analysis suggests that Hafez viewed these sectarian differences as mere distractions for those not yet on the mystical path.

[26] Hafez, "Chon Nadidand Haqiqat Rah-e Afsāneh Zadand," emphasis added.

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context of the novel, this pastiche emphasizes that genuine representation and narration of events of war can only be done by those directly impacted by the material reality. The novel underscores the gap between lived personal experiences and external interpretations, personal and collective memory, critiquing the limitations of conventional and institutional storytelling in capturing the truth of war.[27]

In "Tābloy-e Qows va Qozah" (The Rainbow Panel), the first of the two canvases, an unidentified speaker asserts his unique authority over the narrative, establishing a tension between the preceding intertextual references and this singular narrative voice:

> I alone possess the voice, regardless of the perspective or name presented. The essence of my power lies in my role as the paramount narrator. One day, I will return to reveal the complete truth. Let us anticipate that impending day.
>
> I shall return, once again, if I survive.[28]

The speaker's assertion, "I alone possess the voice," underscores the dominance of a central narrative force that seeks to override all other interpretations of events. This claim directly challenges the intertextual elements that suggest a multiplicity of meanings, setting up a conflict between diverse perspectives and a singular authoritative truth. The novel leverages this tension to delve into the complexities of narrative authority and the power dynamics in historical interpretation, reinforcing the intertextual reference to Hafez and its emphasis on a singular, transcendent truth that surpasses conventional divisions and interpretations.[29]

While the novel's opening pages are rich with intertextual references, engaging with various cultural and artistic traditions, the prominent use of the first-person "I" introduces a tension between decentralized meaning and the assertion of a single narrative authority. Echoing Roland Barthes's poststructuralist critique of author-centered criticism, the novel questions who truly holds the power to recount events. By delaying the revelation of the narrator's identity, the novel builds anticipation for a "complete truth" that is deeply intertwined with the experiences of those directly affected by the materiality of trauma. This tension reflects the broader struggle over control of the narrative surrounding traumatic historical events: who is telling the "truth," and who is telling myths and fables?

Originally, intertextuality, as introduced in poststructuralist theory, was meant to challenge author-centered criticism and allow for a plurality of interpretations. Roland Barthes argued that assigning a single, definitive meaning to a text based on the author's identity or intentions imposes limitations on the text. He viewed the author's purpose to be the production of the text, not defining its meaning. Barthes's aim was to disrupt the traditional association between "author" and "authority," suggesting that meaning is created by the reader and that the writer's original intent is ultimately inaccessible.[30] This raises the question: who is dismantling whose authority in this statement? The inclusion of the unidentified authorial "I" hints at the eventual return of a legitimate storyteller, distinct from both narrator and author – perhaps someone who has been silenced, marginalized,

[27] See Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, trans. Lewis A. Closer, Heritage of Sociology Edition Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992). This work is seminal in memory studies, as Halbwachs introduces the concept of collective memory, arguing that memory is a social construct influenced by group identities and cultural frameworks, distinguishing it from individual memory.

[28] Hassan Bani Ameri, *Gonjeshkha Behesht ra Mifahmand* [Sparrows Understand Heaven] (Nashre Sarir, 2006), 7.

[29] The field of memory studies, which intersects with trauma theory, also explores the distinction between personal and collective memory. Scholars such as Cathy Caruth and Dominick LaCapra have examined how trauma affects memory, leading to fragmented personal memories that may be difficult to reconcile with the collective narratives of history and culture.

[30] Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (Hill and Wang, 1986), 53.

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or even deceased. The desire to "reveal the complete truth" is accompanied by a deliberate delay in unveiling the speaker's identity and the truth until the novel's conclusion, where the voice of the "martyred" protagonist returns to fulfill the promise made at the outset.

This intricate layering of visual storytelling and intertextual references exemplifies the tension between personal and collective memory. The isolated statements from Persian cultural heritage, starkly set against blank pages, illustrate how collective memory – embodied in these canonical texts – asserts itself as an authoritative narrative. However, the novel complicates this collective memory by embedding it within a personal narrative voice that seeks to reclaim a singular, traumatic truth. This interplay highlights the distinction between collective memory, which seeks to unify and stabilize historical events through shared symbols and narratives, and personal memory, which often challenges these collective narratives by introducing fragmented, subjective experiences of trauma. The novel thus becomes a site where the struggle between these two forms of memory is dramatized, questioning who holds the authority to narrate history and whose voices are marginalized in the process. By drawing on classical Persian cultural heritage, the narrative weaves together historical and mythical dimensions, engaging with collective memory and linking past events and cultural symbols to the present narrative.

The body remembers

The narrative unfolds through a central chapter entitled "Ghows va Qozah," a play on words that, when combined, mean "Diving and the Rainbow." The term *ghows*, which translates to diving or plunging, reflects the chapter's focus on Alijan's mysterious death in the river and Ali Ashraf's quest to locate Alijan's body in any water he encounters. Alijan's drowning in the river symbolically parallels how white light refracts when it enters a medium such as a glass prism or water droplet, bending and dispersing into its component colors. Alijan's fate, like the refracted light, is fragmented into multiple accounts of what truly happened. This metaphor of dispersion structures the chapter into seven segments, each named after a different color of the rainbow.[31]

These colors are not merely aesthetic, they are integral to the narrative structure. Each color evokes specific emotions and aligns with the thematic elements of memory, identity, and trauma, creating a multi-sensory reading experience. Through the "Haft Awrang" structure, the chapter weaves these themes with the physical properties of water, color, films, and photographs, engaging readers on visual, tactile, and emotional levels. The use of rainbow colors symbolizes distinct facets of truth. Each segment represents a different aspect of the past as remembered by various characters and narrated by the photojournalist. As the chapter progresses, these individual colors converge to form a singular light – or truth – that encapsulates the complex reality of the past, the truth of Alijan's death. This convergence mirrors the way white light is created when all the colors of the spectrum combine. Water, central to the novel as the protagonist is born, dies, and emerges from it, serves as a vessel for memories. Each rainbow color represents an emotional facet of the past, which seeps into the present through the interplay of light and water, revealed through the narrator's interviews, personal recollections, witness accounts, and recorded documentaries from the war.

