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## Mourning mothers and wars that never end: reading Nasim Marashi's *Haras* (Pruning) in the shadow of the Iran-Iraq war

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### ABSTRACT

The Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988), which the Iranian government frames as a ‘Sacred Defense’, occupies a large space in contemporary Persian fiction, sometimes in surprising ways. This article focuses on the 2017 novel *Haras* (Pruning) by Nasim Marashi (Nasīm Mar‘ashī), which despite being shaped entirely by the context of the Iran-Iraq War rarely treats the experience of living through it. The article explores how *Haras* builds on previous works that use the war not as a focal point, like conventional war literature, but a point of departure to explore different stories about post-war Iran, intricately connected to, yet far beyond, the war with Iraq. The article postulates that by using the war with Iraq to call attention to the loss of people, homes, and the environment, *Haras* uses the war to innovatively challenge the messaging of the Islamic Republic.

The Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988) has inspired a massive amount of cultural production that began during wartime and has continued until today. Within the literary sphere alone, thousands of works of fiction, poetry, and memoir have been published since the outbreak of the war in September 1980 in Persian, Arabic, as well as other southwest Asian and European languages. Although Persian literature was no stranger to the theme of war before this conflict, the war with Iraq has inspired an unprecedented quantity of literary writing in Persian dealing with modern warfare, encompassing soldiers’ experiences of the war front, its violence, desolation, despair, boredom, combat death, martyrdom, the destruction of livelihoods and cities, and PTSD in the lives of soldiers and civilians alike. In this article, I take up the depiction of the Iran-Iraq War through one famous, recent work of Persian fiction: the bestselling novel, *Haras* (Pruning, 2017), by Iranian author Nasim Marashi (Nasīm Mar‘ashī, b. 1984), currently in its thirtieth-fourth printing.<sup>1</sup> I contend that the novel breaks away from the dominant cultural depiction of the war in Iran—one that is often sponsored by the Iranian state—and uses the war as an entryway to

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<sup>1</sup>Throughout this article I spell the author’s name according to the way she spells it on social media as well as in her first novel *Payiz fasl-i akhar-i sal ast* that was translated into English (see Nasim Marashi, *I’ll Be Strong For You*, trans. Poupeh Missaghi, Astra House, 2021).

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discussing both the buried trauma of civilians whom the war affected and the often ignored environmental and ecological impact of the conflict on the marshlands in Khuzestan.

In literary and cultural criticism, the literature of the Iran-Iraq War is usually referred to either as 'Sacred Defense literature' (*adabiyāt-i difā'ī muqaddas*) or more simply as 'war literature' (*adabiyāt-i jang*). There are differences between the two labels, however, and each one has its own implications. 'Sacred Defense literature' implicitly places a literary work within the overarching 'Sacred Defense culture' (*farhang-i difā'ī muqaddas*). As a war culture, Sacred Defense culture encompasses literature, film, music, the visual arts, and an array of research that is generally sponsored by cultural institutions connected to and/or funded by the state. The cultural production associated with the Sacred Defense label tends to commemorate the eight-year war with Iraq as a narrative of resistance (*muqāvamat*), sacrifice (*isār*), and martyrdom (*shahādat*) in the name of both Islam and the Iranian nation. Sacred Defense literature is no exception. Today, the most prominent examples of Sacred Defense literature are memoirs, novels, short stories, poetry collections, and books of literary and cultural criticism printed by publishers who receive financial sponsorship from the Iranian government, such as Surah-yi Mihr or Sarir.<sup>2</sup>

Despite its evolution since 1980, the Sacred Defense narrative still imposes a limited view of the war with Iraq both onto its historiographical and cultural representations. In its simplest and most propagandistic form, the eight-year war with Iraq has been depicted as a modern-day re-enactment of the martyrdom of the third Shi'i Imam, Hossein, in the Battle of Karbala in 680 CE, what scholars have referred to as the 'Karbala Paradigm' for over four decades now.<sup>3</sup> This framing of the war, which has made its way into all forms of cultural production, was at its height during the war years, but has become less brazen with the passage of time since the end of the conflict.<sup>4</sup> In the decades since the war ended, authors like Ahmad Dehqan, Habib Ahmadzadeh, and Davud Ghaffarzadegan have published works of fiction that are read as Sacred Defense literature but sometimes differ drastically from most examples of this literature.

The Sacred Defense narrative is particularly prevalent in the type of literature that is published and marketed as war literature, and specifically as Sacred Defense literature. This has resulted in a proliferation of state-sponsored literature—especially memoirs—about the war experience and partly explains why the Sacred Defense narrative of the war, and its connection to the foundation of the modern Iranian state, continues to be published and dominate the larger field of war literature of the Iran-Iraq War. The other important factor has been the government's censorship of war narratives that do not conform to, contradict, or actively undermine the Sacred Defense narrative. Within contemporary Iranian fiction, prominent examples of war literature that have been, or continue to be censored within Iran, include Esma'il Fasih's *Zimistan-i 62* (The Winter of '83), which was published first during the war and then quickly censored from 1987 to

<sup>2</sup>For more on these presses, see <https://sooremehr.ir> and <https://sarirpub.ir>, (accessed October 8, 2023).

<sup>3</sup>This term was coined by Michael Fischer in *Iran: From Religious Dispute to Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980). For a more recent usage in the contexts of martyrdom and masculinity in Iran, see Olmo Gözl, 'Martyrdom and masculinity in warring Iran: the Karbala paradigm, the heroic, and the personal dimensions of war', *BEHEMOTH: A Journal on Civilisation*, 12, no. 1 (2019).

<sup>4</sup>Narges Bajoghli, *Iran Reframed: Anxieties of Power in the Islamic Republic* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019), 100–2.

