

A Revolution Lost: Narrative Temporality and Postmodern Subject in Iran's Post-Revolutionary Novels

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Abstract

This article studies the post-revolutionary social situation in Iran as a peripheral country, through the novels written and awarded in this historical moment. The narrative temporality and its rapport with the subjectivity that is constructed by and at the same time constructing a novel, is a pivotal formal characteristic, through which this essay engages with the analysis of Iran's post-revolutionary society after 1979 uprising. The discussion is concentrated on the awarded Persian novels in three mainstream festivals, in the years between 2001 to 2011. This decade is specifically significant since post-revolutionary literary relations and institutions are established and gained power during this period. This research discusses three recurrent narrative temporalities centered around an "eternal past," which, as the essay argues, is a fundamental element in the specific actualization of post-modern subjectivity in the periphery. This specific actualization is different, but not isolated, from the case in the core countries. However, these two different actualizations of postmodern subjectivity are dialectically intertwined as the contrasting symptoms of a single phenomenon. In Iran's particular historical case, this actualization is synchronic with the construction of a post-revolutionary subjectivity that has to confront the defeat of the anti-systematic revolution, due to the structural limitations of state power in a peripheral country within the capitalist socio-economic relations. Reflecting upon this historical moment via the lens of narrative temporalities in the corpus of this research has made it possible to depict the complexities of Iran's post-revolutionary society from an innovative perspective.

Keywords: Narrative Temporality, Iranian Post-Revolutionary Novels, Postmodern Subjectivity, Eternal Present, Eternal Past

1. Introduction

The post-revolution society and its relation to literary works produced and consumed whitening the new social order has always been a challenging object of study. The main question is how the aesthetic representations of individuals' experiences (i.e. literary narratives) are constructed in a mediated relation with the new social situation and what can be read through the analysis of these narratives. In Iran's case (after the defeated revolution of 1979¹), there have been some efforts to study this relation through an analysis of the post-revolutionary literary productions, most of which are concentrated on the contents of these works. This research gaze at this question from another perspective, by analyzing the formal element of 'narrative temporality' in Iran's post-revolutionary novels. This choice is based on the argument that 'revolution' is a historically dislocated and dislocative moment beyond the normal flow of events that cannot be thought about with former temporal structures. With the waning of these structures comes the need to resituate oneself in the history, that is to internalize the moment of revolution in the forms by which the time is being experienced. A process through which this new subject constructs

and at the same time is being constructed by different temporal structures originating from a post-revolutionary social situation. Narrative literary works are very fruitful grounds for digging into these structures and analyzing them with all of their fractions, paradoxes, and inconsistencies. Therefore, this article is concentrating on the temporal structures through which post-revolutionary novels are constructed and the relation of these structures to the moment of revolution itself and the social situation in decades following it. This innovative approach opens up new analytic possibilities to reflect upon contemporary literature in Iran as a peripheral country, and digs deeper into the interdependent relations of the socio-political field and the literary one to reach an intricate and illustrative comprehension of the literary works as well as the social situation.

The novels² chosen for this study are those that are awarded in three of the most mainstream Iranian literary festivals between 2001 to 2011. The decade, far enough from the revolution and the war³, when the post-revolutionary literary relations and institutions have established and gained power. These relations and institutions, no matter how politically independent from the government they might seem to be, have a rapport with post-revolutionary social relations. Therefore, reading through what is 'good' according to these literary institutions (i.e. the festivals) and juxtaposing them with the contemporaneous socio-economic situation can shed new light on the story of the revolution's end or, more precisely, defeat.

2. The Construction of the 'Eternal Past' Through Fragmented Memories

In studying the temporal structure of these awarded novels, three recurrent narrative temporalities can be recognized. It should be emphasized here that this research's objective is not classifying all of the novels under these three categories, but to build a holistic- yet not inclusive- picture of these works based on their temporal structures. Thus, there remains the possibility that some of them might stay outside of these repetitive structures.