The novel begins eight years after Alijan's body goes missing and forty days after it is discovered in the river, unscathed. Danial has settled into a peaceful yet haunted life, with the image of a bullet hole in Alijan's throat etched into his memory. Nationwide memorial preparations are already underway when a mysterious phone call shatters Danial's family life, casting a shadow over everyone connected to Alijan. The voice on the other end, claiming

[31] "Über Wahrheit und Lüge im außermoralischen Sinne" (On Truths and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense) is an essay written by Friedrich Nietzsche in 1873. In this work, Nietzsche challenges conventional notions of truth, arguing that what we call "truth" is merely a collection of socially and historically agreed upon metaphors, illusions, and arbitrary linguistic constructs.

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to be Alijan, sounds exactly like him. This unexpected call triggers a visceral reaction in Danial, disrupting the calm blues of his current life with the violent reds of wartime memories, blurring the lines between past and present. Danial retrieves the film of Alijan's burial procession. As he meticulously reviews each frame – observing the grief on the mourners' faces and revisiting his own memories – he begins to question the identity of the person in the coffin. "Who was in that coffin then, if not Alijan?" he wonders.

Danial, then fresh out of college with a degree in theater and film, had hidden a camera in his backpack and joined Alijan on a mission to the war-torn region of Paveh, where the local Kurds are torn between their Kurdish identity and loyalty to the central government. Danial and Alijan craft careful strategies to navigate this precarious situation, as separatist Kurds are both wary of and in conflict with the central government militia. Trust is nonexistent and fear prevails. Despite this, Danial and Alijan form an alliance with Ali Ashraf (Asoo) and his mother Zhinoo while in Paveh, until Alijan is shot through the throat during an operation and drowns while crossing the river. In a melancholic, post-traumatic response to Alijan's death – or disappearance – Ali Ashraf, later revealed to be Alijan's half-brother, begins a nightly ritual of donning a diving suit to search the river for Alijan's body. The lack of a proper burial drives Ali Ashraf to keep this vigil for eight long years, until finally finding Alijan's body.

In *The Body Remembers*, Babette Rothschild examines the complex interplay between physical manifestations of trauma and psychological therapy. She argues that the human body retains physiological memories of traumatic experiences, as our initial perceptions of an event are encoded not in words but through somatic sensations – such as smells, sights, sounds, touches, or tastes. These sensory memories can trigger flashbacks, igniting psychosomatic reactions in the present when any of the senses re-encounter elements reminiscent of the trauma.[32] Similarly, *Gonjeshkha Behesht ra Mifahmand* depicts a traumatic past not just through its characters' thoughts and dialogue but also their interactions with the environment, reactions to physical settings, and sensory experiences.

The corresponding narration of memories evokes a deeply sensory reading of the novel, where trauma is not just verbally told but physically and emotionally experienced through vivid images, sounds, and even the subtle shifts in human expressions and the physicality of Ali Ashraf's mourning, echoing Rothschild's idea that trauma is stored in the body and can be recalled through sensory triggers. The narrative delves into the complex interplay between memory and representation, contrasting tangible photographic images with fragmented, sensory recollections of traumatic events. While photographs and documentaries offer a selective view of history, the narrative suggests that the true impact of trauma is preserved within the body and through sensory and emotional recollections, challenging the idea that documentary evidence alone can fully encapsulate the depth of human suffering.

In *Gonjeshkha*, the narrator presents two distinct types of images: tangible photographs and films captured by the narrator-journalist and the mental snapshots stored in his and other characters' memories. The first set of images, tangible photographs, are revisited by Danial in the wake of his mysterious phone call. One particular photograph captures Ali Ashraf and a girl, Goole Bakh, who had been rescued immediately after her parents' tragic murder. Despite the brutal murders they just witnessed, both Ali Ashraf and Goole Bakh are smiling in the photograph, taken on the most chaotic and bloody day of battle in Paveh. Another tangible image consists of film footage Danial recorded at the end of that day, documenting the arrival of supporting forces that broke the siege and rescued Alijan, the narrator, and their company. Although the images are blurred and poorly captured, Danial enhances them with audio and commentary to make the film presentable, recalling Susan Sontag's interpretations of photography: "Even when photographers are most

[32] Babette Rothschild, *The Body Remembers: The Psychophysiology of Trauma and Trauma Treatment* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2000), 44.

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concerned with mirroring reality, they are still haunted by tacit imperatives of taste and conscience."[33]

The second set of images stems from the narrator's photographic memory – capturing moments he wished he could have recorded with a camera. He acknowledges that the rapid unfolding of events that day could only have been precisely captured through still photographs or films. Nevertheless, he suggests these moments can be vividly remembered and, over time, become even more resonant and enduring.[34] In the narrative, the narrator presents seven vivid images from traumatic past events, enhancing them with the recollections of his interviewees and described as if in slow motion. This approach creates a narrative documentary, a montage of characters' mental images and emotional recollections that, although not physically captured, form a vivid and evocative depiction of their experiences.

The distinction between tangible photographs and the sensory, emotional snapshots stored in memory highlights the inherent contradictions between journalistic documentation and institutional memory versus individual traumatic memory. Susan Sontag notes that photographs serve as evidence, making tangible the things we might otherwise doubt.[35] While a painting or prose can offer only selective interpretations, a photograph might seem to offer a clear window – a "narrowly selective transparency."[36] Yet, Bani Ameri's narrative questions this premise. In the novel, the photographs and films Danial captures depict moments of relative calm, while it is through the narrative of memory that moments of intense chaos are vividly brought to life. These captured images do not convey the full scope of trauma, such as Goole Bakh's joyful appearance on Ali Ashraf's shoulders, masking the horror of the murder of her parents and uncle just moments earlier. The physical photographs omit these traumatic details, whereas memory preserves and recalls them without bias, even years later. The role of the storyteller thus becomes to give form to those memories of historical events that cannot be visually represented or shared outside of narrative storytelling.