2003 before receiving permission to be published again.<sup>5</sup> A decade after the war, Shahriar Mandanipour's two-part magnum opus, *Dil-i dildadigi* (The Courage of Love) was censored after its publication and has been never republished within Iran. Similarly, Hossein Mortezaeian Abkenar's short, binominal novel, '*Aqrab ru-yi pillah-ha-yi Andimishk, ya, az in qatar khun michikah, qurban!*' (The Scorpion on the Steps of the Andimeshk Railroad, or, There Is Blood Dripping from This Train Sir!), was pulled from shelves in Iran after publication, but not before first winning multiple awards. It was later republished in Paris by Naakojaa Publishing House.<sup>6</sup> Mandanipour's most recent novel, which also deals with the war, *Moon Brow*, first appeared in English translation in 2018, nearly two years before the original Persian text was issued by London-based publisher, Mehri. These novels are prominent examples of war novels that have been censored, usually finding a publisher within the Iranian diaspora. All of them also easily fit into the genre of war literature, even if they do not endorse the Sacred Defense narrative of the Iran-Iraq War, demonstrating how the discrepancy between the use of the labels 'war literature' and 'Sacred Defense literature' often tells readers more about the ideological orientation of the critic, writer, or publication outlet than it does about the text itself. And this often boils down to a perceived 'pro-' or 'anti-war' bias in a war story.<sup>7</sup>

What qualifies as war literature for critics and publishers—whether it is of the Sacred Defense variety or not—typically deals with stories of soldiers, during or after the war, or the experiences of civilians during combat, under bombs, in shelters, or fleeing cities facing attack. The aforementioned novels are no exception. Moreover, all of them are written by men and revolve around male characters and experiences, and most take place not just during the war but on the war front as well. As such, literary criticism that treats this war's literature (and the literature of many other wars for that matter) tends to have a limited understanding of what war stories are or can be. In limiting the definition of war literature to direct experiences of the war and/or combat, many critics have excluded novels and short stories that indirectly engage with the war, even if they are entirely shaped by the conflict. At the same time, and with few exceptions, literary criticism of the Iran-Iraq War has also tended to deemphasize or ignore women's literature that has emerged from the conflict, even though their experiences during and after the war were marked by the eight-year conflict.<sup>8</sup> As Matteo Farzaneh notes:

The wartime government persuaded mothers and wives to sacrifice by taking on more duties at home and sending their men to war, and they portrayed the men as brave males who would be divinely rewarded for sacrificing their lives by ascending to heaven to live an eternal life of honor in the next World. [...] High politics exclusively practiced by male politicians made the females pawns in their game. Men acted without women's input in the war room

<sup>5</sup>Saeedeh Shahnapour, 'Esma'il Fasih and His War Novel', *The Winter Of 1983*, 24, (2013): 61.

<sup>6</sup>Amir Moosavi, 'Desacralizing a Sacred Defense: The Iran—Iraq War in the Fiction of Hossein Mortezaeian Abkenar', *Iran Namag*, 5, no 3 (Fall 2020): 167.

<sup>7</sup>Moosavi, 'Sonic Triggers and Fiery Pools: The Senses at War in Hossein Mortezaeian Abkenar's *Scorpion*', in *Losing our Minds, Coming to Our Senses: Sensory Readings of Persian Literature and Culture*, ed. M.M. Khorrami and Amir Moosavi (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2021), 172–3.

<sup>8</sup>A major exception to this has been the (important) attention given to prominent war memoirs written by women. See Goulia Ghardashkhani contribution to this issue, as well as Azra Ghandeharion and Maryam Sadat Mousavi Tekiyeh, 'Ideology Behind the Covers of the Bestselling Books in Iran: Female Narrators in War Literature', *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 40, no. 1 (2019): 146–75 and Laetitia Nanquette, 'An Iranian Woman's Memoir on the Iran-Iraq War: The Production and Reception of *Da'*', *Iranian Studies* 46, no. 6 (2013): 943–57.

while women became one group most affected by the former's missteps when urgent decisions went amiss in response to the Iraqi onslaught.<sup>9</sup>

I do not want to suggest that all literary fiction that mentions the Iran-Iraq War be considered 'war literature', but rather that a more inclusive understanding of the war and the experiences it created should be considered when examining the Iran-Iraq War and its literary reflections. In this way, I take a cue from writer and critic Viet Thanh Nguyen who notes,

A true war story should also tell of the civilian, the refugee, the enemy, and, most importantly, the war machine that encompasses them all. But when war stories deal with the mundane aspects of war, some may see them as 'boring' or simply not even about 'war'. These conventional perceptions of war stories blind us to war's extensive nature, for these perceptions divide the heroic soldiers who seem to be the primary agents of war from the citizens who actually make war happen and who suffer its consequences.<sup>10</sup>

This passage appears in Nguyen's Chapter 'On True War Stories', which is partly a retort to American author Tim O'Brien, whose classic book of American war literature from the Vietnam War, *The Things They Carried*, contains his famous short story 'How to Tell a True War Story'. For his part, O'Brien goes to great length in his story to show how 'a true war story' is not always about glory and victory. He writes:

War is hell, but that's not the half of it because war is mystery and terror and adventure and courage and discovery and holiness and pity and despair and longing and love. War is nasty; war is fun. War is thrilling; war is drudgery. War makes you a man; war makes you dead. The truths are contradictory.<sup>11</sup>

Nguyen points out that the war stories that O'Brien and others like him describe are generally not applicable to civilians in war. Just as they fail to speak of the profits reaped by war, the gains made by politicians, the horrors suffered by enemy combatants and civilians, or the victims of collateral damage. 'A true war story', according to Nguyen, 'requires the right kind of panoramic optics, an ethical one and an aesthetic one that allows us to see everyone and everything involved in war'.<sup>12</sup> Literary criticism of the ever-growing body of Persian language fiction of the Iran-Iraq War, like criticism of wars in other languages, tends to follow the model of war stories put forth by Tim O'Brien. It often excludes works that deal with the war at a distance or use war as a starting point to launch into entirely different stories.