The first group are the novels narrated through the obsessive recollection of memories, mostly by a first-person narrator. In this temporal structure, time is fragmented, nonlinear, and full of flashbacks, which altogether function as 'the past's' agents that deactivate 'the present'. An illustrative example, is a novel named *Who Would Believe, Rostam?* (*Āe Kasi Bāvar Mikonad, Rostam?*) which is a first-person narrative of a woman traveling on a train and recalling fragmented memories throughout her journey. There is no action, no change on the way. Nothing goes ahead, except for the train that is moving on the ground and the narrator is remembering 'the story' as if it had already ended before the narration begins. Therefore, 'the present' of the narrative is reduced to a frozen moment, an empty body for 'the past' in which it is reincarnated. Moreover, the linear motion of 'the present' somehow becomes the same with the spatial movement of the passengers in the train, and all through the novel, the only thing that is changing 'presently' is the location. This tendency to run away from time -or more precisely from the temporal representation of life- is also reflected in the narrator's monologues:

We pass a train standing on the platform in front of us. I look at the train's window, which is not a window, it is a large, single piece of glass that does not open or close, and I think that moving trains are like prisons, and the stations in the middle of the road are meeting hours. If one is brave, one can use them to escape. But one must have courage. (Sharifian, 1995, p. 6)

The allegory of prison/train for the situation in which the narrator finds herself from the very outset could lead us to the structural position of 'the present' in the novel. A prison that is going forward but no one dares to escape it. As the train is what goes forward in the story, in a sense it is a metaphor for the time itself, and the imprisonment in the train is also a form of being stuck in time. However, the relationship between the narrator and this situation is complex and paradoxical. She desires it herself: 'I want to sit in a moving train for days and weeks, a train from which there is no station to get off.' (Sharifian, 1995, p. 104) Nevertheless, at the same time she regrets surrendering herself to it: 'From the moment I decided to travel with Jahan [narrator's husband], from the moment I set foot on the train, I knew I was boarding on a train while I didn't know where it was going and why was I on it and how far would this displacement go.' (Sharifian, 1995, p. 132) This 'displacement' in the content is the narrator's immigration from Iran, which, as we understand from the recalled memories, has separated her from her family and the person she used to love. However, putting together the metaphors repeated in these internal monologues and the objective situation of the narrator in 'the present' of the narrative (sitting on a moving train), one can claim that 'this displacement' has another signification layer too: the inevitable but formally repressed presence of 'the present' as a 'place' to which the narration does not belong. A moment that the temporal structure of the novel is repressing by avoiding the linear time that has the potentiality to transcend the chaotic and fragmented pieces of memory. Therefore, 'the present' and the potentiality it bears, 'the future', are structurally suspended in the novel. It is as if this suspended moment(s) (it is hard to separate them) is the only thing that can take the narrator and the narration out of their homeland (past) and out of the limits of their consciousness. In other words, 'the present' is a threat to the work's form; since it is the point at which it becomes possible to problematize its claimed cohesion for constructing an imminent story through and only through fragmented memories. In this novel, the formal attempt to reduce this moment to a kind of spatial figure occurs by bringing the place closer to the time. By transforming the place into an always-moving state, a train. To say it more radically, in this novel, what is going on is not the time, but the train and only the train. Therefore, there is an enormous past that tells the whole story and a petrified deactivated present that does nothing; it just remembers. Because if we get rid of 'the temporal present,' nothing will push us forward anymore.

This formal characteristic—the reduction of the ongoing moment (now) to a still standpoint by turning it into a platform for the return of the fragmented memories—is the common feature in almost half of these novels. Everything is passed, as 'the

past' itself is only actualized by the conquest of 'the present.' An eternal past that arrests 'the present' and makes the future inaccessible.

3. The Eternality of the Past in Circular Temporal Structure

There is a second structure, that, as different as it seems, constructs the relation between the past and the present according to the same temporal structure. In this group of novels, 'the present' is present and active in the sense that it proceeds. However, it does not proceed to another time, not to the future, but to the very beginning point from which it had started. As the form—and in the case of these novels also the content—emphasizes: 'nothing under the sky is new.' The temporal structure of these novels, along with the narrative structure, simultaneously constructs a circular path in which everything that happens at the present is the shadow of something in 'the past' and so on; likewise, everyone who is narrated is the shadow of someone else in 'the past.' The narrator of a story is the reader or a character in another story, which happens in a different time layer. Let us demonstrate this point through a close reading of *Names and Shadows* (*nām-hā va sāye-hā*), a novel that exemplifies this structure. The title itself draws attention to the circular narrative structure. The novel begins with a section called 'Preface,' which is narrated in the first person and signed with a name different from the actual writer of the book: 'I have written this novel or this thing that I don't know what to call, a few years ago. It must have been 1375 [1996]. Not me. I have to say we. It is something that both of us have written ...' (Okhovvat, 2007, p. 8) As mentioned, the name that has signed the preface at the end (Parvindokht Torshizi)—which is also the narrator of some parts of the novel—is different from the author's name on the cover. Thus, this section should not be considered a paratextual preface. In these first pages, there is a connection between two narrative layers; since the narrator has admitted that is not 'the real story of her life' but a 'novel.' This confession can be understood in two ways because as the novel continues, we are faced with two narrations. The first-person narration of Parvindokht, and the narration of Khan-Dayi's (the uncle of Parvindokht's husband) manuscripts that Parvindokht revises after his death. At first glance, it may seem that what the narrator has admitted in the preface to be a novel is only the text of the manuscripts; But in this case, writing a separate part called the preface and signing it with a name other than the name on the cover of the book would be meaningless. The text of the preface ends as follows:

Whatever it is, it is what it is. Even if it has nothing, it is dear to me, as it reminds me of the kind hand that sometimes caressed my hair and even slipped on my neck and rested on my shoulders.

Good or bad, that is what it is.

Parvindokht Torshizi

Isfahan, May 80 (Okhovvat, 2007, p. 17)

This initial section questions the veracity of the narrator's first-person narrative since, through its form, it brings up the fact that the whole thing is a 'novel.' It should be emphasized that although the experience of reading a novel is always intertwined with the consciousness of its fictionality, it is different when this is declared in the text itself; like bringing the camera into the framework. Therefore, there is the first rupture in the narrative layers: Parvindokht as the first-person narrator in some parts of the novel versus Parvindokht who has signed the preface. The latter admits the former's real-life story to be just a 'novel.' The first chapter continues with the narration of Parvindokht, and the second chapter, at a different narrative level, is the story of Dr. Salahuddin Ivanboland (the main character of the manuscripts), which begins without any previous background.

These two narratives, each of which is in a different time layer are spread independently in different chapters. Only after a few chapters, it becomes clear that the story of Salahuddin is the novel that Khan-Dayi has been writing and the manuscripts which Parvindokht is revising. Besides, it seems that this 'story' is a narration of his real-life story. Analogous events that are repeated in both stories, such as being forced to leave Iran and how to return, political activities in the Tudeh Party of Iran, a brief love affair with a woman, and the like, are frequent similarities that create parallelisms between the two narrative layers.

Such organization of narrative parallelisms in circular temporalities may be found in quite a few other novels as well. What happens in this form is the creation of a kind of circular and repetitive temporality, in which there is an illusion of the 'present' and the 'future'; but again they are nothing more than the past's reincarnation. Each layer repeats other narratives and casts its shadow on another layer. Of course, we should not reduce this form to the postmodern technique of connecting two different layers of the narrative; which is supposed to demystify the text by the entrance of the author. Here the parallelism of the asynchronous layers of the narrative is of particular importance in constructing the temporal form. It is not a question of repeating the story of the author and the characters in different narrative layers at the same time. Rather, we are faced with different characters with almost the same story, each of whom is present in a specific and different historical moment. In these Novels, everything is a repetition of the 'past' while nothing is really in the 'past'. This is the point where this narrative form joins the first one in blocking the linear imagination of time and transforming the 'present' and what it bears as a potentiality—the future- to an eternal 'past.'

4. The Interrelation of the 'Eternal Past' and the 'Eternal Present'

'Eternal past' is the center around which the narrative subjectivity of these novels clusters. A subjectivity that is significantly in accordance with the postmodern one, arising from and also constructing a process of mediation between daily life and the

socio-economic relations of late capitalism. Fredric Jameson discusses this question in his article 'The End of Temporality' - mostly based on the situation of the postmodern subject in core countries- as the problematic situation of a subject deprived of the ability to situate itself in history: 'This situation has been characterized as a dramatic and alarming shrinkage of existential time and the reduction to a present that hardly qualifies as such any longer, given the virtual effacement of that past and future that can alone define a present in the first place.' (Jameson, 2003, p. 708) In comparison, our discussion of novelistic forms in a peripheral country, reveals a postmodern subject similarly troubled in terms of its rapport with this historical moment but so deeply different regarding the way this rapport is actualized. From the point Jameson is looking at the postmodern subject, constructed in the cultural productions of late capitalism, what happens is time's 'shrinkage to the present'. (Jameson, 2015, p. 105) As he discusses the action movies as an indicative symptom of this situation:

Nowadays they are reduced to a series of explosive presents of time, with the ostensible plot now little more than an excuse and a filler, a string on which to thread these pearls which are the exclusive center of our interest: at that point the trailer or preview is often enough, as it offers the high points of films which are essentially nothing but high points. (Jameson, 2015, p. 105)

What Jameson is discussing, and the works studied here, are contrasting symptoms of a single phenomenon. In these action films, the plot is reduced to a pre-prepared form, whose empty points are filled with explosive moments that do not justify themselves in relation to each other; rather, they only make sense given their placement in a pre-known plot. The linear plot does exist in these films, but it has lost its agency because events are given their meaning from somewhere outside of this particular narrative. Whereas the plot and its temporality play a different role in the novels discussed so far. In the first temporal form, what happens is not filling the singular moments of explosive presents in the plot; but constructing a temporality that makes every single moment of the story singular. Therefore, instead of vacancies in a pre-known plot, there is a vacuum space in which fragments of the narrative are spread and find their meaning in their spatial relationship with other fragments. Paradoxically, the eternal present, that is the frozen temporality of these narratives, is only possible in 'the past.' This is also the case with the second temporal structure, in which 'the past' imposes its swollen presence on 'the present' to such an extent that 'the present' only makes sense as a platform for re-reading 'the past.' Unlike action movies, in these narrative forms, the summary of the story can never be enough, and what is lost first of all in summarizing the story is the form within which the pieces of the story are situated and become meaningful. That is why any kind of summarizing these narratives produces a completely different narrative.

To say it concisely, in both forms discussed so far, time is somehow spatialized. This spatialization is made possible in the first form by flattening time into pieces of individual memories, and in the second form by imposing a national historical depth on the time-space relations of the narrative. In another explanation, in the first form, the narrative is de-historicized because it cannot locate itself in the history of the 'national situation' in which it is concretely situated. And in the second form, the same process occurs by imposing a national historiographical past on the narrative which again causes the loss of its relation with the concrete historical reality. The thrown-to-the-past present in the first form is individual and in the second is national.

What happens in these narratives is not inflation or eternalization of 'the present,' but its deactivation by projecting 'the past' on it. Here we are dealing with a swollen past, which, does not come from the historical reality but a historiographical construction. The process of de-historicization in these novels suspends 'the present' and throws it to an uncertain point in history, to an endless road. Instead of being trapped in the 'eternal present,' the subject is trapped in the 'eternal past', which, in a different process, deprives them of the possibility to be concretely situated within history.

5. Inevitability of Destiny in a Closed Circle Temporality

Narrative temporality in the third form shares certain aspects with the previous two. In this form, there is a circular story that is narrated in a disordered and fragmented temporal structure. However, what happens here is neither the reduction of 'the present' to the ground for the returning fragments of 'the past' nor the parallelism of 'the present' and 'the past' in the narrative and temporal layers. Instead, 'the present', 'the past', and even 'the future' are intertwined in a single circular layer; in an individual's story of failure in escaping from a determined destiny. In this temporal form, the future in which the character has escaped from his current situation leads her/him back precisely to the point she/he has escaped. A structure that reproduces a constant and unsatisfied tension. An illustrative example of this form is a novel titled *The Nocturnal Harmony of Wood Orchestra* (*Samfoni-ye Šabāne-ye Orkestr-e Chōbhā*) in which the narrator's attempt to escape his current situation, an escape that has already become a goal in itself, always remains unfinished in a circular rotation. Even after death, the divine punishment for him is to return to his past:

I told myself that I should use a firm hand. What will they do to me? The worst-case scenario is that they throw me in front of the snake; or cut me in half with a saw; They will not return me to that hell! That was when I threw caution to the wind and said in an aggressive tone: Here is the same with that ruin!