Seduction of war's euphoria, aesthetics of colors in brutality, and ethics of violence

Bani Ameri deliberately uses vibrant colors, drawing on the continuity of classical Persian heritage, particularly the *Haft Awrang* and *Shamāyel Gardāni* styles, while also evoking the symbolic representations of religious war in the work of contemporary revolutionary artists, such as Kazem Chalipa.[37] However, unlike revolutionaries' obsession with religious symbolism, Bani Ameri aims for realism, stating, "I wanted to be realistic in showing the true colors of life in war."[38] This realism, while bringing beauty to his depictions, complicates the portrayal of war by blurring the line between aestheticization and brutality. The narrator's descriptions of events do not provoke a denunciation of human cruelty or fully convey the reality of death and destruction. Susan Sontag, in her exploration of war photography, argues that images of suffering can evoke both horror and fascination, often dulling ethical responses when their beauty overshadows the brutality they depict.[39] Bani Ameri's use of color mirrors this tension, where the allure of war's beauty risks obscuring its harsh truths. However, the epigraph, "Since truth *I* could not see, the path of myths *I* took," reflects Ameri's recognition that his distance from the material experience of war can lead to

[33] Sontag, *On Photography*, 162; Bani Ameri, *Gonjeshkha Behesht ra Mifahmand*, 162.

[34] Bani Ameri, *Gonjeshkha Behesht ra Mifahmand*, 65.

[35] Sontag, *On Photography*, 3.

[36] Ibid., 5–6.

[37] Kazem Chalipa (1958–), often referred to as the "artist of the revolution," portrays modern fallen soldiers as martyrs of the Battle of Karbala in 680 AD, following the ideological tradition that sanctifies war and resistance. For a more comprehensive analysis of his paintings, see Maryam Ghodrati and Rachel Dale, eds., *Embodied Testimonies, Gendered Memories, and the Poetics of Trauma: Exploring the Intersection of Deconstructionist and Postcolonial Trauma Theory* (Vernon Press, 2024).

[38] Maryam Ghodrati, personal interview with Hassan Bani Ameri, August 17, 2017.

[39] See Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003).

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mythologization, just as a journalist – by the act of photographing or documenting – can reduce the victims of war to mere spectacles, objectifying their pain for consumption by distant audiences.[40] While Bani Ameri portrays war's aesthetic allure, he simultaneously undercuts this romanticization by confessing to the mythologizing of events because of the "truth he could not see."

In one snapshot of the narrator's memory, he vividly recalls the chaotic day he most wishes he had captured on camera. Upon their arrival at the neighborhood hospital to sell their goods, Asoo (Ali Ashraf's Kurdish name) and his mother Zhinoo are suddenly caught in a siege. Obeying his mother's urgent command, Asoo mounts his beloved horse to fetch his uncle and wife, believing the hospital to be a refuge amidst the chaos, as helicopters from the central government descend, laden with weapons to evacuate the wounded. In this memory-turned-photograph, the fear in Zhinoo's eyes is palpable as she whispers "Asoo," her voice laden with anxiety.[41] As the chaos unfolds, the narrator, mounted on a motorcycle, dodges bullets and ignores warnings to stop. Amid the peril, he finds exhilaration in the dangerous ride, driven by the powerful beats of the horse galloping ahead. This raw thrill of navigating through a war-torn city infuses the narrative with a complex blend of horror and beauty.[42]

Another snapshot shifts to a devastating tableau at Asoo's uncle's house, where the consequences of the siege become painfully clear. Asoo arrives too late, finding his relatives fatally shot. The narrator vividly describes the murder scene: a bloodied hand, clutching chestnuts, emerges from the wreckage of a shattered window, symbolizing the abrupt and violent disruption of daily life. Unaware of the tragedy inside, Asoo pauses, a fleeting smile crossing his face at the sight of chestnuts falling like tears, creating a poignant contrast against the backdrop of his family's demise. The narrator paints the scene with poetic clarity, depicting an expansive sky, bluer than ever, riding atop mountains, waterfalls, rocky houses, and the rich forest unfolding before them.[43]

The narrator's recollections raise questions about the impact of war imagery on viewers and the ethical responsibility of journalism. The vibrant colors – blood red, forest green, and sky blue –enhance the aesthetic appeal, while excitement on the battlefield obscures the harsh realities of violence and death. Susan Sontag, in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, cautions about the seductive power of such images and questions their ability to mobilize opposition to war. She discusses how images of suffering can be both repulsive and strangely beautiful, questioning whether the aesthetic presentation of such images dulls the ethical response to violence. She cautions about the seductiveness of such images: "IS THERE AN ANTIDOTE to the perennial seductiveness of war? [...] Could one be mobilized to actively oppose war by an image?"[44] In war photography, the tension between beauty and brutality raises the question of whether viewers become desensitized to violence through aestheticized depictions, leading them to view conflict as an abstract concept rather than a brutal material reality. For the narrator, this interplay between beauty and horror complicates his own understanding of war, as the aesthetic allure might overshadow the visceral human suffering beneath the surface. This challenge becomes even more pronounced in journalistic representations, where the line between documentation and sensationalism is often blurred, forcing viewers to confront their own moral and emotional reactions to the images presented.

Susan Sontag asserts that beautification is a typical function of the camera, often obscuring the ethical implications of what is depicted and potentially numbing the viewer's moral response.[45] In contrast, she describes the act of "uglifying" – showing scenes in their

[40] Hafez, "Chon Nadidand Haqiqat Rah-e Afsāneh Zadand," emphasis added.
[41] Bani Ameri, *Gonjeshkha Behesht ra Mifahmand,* 65.
[42] Ibid., 71.
[43] Ibid., 73.
[44] Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 122. Emphasis in original.
[45] Sontag, *On Photography*, 81.