This type of 'war-adjacent' literature opens a space for launching new personal and collective narratives that originate with war and contain circumstances shaped by it, but do not allow their plots to be consumed by war itself. They complicate the very idea of war literature and, by extension, governments' narratives of war. In Iran, such stories slowly began appearing in the final years of the war, exemplified by a novel like Esma'il Fasih's *Suraya dar ighma* (*Soraya in a Coma*, 1986), but appeared more consistently after the war ended in 1988. Prominent examples of such fiction include Goli Taraghi's 'Madam

<sup>9</sup>Matteo Farzaneh, *Iranian Women and Gender in the Iran-Iraq War* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press), 9.

<sup>10</sup>Viet Thanh Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War* (Kindle Locations 3048–3051) (Harvard University Press, Kindle Edition).

<sup>11</sup>Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* (New York: Mariner Books), 76–7.

<sup>12</sup>Nguyen, 227.

Gurgah' ('Ms. Wolf', 1989),<sup>13</sup> Hushang Golshiri's 'Naqqash-i Baghani' ('The Painter of Baghan', 1994), and Shahriar Mandanipour's 'Rang-i atash-i nimruz' ('The Color of Fire at Midday', 1997). In all these cases, the war with Iraq creates a major part of the context, gives some shape to the contours of the plot, and sometimes makes an appearance by coming briefly to the foreground from the background of the text. Yet, critics rarely bring them into conversation with the greater body of Iranian war literature.<sup>14</sup> While such literature is often not considered part of the canon of modern war fiction, it is, from Nguyen's panoramic perspective, another part of the war's literature. This side of the story is missing from the Iran-Iraq War's literary history.

In what follows, I turn my attention to the well-known Persian-language novel, *Haras* (Pruning), written by the Iranian writer, Nasim Marashi.<sup>15</sup> The novel is a unique and recent high-profile example of literary fiction dealing with the Iran-Iraq War. It depicts the dark consequences of the war for the parents of a child who was killed in the initial Iraqi bombardment of the city of Khorramshahr, in southwestern Iran. The novel uses the afterlives of that moment of despair to connect the Iran-Iraq War to post-war processes of mourning, the 1990–91 Gulf War, the environmental ruin of both of those wars, and a narrative of ecological and personal survival and renewal.

### **Nasim Marashi's *Haras***

Published in late 2017, Nasim Marashi's short novel, *Haras*, portrays some of the afterlives of the Iran-Iraq War as experienced by Iranian civilians of Khorramshahr. It does so by connecting the violence and personal losses of the eight-year long conflict to haunting consequences of long-term violence felt within Khuzestan, the province most scarred by the war's fighting, in the years following the war's end. This post-war reality is more than the melancholic, haunting memories of wartime deaths. It includes the psychological consequences of war on the families of those who lost loved ones, especially mothers, who are presented as constant mourners both for people and places forever lost. It also includes the destruction of the natural environment of the country's Southwest, significantly, its marshlands located between Abadan and Ahvaz, an area referred to as the Shadegan Ponds (Talab-e Shadegan). The novel is set in 1997, nearly 10 years after the war's conclusion and tells the story of the war's consequences on the people who decided to stay in Khuzestan during wartime and remained there in the first decade of the post-war period. It is built on a fragmented narrative that suspensefully unfolds as the author rapidly plays with both the progression of time and the narrative point of view. The novel is highly engaging despite the occasional dizzying effects of the time and space changes.

Yet, for all its engagement with the consequences of the war, *Haras* is not a conventional piece of 'war literature', even if it is a story that has been shaped entirely by the war with Iraq. Instead, it is part of Nguyen's notion of a 'panoramic vision of war'. In the Iranian literary context, it wrests the experience of war away from the category of

<sup>13</sup>Translated into English as 'The Neighbor' (2006).

<sup>14</sup>For a discussion of 'The Color of Fire at Midday' in the context of the war, see M.M. Khorrami, 'Narratives of Silence. Persian Fiction of the 1980–1988 Iran-Iraq War' in *Moments of Silence: Authenticity in the Cultural Expressions of the Iran-Iraq War 1980–1988*, ed. Arta Khakpour, M.M. Khorrami and Shouleh Vatanabadi (New York: New York University Press, 2016), 171–2.

<sup>15</sup>*Pruning* is the literal title of the novel, but it might be more idiomatically translated as *Pruning the Palm Trees*. Since the novel remains untranslated to English, I will refer to it by the Persian title in the remainder of this article.

Sacred Defense literature and calls for a more complicated understanding of the literature of the Iran-Iraq War. I contend that *Haras* intervenes in literary memory of the Iran-Iraq War by associating its narrative, one of the Islamic Republic's foundational stories, more with post-war violence, and ongoing processes of mourning both human and non-human victims of the Iran-Iraq War, than the discourse of the Sacred Defense. In this way, the novel uses the Iran-Iraq War as a starting point for delving into other issues that are connected to but oftentimes not associated with the conflict and its cultural representation, thus broadening the understanding of the war's impact on society. At the same time, the novel boldly introduces supernatural elements into a fictional narrative of the Iran-Iraq War. This is significant since war fiction in Iran continues to be dominated by realism and an urge to depict the 'truth', regardless of ideological persuasion of the author.<sup>16</sup>

*Haras* revolves around Rasul and Naval (*Navāl*), a husband and wife from Khorramshahr, and their five children. The children's births (and in some cases deaths) span a period that begins in 1978, shortly before the Revolution, goes through the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988), and ends in 1991, during a moment marked by the 1990–1991 Gulf War and the burning oil wells left behind by the Iraqi military when it retreated from Kuwait in the face of Operation Desert Storm.<sup>17</sup> The children's births and deaths punctuate the storyline, creating seminal moments around which the parents form their happiest and darkest memories that reappear several times over the course of the novel. Structurally, the novel uses Rasul and Naval's married life, along with Rasul's search for Naval in the present moment, as a type of frame story to unfold layers of the couple's backstory that contain moments of joy, unspoken memories of death, and the seeds of haunting traumas.

The novel opens with an image of Rasul, a once tall, strong, and proud father, now aged and haggard after losing two children over the previous decade and being a single father of three remaining children for the last three years before the novel's opening scene. Of the five children whom he fathered with Naval, their firstborn son, Sharhan, was killed in 1981 in the first year of the war; his daughter Tahani, the last to be born, died shortly before the novel begins, quietly choking to death on a jujube fruit in the family's backyard. Among the three remaining children are his two daughters, Anis and Amal, and his son, Mahziyar, now aged six, who accompanies him along the Ahvaz-Abadan Highway in the novel's opening pages. In the novel's opening scene, Rasul is driving his son in the sweltering heat to the nearby marshlands where he has recently learned that Naval—who disappeared approximately six years earlier—is now living. In the first chapter, the father and son, with the help of a local man who has a boat, arrive at their destination, a fictional island village in the marshes called Dar al-Tal'ah, where Naval now apparently lives. The island is inhabited only by women; outsiders, especially men, are not supposed to enter. The rest of the novel takes place there, where a few of the island's elderly women play a game of procrastination with Rasul, in an attempt to convince him that Naval is no longer the woman whom he once knew and that he should avoid contact with her. Throughout this process, Rasul and Naval's backstory is revealed in the form of the husband's flashbacks or moments in the narrative that the novel uses to loosely connect an event or item in the present day to a point in the previous two decades.

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<sup>16</sup>For more on this tendency within war literature see Moosavi, 'Desacralizing'.

<sup>17</sup>The Iraqi military lit approximately 700 oil rigs on fire in January and February 1991 shortly after Operation Desert Storm began, creating massive fires and billows of black smoke that choked the skies. The first of these fires was put out in April 1991 and the last on November 6, 1991.

At the heart of Naval's disappearance are two incidents involving her children. The first is the death of their firstborn child, Sharhan, who was three years-old in 1981, nearly 16 years prior to the story's present moment, when he was killed in a missile strike on Khorramshahr. The death traumatizes the couple and despite the birth of two girls shortly after his death, his loss casts an irreparable shadow over them. The second incident happens ten years later when Naval becomes pregnant again, with what would be a fourth child, and who, she claims during the pregnancy, will be a boy. From this pregnancy comes Mahziyar, Rasul's son (or so we are led to believe), who accompanies him to find Naval. The true story, however, is more complicated. Towards the end of the novel, it is revealed that shortly after Mahziyar's birth, which happens while Rasul is away working as a contractor in Kuwait putting out oil well fires, Naval, desolate and despondent, paid a nurse at a hospital to 'ensure' she would have a boy. To do so, the nurse paid a local family and traded with them the baby girl whom Naval birthed in exchange for their newborn son. After Rasul returns home, some weeks after the birth of the two children, he realizes what has transpired in his absence. Enraged, he finds out who has his biological daughter and buys her back, while also keeping Mahziyar, as a secretly adopted son. By that time, Naval has already left, both out of disgust for herself and, as revealed in the novel's penultimate chapter, at Rasul's behest. From that moment onward, Rasul is essentially left on his own to raise four young children: Anis, Amal, Mahziyar, and Tahani, his biological daughter who dies shortly before the moment that the novel begins. Despite the hardships that the family endures, *Haras* offers no cathartic denouement. The trip to the island does not end successfully for Rasul, and he must come to terms with the fact that his wife is now transformed forever and will stay on the island.

### **Reading war through Haras**

The novel's most direct references to the Iran-Iraq War take place through Naval's flashbacks to the war years. The most important of those takes readers back to Khorramshahr in the early days of the war, a city whose very name, as well as its epithet of 'Khūnīnshahr' ('City of Blood'), became synonymous with the Iraqi invasion, occupation of parts of the province of Khuzestan from late 1980 until mid-1982, and the fierce and now celebrated Iranian resistance to the invading Iraqi army. The references to the war are moments that are experienced by civilians during wartime and never a direct reference to frontline combat or the street-to-street fighting that took place in some of the country's southwestern cities. Of these, the most memorable example is Sharhan's death in a missile attack on the city. The short scene appears in the book's third chapter, is just over a page and a half long and reads as follows:

The sound came when Naval was in the kitchen. She had not yet put on weight, but her stomach no longer fit in old clothes. She was wearing a green and lemon-yellow shirt from three years ago, one year before the revolution, the year that Sharhan was born. As soon as Rasul realized that Naval was pregnant he went to Abadan and bought it for her. After Sharhan was born, Naval put her [maternity] clothes into a closet, placing mothballs all around them. She had pulled them out just a few hours before that sound and put [the shirt] on. The smell of the mothballs made her sick. But what could she do? Her normal clothes didn't fit her anymore. When she heard the sound, Naval was heating dates on the stove to make *khurmāgarm* for Rasul, who had gone to Ahvaz for an interview; he was supposed to return home that evening. Rasul had said they shouldn't stay in Khorramshahr anymore. They should go to Ahvaz. He could grow there, he could go to the university, get

a degree. Naval didn't want to go. Her entire family and all her friends were in Khorramshahr. Her father, her uncles, her cousins. She did not want to be so far from them. The dates were on the stove when she heard the sound. Naval looked down, near her feet, then into the kitchen, then to the side of the room. 'Sharhan!' she screamed. There was no response.<sup>18</sup>

She finds Sharhan in the alley outside the house. He is sitting, stunned. People are screaming and running in every direction. She frantically grabs him and carries him into their home, still fixated on 'the sound'. As she brings him inside, her attention shifts to the heavy breathing that shifts to wheezing. Then she feels a 'warm liquid dripping down the bump of her stomach' and sees her yellow and green shirt, now coloured red.<sup>19</sup>

Rather than refer to rockets and bombs, the passage instead makes repeated references to Naval's sensorial memories—the sounds of the rockets, women screaming, her son's final breaths, the smell of dates burning on the stove, the weight of her body from a second pregnancy, and the warmth of the fluid she feels drip on her leg, the first sign that her son has been injured in the attack. Going forward, she will come to embody these consequences of the child's death and the first days of war. The war will become intimately tied to her very being. To read the Iran-Iraq War in *Haras*, is less about reading what happened during the eight years of conflict and more about how the effects of the war, and especially her son's death, are impossible for Naval to shake off. They consume her, eventually leading her to the island.