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harshest form – as a means to provoke a stronger, more thoughtful reaction. This contrast highlights how colorful, aesthetic portrayals can inadvertently diminish the viewer's moral engagement with the real horrors of war, while more stark, unembellished depictions might encourage a deeper contemplation and ethical reaction to the atrocities shown.[46]

By blending beauty with brutality, Bani Ameri's depiction suggests that the aestheticization of war can distort its painful reality, leaving viewers entranced by the imagery and detached from the ethical implications. Bani Ameri's use of realistic colors and depictions highlights the tension between beauty and brutality, suggesting that war's true nature is often obscured by its aestheticization in art and media. For the author, who has not directly experienced war, and a journalist who remains objective, this aestheticization creates a distorted or incomplete understanding, where chaotic beauty overshadows underlying horrors. In this sense, the narrator's struggle to know the truth of war perhaps stems from the gap between secondhand, visually appealing portrayals and the visceral, traumatic experiences that survivors carry with them.

Fragmented memories: the affective experience of trauma versus semantic recall

Among the vividly described snapshots, photographs, and films in the narrative, the sixth stands out as the most traumatic and visually intense, demanding a deeper and more engaged response from the reader. In this harrowing scene, a helicopter transporting the wounded and dead is struck by sniper fire upon takeoff. It spirals out of control, colliding with the surrounding hills, and its spinning propellers descend upon the people below. This catastrophic moment, rooted in historical events, coincides with the arrival of Ali Ashraf and his mother Zhinoo, who tragically loses her life to the helicopter's blades. This sixth photograph captures the chilling aftermath of the day's events, marking it as a profoundly impactful image within the series:

> The Sixth Photograph: blood splatters on Emad's eyeglasses and face, the distorted reflection of a helicopter in one lens, and the headless image of Zhinoo in the other, standing, with hands toward the sky.
> Aunt Zhinoo fell to the ground, right in front of my eyes and I exclaimed, "Auntie..." and was overcome with nausea, confronted for the first time by a decapitated body at such proximity.
> Ali Ashraf chillingly recounted, "I watched as my mother's head rolled and rolled on the ground until it reached my feet."
> The Sixth Slow-Motion: The helicopter's propeller spinning amid smoke and fog of the dust and the loud noise of its engine. Zhinoo's head falling on the ground and rolling. And Alijan's stunned gaze. Zhinoo's hands clutching the ground. My coughs and horrified gaze on the helicopter. It's still on and is wavering, and the corpse of the pilot is hanging from it. [...] Zhinoo's head rolling on the ground. A man is beating his head to the wall. Zhinoo's head rolling on the ground. A woman covering her eyes and screaming by all her might. Zhinoo's head rolling on the ground. Rahman's looking all around him, bewildered, and his screams directed toward the sky. Zhinoo's head rolling on the ground. Gorgin biting his lips, his attempt at composure to Ali Ashraf's fixed, empty stare, and a drop of tear rolling down from a corner of one of his eyes. Zhinoo's head rolling on the ground. Alijan's hands coming forward to take Zhinoo's shaking hands and putting them on his face, [...] Zhinoo's head rolling on the ground. A red hole in the middle of a man's forehead right when he is screaming, "God!" [...] Zhinoo's head rolling on the ground. The galloping sound of the horse and the head reaching to the tip of Ali Ashraf's Kurdish shoes. Goole Bakh's stunned gaze on the

[46] Ibid.

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> ground [fixed on the head]. The empty look of Ali Ashraf fixed on Zhinoo's head. [...] his gaze staring straight ahead.[47]

The narration of this traumatic memory is rendered through fragmented present tense and passive, repetitive, run-on sentences. The relentless repetition of Zhinoo's head rolling becomes a disturbing motif, interwoven with the visceral reactions of onlookers, vividly depicting a spectrum of emotions in the face of tragedy, from horror to disbelief. This stylistic choice mirrors one of the unique characteristics of traumatic memories identified by van der Kolk:

> that traumatic experiences initially are organized without semantic representations and that "memories" of the trauma tend to, at least initially, be predominantly experienced as fragments of the sensory components of the event: as visual images, olfactory, auditory, or kinesthetic sensations, or intense waves of feelings (which patients usually claim to be representations of elements of the original traumatic event).[48–50]

In the portrayal of the sixth scene, Danial utilizes various sensory perceptions to communicate the intensity of the moment. The actual event includes little direct communication; it is only later, possibly years after, that Danial and Ali Ashraf can articulate their experience, embedding brief dialogues within the slow-motion recounting of events. This approach underscores the delayed processing and expression that typifies traumatic recall.

Regarding traumatic memory, van der Kolk suggests that "terrifying experiences may be remembered with extreme vividness"; it is only over time that a subject gradually develops a personal narrative that can be properly referred to as "explicit memory" or "narrative memory."[49] Even after the event, in a state of high arousal, subjects may fail to give a coherent narrative of the event, but this inability does not interfere with their implicit memory, as "they may 'know' the emotional valence of a stimuli and be aware of associated perceptions, without being able to articulate the reasons for feeling or behaving in a particular way."[50] It is clearly evident in the photographs and films the narrator describes most vividly that the sensory memory of traumatic events remains graphic, remembered, and relived through the body, while the words associated with the process of narrating events with highly emotional content remain fragmented and crippled.[51] The distinction between narrative memory (explicit memory) and sensory, affective memories (implicit memory) highlights a divide between how we traditionally think of memory as a story (narrative) versus how traumatic memories are often actually experienced – as disjointed, vivid, sensory fragments that are materially felt and embodied.[52] While previous snapshots of the narrator's memory obscure the brutality, the memory of the helicopter scene confronts it. In this traumatic memory, there is no detachment; the brutality is front and center, forcing the reader to confront the visceral horror without the veil of beautification. The previous images can be interpreted through narrative memory (explicit), with the visual details curated for effect, while the current image is more aligned with sensory or affective memory (implicit), where trauma is experienced as disjointed sensations and feelings.

In disjointed fashion, the middle of the novel shifts narrative focus away from Danial, our narrator up to this point, and instead centers the voice of Hania, Alijan's widow; the pair met while she was a war zone volunteer in the same region as him. At the point of her

[47] Bani Ameri, *Gonjeshkha Behesht ra Mifahmand*, 118–119.

[48] van der Kolk and Fisler, "Dissociation and the fragmentary nature...," 513.

[49] Ibid., 508.

[50] Bessel A. van der Kolk, "Trauma and Memory," *Psychiatry & Clinical Neurosciences* 52 (1998): S101.

[51] Tali Sharot et al., "How Emotion Enhances the Feeling of Remembering," *Nature Neuroscience* 7, no. 12 (2004): 1376–1380.

[52] Bessel A. van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (New York: Viking, 2014).

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introduction to the reader, Hania is remarried to Yahya, a kind and supportive man who also served with Alijan. She is depicted as soft-spoken, dignified, and reserved, yet clearly harbors unresolved feelings about her first husband's death – a topic she seldom discusses. Her persistent silence suggests her struggle to accept this loss, hinting at a deeper, possibly sinister, secret she might hold regarding a murder, as suggested by Ali Ashraf.

Throughout the novel, Danial, the narrator, attempts to gain insight into Alijan through Hania's memories, but she consistently avoids discussing him. Memories of Alijan trigger intense emotional outbursts from her, and she often retreats into solitude to cry. During moments of sorrow, she finds solace in reading poetry from a collection by Hafez, a gift from Alijan, symbolizing her unspoken grief and the unresolved nature of her loss. Her inability to see Alijan's body in its final resting place profoundly affects her, leaving her to grapple with her grief in isolation. Her silence breaks the night Alijan's body is recovered from the Arvand River. Hania steps forward to identify the body and, not long after, seeks out Danial in his office. It is as if years of suppressed speech and emotion flood out all at once: she speaks with the urgency and clarity of someone who has long been silent, eager to express everything she has held back.

Hania's sudden discovery of her voice reflects the argument made by Cathy Caruth, among others, that "exposure-based" treatments for PTSD should involve patients providing a detailed oral or written account of their traumatic events and intentionally engage with visual reminders of their trauma. This method aims to elicit traumatic memories that have yet to be fully processed – what Caruth terms "unclaimed experience."[53] These are experiences that were not fully understood or integrated when they occurred, but resurface, seeking comprehension beyond the initial emotional and sensory impact.

Caruth has faced extensive criticism for her hesitancy to fully endorse the integration of traumatic memories into conscious language as a pathway to healing, arguing that such efforts might undermine "the event's essential incomprehensibility, the force of its *affront to understanding*."[54] She posits that this dilemma often leads survivors into a silence borne from a reluctance to "translate their experience into speech."[55] As Holocaust survivor Schreiber Weitz articulates, this creates a paradox where "to speak is impossible, and not to speak is impossible."[56] This inherent tension – the urge to speak versus the resistance to it – underscores the complexity of comprehending trauma, stemming from the survivor's deep-seated knowledge of the event, which is resistant to externalization and materialization in the form of narration.[57]

[53] Brewin et al., "Intrusive Images in Psychological Disorders...," 220.

[54] Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, 154; Carl Krockel, "Reading Modernist Fiction as War Testimony: The Case of D.H. Lawrence's 'Nightmare,'" *Etude Lawrenciennes* 42 (2011): 153–186. Since the early 2000s, scholars have raised criticisms of Caruth's approach. Some of the key critiques include Dominick LaCapra, whoc criticizes Caruth for her abstract and generalized treatment of trauma, emphasizing the need to differentiate between various forms of trauma and account for specific historical and social conditions that shape traumatic experiences and their representations. See Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014). Ruth Leys also critiques Caruth's work for its reliance on a universal model of trauma that downplays the importance of historical and cultural specificities. Leys argues that trauma should be understood in relation to specific historical events and cultural contexts rather than as a transhistorical phenomenon. See Ruth Leys, *Trauma: A Genealogy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000). Critics such as Geoffrey Hartman and E. Ann Kaplan argue that Caruth's emphasis on the inexpressibility and unrepresentability of trauma can lead to a form of theoretical paralysis, where the focus on what cannot be said overshadows what can be communicated and understood about traumatic experiences. See Geoffrey Hartman, "Trauma Within the Limits of Literature," *European Journal of English Studies* 7, no. 3 (2003): 257–274; E.A. Kaplan, *Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005).

[55] Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, 154.

[56] Ibid.

[57] For a literature review of Caruthian and postcolonial trauma theory, see Maryam Ghodrati and Rachel Dale, eds., *Embodied Testimonies, Gendered Memories, and the Poetics of Trauma: Exploring the Intersection of Deconstructionist and Postcolonial Trauma Theory* (Wilmington: Vernon Press, 2024).

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In defending her position, Caruth clarifies that she does not view speech as negating the truth of a traumatic event or an outright failure to understand trauma. Rather, she warns of "the danger of speech, of integration into the narration of memory lies not in what it cannot understand, but in that it understands too much."[58] She argues that integrating trauma into a stable narrative might be seen as a form of "sacrilege" against the raw authenticity of traumatic experience.[59] To speak about trauma, Caruth seems to suggest, is to "move away from the experience of shock by reintegrating it into a stable understanding of it."[60] This tension is mirrored in Hania's journey from silence to speech, following her harrowing experiences in the war. Initially, her trauma translates into a prolonged silence, and only later into a narrative shaped by her recollections. While this act of narrativization starts to bridge her secretive silence, it does not entirely dispel the mystery or fully illuminate the truth; instead, it exposes some aspects while simultaneously unveiling new ambiguities previously buried amid the singular truth Hania was fed.

The encounter with Alijan's dead body marks a cathartic moment for Hania, releasing her from the bonds of unspoken guilt, fear, and grief. This moment of verbalization is symbolically captured by the blue color referenced in the chapter title, which signifies both the tranquility that settles over Hania's lingering melancholia and the serene atmosphere that envelops the novel as Alijan's fragmented history and long-absent body are finally reconciled with Hania's version of the truth. While Alijan remained missing, Hania was caught between hope and dreading his possible return. Confirmation of his death through the physical reality of his body allows her memories to flow more freely, enriching her narrative with previously withheld details.