The first indication that the consequences of war are too much for Naval to bear appear in the chapter that follows, which takes place three years after the war ends, and nearly 11 years since Sharhan's death. By that point, the couple has relocated to Ahvaz and she has had two more children—Amal and Anis—and is pregnant with a third, Tahani. Here, the novel suddenly takes a stark turn towards the supernatural. For 10 years since Sharhan's death, Naval claims to have been unable to see men or boys with the exception for Rasul. She only registered women. Rasul, rather than recognize a deeper problem, only insists that she must move on. He tells her that 'she ought to snap out of it because it's clear that the war is over. [...] if she would just took a proper look around she would see men in the streets. Men who were POWs are being freed. Men who left cities are coming back and boys are being born one after another.' None of this has an effect on Naval. She continues to be haunted by the war:

[O]n the many nights that Naval couldn't sleep, she wouldn't count sheep, but instead would count Khorramshahr's dead men. She would start with her family and those close to her: her son; then her father and her cousins who, before Sharhan and her father, had died in ways that blew their bodies into bits and pieces. Then she moved on to her neighbors, then her childhood playmates, then the other folks who used to live in town, then the people whose names she saw on television, on the *hijlahs* at the end of the alleyways, on Jannat-Abad's headstones, names that she just couldn't forget and which Rasul ordered her to never again mention.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>18</sup>Nasim Marashi (Nasim Mar'ashi), *Haras* (Tehran: Cheshmeh, 2017), 26. *Khurmāgarm*, is a type of sweet made of melted and pressed dates.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., 27.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., 28–29. A *hijlah* is a bridal chamber, but here refers to the small, shrine-like structures that are placed on the streets where a young, unmarried man who has died once lived. They were extremely common during the Iran-Iraq War and commemorated the deaths of bachelor soldiers who were considered martyrs. These *hijlahs* were 'connected to the legend of the betrothal of Qasim b. Ḥasan to Imam Ḥusayn's daughter Zubayda (also called Faṭīma Kubrā) at Karbala, just before his martyrdom'. See Jean Calmard, 'Hejla', *Encyclopædia Iranica*, <https://iranicaonline.org/articles/hejla>, (updated March 22, 2012), (accessed October 8, 2023).

Within the larger context of Iranian war literature, *Haras* stands out by connecting civilians' experiences of the war to the next regional war that took place shortly after the Iran-Iraq War ended: the 1990–1991 Gulf War (Operation Desert Storm). It creates connections across nearby borders that are not typically included in Iranian war fiction. Less than two years after the 1988 ceasefire between Iran and Iraq, Saddam Hussein launched an invasion of Kuwait and occupied the country for nearly seven months. Once the U.S.-led coalition decided to take military action and push Iraq out of Kuwait, it swiftly defeated the occupying Iraqi army. The Iraqi withdrawal and its crushing defeat in Kuwait were followed by its government's brutal suppression of attempted uprisings in the majority Shi'a south and majority Kurdish north regions of the country. It also set the stage for the devastating sanctions levelled against the country that would last until the 2003 U.S.-led invasion.<sup>21</sup> Parts of *Haras* go back to the January 1991 Iraqi retreat from Kuwait when the Iraqi military set fire to over 700 Kuwaiti oil wells and storage tanks, dumped massive amounts of oil into the Persian Gulf, and created trenches and man-made 'oil lakes' in an attempt to stop the potential advance of coalition troops into Iraq.<sup>22</sup>

*Haras* brings together these distinct wars in two ways: firstly, through Naval's memories of the Iran-Iraq War, and secondly, through Rasul's journey to Kuwait as part of one of the firefighting crews that helped put out the oil fires from March to November 1991, in an effort that was dubbed 'Operation Desert Hell' by American firefighters.<sup>23</sup> As previously mentioned, Naval's memories of the Iran-Iraq War continue to haunt her after the war concludes and they meld with how she comes to experience the 1990–1991 Gulf War from afar. The oil fires caused what was referred to in English language media as 'black rain' to fall on the surrounding region, covering an area of hundreds of kilometres from the fires, which included large parts of Iran.<sup>24</sup> During a day some three years after the Iran-Iraq War ended, Naval 'suddenly sees the sky go black as if it were night'. She hears thunder and lightning and feels the drops on her hand. 'It was black. She quickly shook her hand. It was as if there was ink on it, something greasy and dirty that couldn't be shaken off. It occurred to Naval that war has started again. This black ink must be [a sign] of chemical weapons'. She is convinced Iraqi planes are dropping chemical weapons and that she and everyone around her will die there and then. 'How good it is that Sharhan has already died, so that he won't burn to death from these chemicals', she thinks.<sup>25</sup> The black rain, infused with oil debris from the burning wells, triggers Naval and brings to the fore all her embodied trauma from the Iran-Iraq War. She collapses on the street, reviving only after a neighbour shakes her back to reality.

However, if the burning oil fields from the environmental fallout of the 1990–1991 Gulf War are a source of trauma for Naval, then for Rasul they become a means of income, revenge, and pride. He joins the well-paid effort to put out the fires and returns from

<sup>21</sup> Following Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, the United Nations Security Council imposed sanctions on the country that lasted from 1990 to 2003, which had catastrophic consequences for ordinary Iraqis. They decimated what remained of the country's economy and all levels of infrastructure. For more, see Joy Gordon, 'The Enduring Lessons of the Iraq Sanctions', *Middle East Report* 294 (Spring 2020), <https://merip.org/2020/06/the-enduring-lessons-of-the-iraq-sanctions/>, (accessed October 8, 2023).

<sup>22</sup> See Tahir Hussain, *Kuwaiti Oil Fires: Regional Environmental Perspectives* (Oxford: Pergamon, 1995), 219–40.

<sup>23</sup> The effort to put out the fires was international with companies contracted from United States, Canada, Kuwait, Iran, Hungary, Rumania, Russia, and China.

<sup>24</sup> See, for example, Marlise Simons, 'After the War: Another War Begins as Kuwaiti Oil-Well Fires Threaten Region's Ecology; Beyond Mideast, Black Rain and Acid-Filled Clouds', *The New York Times*, 1991.

<sup>25</sup> Marashi, 32.

Kuwait 'darkened, fattened, wearing jeans and a golden American watch'.<sup>26</sup> A flashback takes us to that time, as he fights the fires with ferocity. He is described as having almost superhuman qualities. Others pass out from the intensity of the heat, but for Rasul the fires had no effect:

He was Abraham. Strong and full of hope. While facing the fires and the terrifying sounds of the roaring flames that sucked up the air from every direction and sent plumes of black smoke into the sky, he would hear the intermingled laughter of Naval and his son together. Those were the sounds that got him through his days in Kuwait. He would stand in front of the fires and listen, allowing those otherworldly sounds of the fires to enchant him [. . .] They came from another world and brought with them sounds of laughter. The sounds of Sharhan in Khorramshahr, sounds that were supposed to come back with Mahziyar'.<sup>27</sup>

The passage weaves memories of the death of the couple's firstborn in the Iran-Iraq War into their attempts to get on with their lives in the post-war era, connecting that era to the next regional war that happens so quickly and takes place so close to their home.

### ***Dar al-Tal'ah: nature, loss, and the living dead***

Rasul will never hear those sounds that carried him through his experience in Kuwait and which he so desperately wanted to hear again. Instead, he returns home to the realization that his biological daughter has been traded (along with a large sum of money) for another family's new-born son. He kicks Naval out of the house. She leaves, heading for their old and now destroyed home in Khorramshahr, where she is found by one of the women from the island village of Dar al-Tal'ah and taken there.

While Naval and Rasul's backstory both frames and animates the novel's plot, the women who reside on Dar al-Tal'ah along with the natural environment that surrounds it, give the novel another rich level of engagement with the various afterlives of the Iran-Iraq War. From the time that Rasul and Mahziyar step onto the canoe-like boat that takes them to the island, the novel exhibits a deep interest in representing the ecological setting of the marshes, with an emphasis on the tragic beauty, power, and suffering of the giant, ubiquitous palm trees—often headless and burnt, a sign of a tree that has been killed but still stands while it dies from within—and the water buffaloes whose presences appear not only on the cover of the book, but repeatedly throughout the passages that take place on the island. But just as trees bear the scars of war and the slow environmental decay that follows, the buffaloes also show signs of pain and suffering:

Rasul looked at Umm 'Aqil's black water buffaloes that stood taller than him. Seven enormous buffaloes, all of them injured and partly deformed. Up close they appeared as huge, black demon-like beasts that only resembled something of a water buffalo. Each one was now incomplete. The one standing in front had two wooden sticks [acting as crutches] tied with a rope to what remained of its front legs. To move, it would press the two sticks to the ground and spring its giant body forward with its back legs. Another had a triangular chunk missing from its back hump that left a shining wound in its place. For another buffalo, a bone covered by loose skin stood in place of its leg [. . .]. Finally, the last buffalo was missing the entire upper half of its face. What remained was a mouth with two large holes above it, to which it kept close to the front buffalo, smelling her and using her to guide herself forward. What was left

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., 95–6.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., 111–12.

of the creatures' udders were crumpled pieces of skin that sagged between their legs and as they walked, while their skin slipped in and out from between bones of their rib cages.<sup>28</sup>

The headless palm trees and wounded water buffaloes of the marshes are signs of what Rob Nixon has called 'slow violence'. As opposed to violence that 'is customarily conceived as an event or an action that is immediate in time, explosive and spectacular in space, and is erupting into instant sensational visibility', slow violence is, in his words, 'violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all'.<sup>29</sup> Despite over 40 years of attention given to the war and its consequences through research and cultural production, the environmental and ecological impact of the war has received relatively little attention, and much of that has gone to the analysis of oil spills in the Gulf. This is likely because the Iranian government's immediate attention was focused on rebuilding cities, the economy, and the military and because 'in contrast to the Gulf War of 1990, the international community did not monitor environmental effects of the Iran-Iraq war'.<sup>30</sup> Yet, some facts are known. For example, more than three million date palms and 5,000 hectares of orchards were destroyed in the war. Additionally, nearly 130,000 hectares of natural forests and 753,000 hectares of pastureland were made unusable in the provinces most affected by the war. Hooshang Amirahmadi identifies Iran's southwestern provinces, including the setting of *Haras*, as having 'experienced extreme environmental damage' with its residents reporting a higher incidence of a variety of health problems 'possibly as a result of war-induced toxins in the environment'.<sup>31</sup> Researchers have also concluded that water and land in the areas hit hardest by the war are still polluted by its effects, including that of chemical weapons.<sup>32</sup>

Aside from the ecological ruin of an isolated island village and its slow renewal, Dar al-Tal'ah is also depicted as a place surrounded in a magical and mysterious aura, in some ways reminiscent of the Persian Gulf village of Jofreh in Muniru Ravanipur's *The Drowned*, or the garden outside of Karaj in Shahrnush Parsipur's *Women Without Men*.<sup>33</sup> The women whom Naval joins there are all widows and/or mothers who have lost children—a category of person for whom neither English nor Persian has a single word, unlike words like 'widow' or 'orphan'. Together, they form a community based on having experienced irrevocable loss that holds deep connections to the island's natural surroundings. For Naval, her losses are compounded: it is the loss of her son, Sharhan; the loss of her home and deaths of her family members in Khorramshahr, from which her initial refusal to leave resulted in Sharhan's death; and the loss of her daughter whom she traded

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., 39–40.