This chapter, although still non-chronological and fragmented, presents the most coherent account of Hania's traumatic past and is the only part of the novel narrated entirely from her perspective. The narrator explicitly chooses to focus solely on Hania's account in this section, preventing other memories from clouding her narrative, and commits to enhancing the text with additional information from other interviews, which he integrates into Hania's narrative using quotations and italics to denote their sources. This methodological approach offers a clearer and more sequential narrative for the reader, contrasting with other sections of the book in which the abrupt interjections of multiple characters can disrupt the narrative flow.

The power struggle between the narrator and author avatar: who knows the truth?

About one-third of the way into the novel, amidst a blend of shifting timelines and overlapping voices, it becomes clear that the narrator, Danial, is antagonistic toward the author avatar, Bani Ameri. Danial, a documentary director and photojournalist who covered the war, asserts authority over the story's narration, including the account of Alijan's death and return from the Arvand River – a story he had previously documented and broadcast. The author avatar, Bani

Ameri, seeks to collaborate with Danial on a novel about Alijan, but Danial resists this involvement, suggesting that only he can capture the true representation of war and Alijan's life, as photojournalism captures objective reality. As Susan Sontag asserts, "photographs are a way of imprisoning reality…of making it stand still, or they enlarge a reality that is felt to be shrunk, hollowed out, perishable, remote. One can't possess reality, one can possess (and be possessed by) images."[61] This suggests that, for Danial, images not only capture but also control reality, making it solely accessible through his perspective.

In contrast, the author sees the act of capturing the world in images as a means to "re-experience the unreality and remoteness of the real," using storytelling to explore

[58] Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, 154.
[59] Ibid. Caruth makes this argument using van der Kolk and van der Hart's clinical observations as evidence.
[60] Ibid.
[61] Sontag, *On Photography*, 163.

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deeper emotional and psychological truths.[62] According to Susan Sontag, the photographic image serves as both a trace and a selection:

> the photographic image, even to the extent that it is a trace (not a construction made out of disparate photographic traces), cannot be simply a transparency of something that happened. It is always the image that someone chose; to photograph is to frame, and to frame is to exclude.[63]

This tension highlights a fundamental conflict between firsthand war documentation and literary construction, each claiming different aspects of truth and representation. Photographs aim to capture fixed moments in time, serving as a material anchor to memory, while literary narratives delve into the immaterial aspects of memory and psychological impact. This dichotomy examines how physical evidence and intangible experiences interact and inform our understanding of reality.

In *Gonjeshkha*, the narrator adopts a fragmented postmodernist narrative style but avoids psychoanalytic interpretation of the characters. The narrative exhibits a clear preference for constructing Alijan's unified persona through the interviews, rather than exploring multiple perspectives. The narrator assumes the role of an omniscient storyteller, integrating various viewpoints to create a cohesive and objective depiction of Alijan's life and death. The narrator blends historical and contemporary moments into a singular, subjective experience, producing seven photographs and seven slow-motion sequences that mix authentic visual imagery with his own creative touch. This approach allows the narrator to seemingly witness everything, often minimizing his own visible presence:

> I have interwoven the diverse perspectives of others, merging historical and contemporary moments to create a unified image that transcends time, encapsulating it into a singular, subjective experience. This approach has inspired me to experiment with both mediums in this project, resulting in seven photographs and seven slow-motion sequences. These pieces blend authentic visual imagery – both my own and that of others – into cohesive and distinctive visuals. While I may not have personally experienced all these moments, I have played a crucial role in shaping their narrative, effectively making these stories my own. In this transformation, I assume the role of an omniscient narrator who has seemingly witnessed everything, at times deliberately minimizing my own visible presence.[64]

However, this narrative approach reveals a problematic fixation. The photojournalist narrator avoids engaging with the author avatar, focusing solely on a singular reconstruction of Alijan's story. This narrow focus stands in sharp contrast to the experiences of Ali Ashraf, whose voice is conspicuously absent. Ali Ashraf, who witnessed his mother's horrific death and the devastation of his hometown, is denied the opportunity to tell his own story. His traumatic reenactments – repeatedly diving into bodies of water in search of his deceased brother – represent unprocessed trauma not easily captured by material evidence. As Caruth suggests, the essence of traumatic events lies not only in their brutal facts but also their inherent incomprehensibility.[65] Ali Ashraf's actions, driven by survivor's guilt, challenge the narrator's singular interpretation, highlighting the limitations of photographic evidence in capturing the profound emotional and psychological impact of trauma. Ali Ashraf's persistent, haunting memories, such as the image of his mother's severed head, underscore trauma's enduring and often unspoken nature. This contrast between the

[62] Ibid., 164.
[63] Ibid., 41.
[64] Bani Ameri, *Gonjeshkha Behesht ra Mifahmand,* 95.
[65] Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, 153.

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photojournalist and survivor narratives exposes the inadequacy of relying on a single perspective to fully capture the complexity of traumatic experiences.

Towards the end of the novel, the fragmented recollections coalesce into the narrative of Alijan's death. Ali Ashraf has harbored a deep-seated suspicion, rage, and guilt for years. On that fateful day, as their regiment crossed the river tethered by a rope, Ali Ashraf heard the splashing of water behind him. Ali Gol, who would later marry Alijan's widow, was directly behind Alijan. They recognized the sound of a bullet piercing Alijan's throat from the rattling and grunting noises he emitted. In a desperate attempt to breathe, Alijan released the rope to clutch his throat. The full account of what followed remains untold by either Ali Ashraf or Ali Gol. However, Ali Ashraf confronts the narrator, Danial, with harsh accusations: "What the hell is Ali Gol doing in Alijan's home now? What right does he have to change his name to Yahya and then go and live in Alijan's house?"[66] Ali Ashraf's accusations hint at his suspicion that Ali Gol might have intentionally drowned Alijan to silence him, thereby avoiding detection by enemy forces on the river's other side, possibly even coveting Alijan's life and his wife, Hania.[67] The truth remains obscured, but the narrator implies that both Ali Ashraf and Hania are burdened by this dark secret. Thus,

Alijan's death is portrayed not as a straightforward sacrificial martyrdom but as a profound mystery, casting a shadow on the ethical dimensions of war and its lasting impact on survivors.