<sup>29</sup>Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 2.

<sup>30</sup>Hooshang Amirahmadi, 'Iranian recovery from industrial devastation during war with Iraq' in Mitchell James, *The Long Road to Recovery: Community Responses to Industrial Disaster* (Tokyo: United Nations University Press, 1996) available online at <https://archive.unu.edu/unupress/unupbooks/uu21le/uu21le0e.htm> (accessed October 8, 2023).

<sup>31</sup>Ibid.

<sup>32</sup>Islamic Republic News Agency, 'Asarat-i zist-muḥiti-i jang-i tahmili hanuz pabarjast' [The Environmental Effects of the Imposed War are Ongoing], <https://www.irna.ir/news/84047085> (accessed October 8, 2023).

<sup>33</sup>See Muniru Ravanipur, *Ahl-i gharq* (Tehran: Khanah-yi Aftab, 1990) translated into English by M.R. Ghanoonparvar as *The Drowned* (Independently published, 2019), and Shahrnush Parsipur *Zanan bidun-i mardan* (Tehran: Nashr-i Nuqrah, 1989), translated as into English by Faridoun Farrokh as *Women Without Men* (New York: Feminist Press, 2011). Readers will notice additional echoes of *Women Without Men* in *Haras* through the characters of Zarrinkulah, who for a period only sees men without heads, Munis, who is resurrected from the dead, and Mahdokht, who becomes a tree.

away to appease her husband and to try to make up for Sharhan's death. She is now made up of all these losses; they are what keep her on Dar al-Tal'ah.

Once Rasul learns of his wife's location, he goes there with Mahziyar, desperately thinking that he will find her and bring her home, at once fixing his family's dire circumstances. After arriving, however, his attempts to see her fail. For days he is held back by a few of the island's old women, namely Umm 'Aqil and Umm Ziya, who aside from knowing him from when they all lived in Khorramshahr, also refer to him by a name he has not heard in years: Abu Sharhan, or 'Father of Sharhan'.<sup>34</sup> At first the women insist that he cannot be there and refuse to show him where Naval lives, all the while maintaining that she is no longer the woman he thinks she is. After days of insisting, he breaks free from them to approach the house where he believes Naval resides, but he is stopped by strong winds and choking sandstorms that seem to be controlled by a supernatural force. Throughout it all, he maintains a naïve belief that he will simply be able to bring his wife back home. Before finally coming face-to-face with her, Umm Ziya tries to kill his hopes once and for all:

You want too much from this life, Rasul. We're cursed. There are some things that people shouldn't see. A woman shouldn't see her children die, her home destroyed, her land blown away. If she sees it, she shouldn't remain here. She should die. Life isn't supposed to be like this—that children die and mothers live, that fathers die and their land remains. We're not humans, Rasul. They dragged us into the lowest depth of hell and pulled us back up. We've come back from hell. Look at us. We're dead. Our land, our water buffaloes, us; we're all dead. We only walk. What did I tell you before? Don't think that Naval is the same Naval that you had before. Don't think you'll take her hand, leave, and it's all over. Go see her, then go make up a story to tell for the rest of your life. I'm telling you this for your own sake, Rasul. It's going to be hard.<sup>35</sup>

The above scene sets the stage for an intense meeting that soon takes place between the couple. Umm Ziya takes Mahziyar aside so Rasul can meet Naval. She is a barely recognizable shell of her former self: frail, hunched over, and ghost-like. Her voice at first is strange and almost inaudible.

Naval was not the person that used to walk the earth, she was a ghost. Lethargic, slow. She did not walk but hovered just above the ground. She wore a black shirt, her long, gray hair was pulled behind her head. She sat on a rock in front of Rasul [. . .] He could not stop staring at her, at the shadow of what Naval once was. He looked for the Naval who was once his wife in her and could not find her. She looked up at him. Rasul shivered. Naval's eyes were no longer dark. They had turned gray. She had become the same Naval from years ago in Khorramshahr, but now colorless. And her body now consisted of all the bodies of those who had died in the war: her father, Sharhan, and more than anyone else, Tahani. Her sickness was Tahani's. The paleness of her face as well. Rasul was looking at Tahani, resurrected and old. A long time passed this way, enough that Rasul could think of a thousand things that he wanted to say but couldn't. 'You gave her [Tahani] a beautiful name', Naval said.

Rasul was stunned. This was not Naval's voice. It was hoarse and scratchy. It was the voice of her father coming out of Naval's mouth. 'I read it on her grave', she said.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup>Arab fathers are often referred to as the Father (Abū) of their firstborn son. *Haras's* dialogue is peppered with Arabic expressions reflecting the various linguistic and ethnic diversity of Khuzestan.

<sup>35</sup>Marashi, 161.

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*, 179.

These ghost-like descriptions of Naval in the novel's penultimate chapter depict her as the embodiment of the condition that she now lives in, a sort of magical state of permanent mourning for her family and her city. I say 'ghost-like' because the state that Naval now inhabits is a state of being that is neither living nor dead, but rather it is a third category of being, something akin to what Žižek has termed 'the undead' or more precisely in his terms, 'the monstrous living dead'.<sup>37</sup> In this form, Naval represents what Avery Gordon considers 'a loss [...] of life' or 'a path not taken'. She embodies features of her dead family members while still fleetingly manifesting parts of her old self. At the same time, however, her existence on the island also 'represents a future possibility, a hope'.<sup>38</sup> Naval's new state of being grants her supernatural powers on Dar al-Tal'ah. Namely, after Umm 'Aqil brings her there from the site of her destroyed house in Khorramshahr, Naval acquires healing powers and a new maternal role, this time for the dead and dying palm trees, claiming to the other women soon after she arrives that she is 'the mother of anything that has died in the war'.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, Rasul finds himself in front of a barely recognizable being that resembles Naval, but a new Naval who can bring back to life the burnt, headless palms of the island that were badly damaged in the Iran-Iraq War. This is what gives the women on the island hope. As Umm 'Aqil tells Rasul, Naval's presence and powers are what sustains their community.

Her inability to return to society and the women's need for Naval ensure that she will never leave the island. In this sense, Naval's loss, which originated in the war, is the starting point for an entirely new life. Judith Butler's observation on the political possibilities of loss is instructive here. She writes:

Places are lost—destroyed, vacated, barred—but then there is some new place, and it is not the first, never can be the first. And so there is an impossibility housed at the site of this new place. [...] We could say, with well-deserved pathos and in the voice of traditional modernism, that this new place is one of no belonging, where subjectivity becomes untethered from its collective fabric, where individuation becomes a historical necessity. But perhaps this is a place where belonging now takes place in and through a common sense of loss (which does not mean that all these losses are the same). Loss becomes [the] condition and necessity for a certain sense of community, where community does not overcome the loss, where community cannot overcome the loss without losing the very sense of itself as community. And if we say this second truth about the place where belonging is possible, then pathos is not negated, but it turns out to be oddly fecund, paradoxically productive.<sup>40</sup>

It is precisely this productivity that Rasul realizes in his final moments on the island. He watches Naval heal burnt palm trees and slowly realizes that he and Mahziyar will return to Ahvaz alone. After their initial meeting, and still dumbfounded by the site of Naval, Rasul wanders into the nearby palm grove hoping to speak to Umm Ziya, whom he had just seen enter it. She disappears and he suddenly finds himself stunned, awed by the trunks of the palms which seem to have existed forever and which will remain forever.

<sup>37</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2006), 20–21. One could also consider Naval's state as a third category to Freud's bifurcated distinction between mourning and melancholia.

<sup>38</sup> Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 64.

<sup>39</sup> Marashi, 100.

<sup>40</sup> Judith Butler, 'Afterword: After Loss, What Then?', in *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, ed. David Eng and David Kazanjian (Berkeley and LA: University of California Press: 2003), 468.

[. . .]. Burnt, dead, but standing. These trees were the guards of this village. Eternal soldiers. Just like the men for whom Naval once searched. The men whom she did not see.<sup>41</sup> This is the moment when Rasul realizes that '[t]he palms did something to Naval that Rasul never could have done. Now she belonged to them. She belonged to those dead *dishdasha*-wearing men'.<sup>42</sup> He quickly leaves after telling Umm 'Aqil that Naval should stay for the palms and that he will bring their daughters another time to see her.

### Conclusion: the war is only the beginning

Although *Haras* uses the war as a starting point to which it constantly refers back, it stands out as a singularly unique story in the context of Iranian war literature. Not only does it eschew the prominent features of both Sacred Defense literature and general war literature in the Iranian context, it sheds light on silenced narratives of the war's afterlives, such as the melancholy of the mother who loses a son and the war's destruction of nature. The novel offers no solution for bringing back what the war took away. The dead are forever dead, and the living must learn to move on. By leaving Naval on the island, in a liminal state of being that is neither fully with the living nor with the dead, *Haras* proffers a conclusion to the war that skirts around the official governmental script of Sacred Defense as well as some of the more straightforward attempts at criticizing the government's handling of the conflict. Instead, the novel highlights a quiet counter-narrative to the war that is completely devoid of the tired clichés that have dominated war literature since the 1980s: there are no war heroes, no martyrs, no stories of the war front, or the lives of veterans.<sup>43</sup> Indeed, *Haras* does not even celebrate any of its characters, choosing to leave them all victims and, at times, even uncharismatic. The novel is simply not interested in treating the war in such a way, even though the storyline cannot exist if not for the war. Instead, the Iran-Iraq war and its consequences become an entirely personal tragedy for their protagonists and the starting point for wholly different types of stories. These stories are what call attention to aspects of post-war life that are neglected by the Sacred Defense narrative: the destruction of the earth, the permanent loss of a city and home, and the loss of loved ones who had no interest in, or even an awareness of, a war between good and evil. Furthermore, the novel's engagement with war is even more general than the Iran-Iraq War. By tying the effects of that war to the 1990–1991 Gulf War *Haras* reframes Iran's war with Iraq regionally and as part of a chapter of entangled violence that crossed borders, connecting the effects of the second conflict to the lives of Iranians who practically inhabit the same geography as Iraq and Kuwait. *Haras* demonstrates how a novel rooted so deeply in a war that defines the identity of the Islamic Republic can rewrite the war's story on its own terms.

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<sup>41</sup>Marashi, 181.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., 182.

<sup>43</sup>This has not gone unnoticed by critics who have taken the novel to task for not celebrating any part of the defence of the country, see for example Sayyidah 'Azra Musavi, 'Jahan ingūnah bah payan mirisad: naqdi bar kitab-i *Haras*', [This is How the World the World Ends! A Critique of the book *Haras*], Tir 5, 1400 (June 26, 2021), <https://bookroom.ir/mag/content/336/> (accessed October 8, 2023).

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