Paradoxically, while Danial, the narrator, insists on a singular construction of Alijan's character and fate through the objective photojournalist lens, which is also in line with ideological narrative of the state, Bani Ameri, the author avatar, disrupts this perspective by appearing at Danial's house. The novelist challenges Danial, revealing that he, too, is a construct of the author's imagination. In the narrative climax, the author avatar asserts control, revealing that Alijan's father, previously thought dead, is alive. This man and his troubled past of marrying seven women and fathering seven sons – echoing the novel's recurring motif of the number seven – have left a complicated legacy. This also reveals that Alijan's quest had initially been to locate his six half-brothers and their mothers, taking him from Paveh – where he met Zhinoo and Ali Ashraf – to the occupied south, where he discovered another half-brother, Hassoon, who was a traitor to the central government.

The twist intensifies when it is disclosed that the voice mimicking Alijan on phone calls is his resentful twin brother, envious of Alijan's wartime heroism and the glory it garnered. Bani Ameri undermines the hero's sanctified image by revealing Alijan's opaque past, including a scandal in which he fathered a child with a woman labeled a "gypsy," a child hidden by his family, who gave her to a childless couple. This narrative choice not only humanizes Alijan but also introduces complexities to his character that defy the typical war hero archetype. Years later, this daughter, now an adult, appears at Alijan's funeral, her resemblance to him unmistakable to onlookers, adding yet another layer to the unfolding family saga. This revelation, while partially clarifying the tangled narrative, preserves some ambiguity, allowing the story to linger in the realms of myth and reality, thus reflecting on the imperfect nature of memory and heroism.

At this juncture in the novel, the narrative abruptly shifts from a realistic pictorial storytelling to a surrealist non-resolution. The mysteries surrounding the anonymous voice, Alijan's family background, and the protagonist's war-related death are unveiled in the final chapter through a glass of water. The author compels the narrator to gaze into his glass of water, and it is in this moment of purity that Danial discovers more. The narrative, which previously focused on illuminating external reality by weaving together elements of documentary film, photography, and personal interviews, takes a surrealist turn. The incomprehensible nature of violence and loss and the secret lives and motives of the characters clash with the narrator's realistic depictions of external material reality and his endeavor

[66] Bani Ameri, *Gonjeshkha Behesht ra Mifahmand*, 398.
[67] Ibid.

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to document historical truth. Though the facts about Alijan's family background could have been conveyed in a realist narrative, the surrealist portrayal now signifies more than the facts themselves. This blending of realism and surrealism reflects the author's desire "to disrupt the fetishized separation of the everyday and the extreme, the individual and history, then and now."[68] The exclusive reliance on documentary forms such as footage, interviews, or photography to represent events becomes problematic, acknowledging the impossibility of depending on realism alone, including historical empiricism, to construct traumatic history. By disrupting this separation, the author aims to convey a more nuanced and interconnected understanding of reality, acknowledging the complex interplay between individual lives and the broader historical context, as well as the continuity between past and present experiences. Beneath the surface lies more: untold personal stories, unrecordable by the camera's lens, hold the power to reshape the meaning of history and strip institutional monuments and memorials of their perceived holiness.

Tābloy-e Qows va Qozah (The Rainbow Panel)

The final two pages of the novel revisit the enigmatic first panel, effectively linking the narrative's conclusion to its cryptic beginning and offering a sense of closure. This restored panel reiterates the original speaker's promise to return and reveal the truth. The title page, referencing "Shamāyel Gardāni Bā Do Tāblo," suggests that these two panels, which carry the authoritative voice of the unidentified speaker, hold the definitive truth about past events. In contrast, the middle frame, "Diving and the Rainbow," functions primarily as a narrative interlude. Despite the speaker's return, the persistent ambiguity implies that the speaker, Alijan, marked by a painful bullet wound, harbors a secret truth yet to be unveiled by any narrator or character.

The final panel of Bani Ameri's novel reveals a startling twist: the unidentified speaker asserts that the person shot by the enemy and then drowned by his two best friends, Ali Ashraf and Ali Gol, was actually Alishah, Alijan's twin brother. The supposed caller on the line was, in fact, Alijan himself. The speaker explains that, throughout their childhood, the twins often switched roles to support each other in various situations. As a result, the photojournalist narrator's attempts to reconstruct the warrior's history amidst the chaos of war and trauma are dismantled. The voice claiming to be Alijan insists that he is still alive, despite his ongoing suffering from a scar on his throat and the forgetfulness of his loved ones, who believe him to be dead.

In the final lines, the ambiguous voice completes sentences left unfinished at the novel's start:

> I alone possess the voice, regardless of the perspective or name presented. The essence of my power lies in my role as the paramount narrator. One day, I will return to reveal the complete truth about the sacrifice of Alishah, who was shot so I could survive and recount everything that happened to them – and indeed, to me – has become my sole means of escaping the perpetual torment that seems destined to continue indefinitely. This realization reflects the silent suffering that binds us all, a collective agony endured in silence. Ali Ashraf and Ali Gol, who uncovered the truth about me before anyone else, are not driven by this knowledge. Instead, their behavior stems from the deep anguish over what each considers an unforgivable sin they committed. Everything unraveled on that fateful night in a fleeting moment that lasted no more than a hundredth of a second...[69]

As *Gonjeshkha* concludes, the clear-cut identity, name, and fame of the heroic fighter dissolve into ambiguity. The binaries of commitment versus corruption and sacred versus desecrated

[68] Michael Rothberg, *Traumatic Realism: The Demands of Holocaust Representation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 145.

[69] Bani Ameri, *Gonjeshkha Behesht ra Mifahmand*, 439–440.

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death become fluid. Even those closest to Alijan harbor suspicions of murder and hidden secrets.

There is no moral to violence. Tim O'Brien has argued that the truth about the violence of war is impossible and elusive: "You can tell a true war story by the way it never seems to end. Not then, not ever," and "in many cases a true war story cannot be believed. If you believe it, be skeptical. It's a question of credibility [...] In other cases, you can't even tell a true war story. Sometimes it's just beyond telling."[70] O'Brien suggested that the only things soldiers can tell as witnesses are nostalgic stories of comradery, but not of the reality.[71] Bani Ameri's use of surrealist narrative techniques further blurs the lines between reality and fiction, realism and modernism, challenging the conventional heroic culture surrounding martyrs and prompting readers to reconsider their psychological and moral relationship with glorified martyrdom.

Bani Ameri's effort to identify a legitimate narrator underscores the impossibility of achieving closure, emphasizing that those who are no longer alive to speak are perhaps the only ones who know what happened. While photographic memory serves as a tool for constructing historical reality, the incomprehensibility of traumatic events and their multidimensional meaning, coupled with personal biases, are highlighted in the surreal and ambiguous final scene.

Through mythical, historical, empirical, subjective, and individual narratives, the novel uses photographs, interviews, and films to convince others of the reality of recalled events. Yet, the physical existence of reality, Alijan in this case, ultimately confirms that what we consider objective reality always carries a subjective element. As Hayden White notes:

> There is so much of photo and video documentation of post-modern "accidents" and events that it is difficult to work up the documentation of any one of them as elements of a single "objective" story. Moreover, in many instances, the documentation of such events is so manipulable as to discourage the effort to drive explanations of the occurrences of which the documentation is supposed to be recorded image.[72]

White argues that the way we recount history – through narratives shaped by cultural and literary conventions – affects how we perceive reality. This does not negate the reality of the events or their impact on those who experienced them, but instead highlights the challenge of fully capturing and representing those realities through narrative forms. Bani Ameri's novel exemplifies this by showing that images retained in survivors and witnesses' memories cannot be captured by documentary tools or historical archives, nor can they be interpreted by those who do not have those memories.

Bani Ameri's *Gonjeshkha Behesht ra Mifahmand* challenges traditional narrative forms, illustrating the complexities of capturing traumatic experiences. The novel's fragmented, stream- of-consciousness approach – contrasted with the idealized portrayals of martyrdom – reflects a deliberate choice to navigate between the sacred imagery of war literature and the harsh realities of murder and moral failure. By avoiding actual photographs or documentary evidence, Bani Ameri relies on pictorial realism reconstructed through characters' traumatic memories, highlighting the interplay between realism and postmodernist elements.

This narrative strategy, along with heavily intertextual reliance on cultural and traditional forms of storytelling, underscores Hayden White's assertion that the way history is recounted through cultural and literary conventions affects our perception of reality.

[70] Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried: A Work of Fiction* (New York: Broadway Books, 1998), 71.

[71] For more on this subject, see Jim Hicks, *Lessons from Sarajevo: A War Stories Primer* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2013).

[72] Hayden White, "The Modernist Event," in *The Persistence of History: Cinema, Television, and the Modern Event*, ed. Vivian Sobchek (London: Routledge, 1996), 23.

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Bani Ameri's novel demonstrates that traditional narrative forms often fall short of capturing the multifaceted nature of historical traumatic experiences. The reference to Hafez's poem, "Since Truth They Could Not See the Path of Myths They Took," encapsulates this idea, illustrating how individuals and societies, in the absence of clear truth, turn to myths to make sense of complex realities. This reliance on myth can obscure the material realities of trauma, which are deeply rooted in the physical and psychological experiences of individuals. The graphic depictions of violence and the chaotic fragmentation of historical and personal narratives align with White's theory and Caruth's observation that such narratives challenge conventional expectations of "what it means to tell, to listen, and to gain access to the past."[73] Return of the dead to speak the truth, despite all the narrator and author avatar have done to construct history, emphasizes the distinction between an event and its representation, between personal and communal. When these events and experiences are conveyed through narrative or documentation, they are inevitably transformed – shaped by narrative conventions, cultural influences, political agendas, national identity, language, and ideological frameworks. This process can obscure, simplify, or distort the full complexity of the events. In Bani Ameri's novel, trauma is not merely an abstract, mythic, or symbolic concept that can be shown by *Shamāyel Gardāni*; it is lived and felt through the bodies of the individuals.

In *Gonjeshkha*, the transformation of once-named individuals into ghostlike, unidentifiable figures reflects the profound impact of trauma. *Shahādat*, in this context, does not signify martyrdom, a transition to a peaceful eternal life, but rather emphasizes bearing witness to a raw personal truth that has not gone through transformation. The novel's surrealist conclusion, with the unblemished state of Alijan or Alishah's body, signifies not a miraculous intervention but a stark representation of loss and an attempt by the deceased to assert their narrative against hegemonic or institutional delineation. Trauma in these instances "does not simply serve as a record of the past but precisely registers the force of an experience that is not yet fully owned."[74]

Gonjeshkha Behesht ra Mifahmand grapples with the fear of "sacrilege of the traumatic experience," challenging definitive claims of truth and resisting a simplified, orderly resolution.[75] It underscores that the profound effects of trauma transcend what can be clearly documented or articulated. By confronting and countering any teleological or theological closure, Bani Ameri's novel leaves readers with a deep and enduring impression of trauma's impact and the elusive nature of truth. It portrays the histories of trauma as inherently fragmented and incomplete, emphasizing the complex interplay between memory, narrative, and understanding. Through its innovative narrative form, Bani Ameri's work engages with the tangible consequences of historical violence and reaffirms that narrative of truth, as experienced through personal psychological and physical pain, is perpetually in flux and inherently imprecise.

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[73] Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, 154.
[74] Ibid., 151.
[75] Ibid., 154.

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