Faust Morenau closed his notebook and turned to me angrily: As punishment, you will be sent back to the same hell! (Ghasemi, 1996, p. 36)

Besides, this is not just death, which has turned from an escape route into a return-way to the starting point. The narrator confronts several self-repetitions. His friend Seyyed is writing a story, the main character of which is the narrator himself (Ghasemi, 1996, p. 25). Although this text is not directly in the text, it comes up in their conversations. Furthermore, the narrator,

who does not see himself in the mirror, that is, has no image of his present presence, encounters someone who turns out to be himself frozen at the age when he last saw himself in the mirror:

No, I was not in front of the mirror. I mean, maybe this is the missing image of me at the age of fourteen. At one point, I felt insane. Is there a definite boundary between madness and consciousness for the insane? ... But still, no one had called me a mad person. But now what? now that there was a knock on the door, and as soon as I opened the door, I saw myself in front of someone who looked like me, like the last image I saw of myself in the mirror. (Ghasemi, 1996, p. 56)

As could be seen even in these short sections, the story of *The Nocturnal Harmony of Wood Orchestra* is the story of the collapse of a person who is stuck in this infinite, repetitive time; but would not give up. He suffers from a disease he calls 'temporal pauses', he loses his self-understanding and his perception of time, and he destroys himself, but at no point does he reach any kind of peace with the situation. Fate in this temporal structure is as inevitable as in the previous two structures. The narrator seems to be under the spell of a 'curse':

Now, when I look at the long list of countries that have been fighting for independence for years, and in some cases for centuries, I understand why losing independence is so easy and so difficult. I, who had left my country because they were controlling everything I did, now felt cursed that even when I am buried, I would go to a place where they would control anything I do! (Ghasemi, 1996, p. 82)

So again, the determined future is there. However, the narrative of one's ceaseless effort to transcend this 'curse,' which is at the same time the narrative of one's destruction, is constructed by and at the same time constructing, the narrative temporality as one circle, or even one dot. This singular moment of tension is what distinguishes this form from the previous two.

Regarding the mediation between the individual and the collective in a historical situation in which this mediation is problematized, this narrative structure stands at a point between the previous two. In the first form, the reaction to the problematic relation between the individual and the collective is a retreat to 'individuality' and constructing this illusion that it can hold itself and produces meaning immanently. What happens in the wake of a such retreat is the return of the repressed collectivity in the form of ruptures in the individual narration and which in turn demolish it into the fragmented parts that remain incapable of forming a whole. In the second form, the constructed national history is supposed to mediate between the daily lives of national individuals and what determines their national situation. However, as constructed as it is, this uncritically ideological narration of national history fails in its mission, and the concrete present of the national situation, as well as the daily lives of the subjects in this situation, remains out of its reach. In the third form, on one hand, the narrative has lost the possibility of going beyond the individual, representing the collective aesthetically, and mediating between the two in a meaningful manner. On the other hand, it does not attempt to hide this inability by limiting itself to a seemingly coherent individual story or a constructed national history. Hence it remains at the peak of the tension, and what it narrates is the destruction of the individual in this impasse. It brings its failure to the surface, to the text's consciousness, and therefore overcomes the failure or, more precisely, wins to fail. What it is, is the frankness of the form in dealing with this situation; An honesty that tries to reject any illusive relief and only narrate the story of an individual's collapse, in a situation where an escape from this collapse is neither possible for the individual nor imaginable collectively. Though, it should be noticed that such honesty, is a possible extremity of this narrative form. This does not mean, however, that all narratives with this form have reached such an extreme of frankness and have created no soothing illusion. At the stake here, is the range of possibilities of the form itself, which may be actualized to different extents in each specific text.

6. Different Temporal Structures and Facing the Revolution's Defeat

The story that is being read/written here through analyzing temporal structures in a corpus of novels that the post-revolutionary literary authorities in Iran have deemed 'successful,' is the story of constructing a post-revolutionary subject, not only in literary works but also and more significantly in daily life, almost three decades after a significant moment—not the moment of anti-systematic revolution (i.e. 1979), but the rupture that follows its victory. The rupture between contemporary subjectivity and the lost revolutionary collectivity that has been suspended and expelled from the frame of our imaginations; the distance between seeking emancipation among a vast crowd on the street and seeking success in one's privately established credentials. Thus, that which is read in the light of the synchronicity of the postmodern subject and the post-revolutionary subject in these novels is the end of the revolution. And this ending occurs not only in the content of subjective consciousness, but more decisively and drastically, in its form. For a revolution is always defeated in form, that is in the structural limits of its material possibilities.

Within the capitalist world-system, after the triumph of an anti-systematic revolution, a peripheral state has to confront the socio-economic relations on a world scale. Relations within which the post-revolutionary society, with all its internal tensions and disintegratedness, has to survive and thus has to locate itself. (See Wallerstein, 1995, pp. 68–69) During the revolution, there is always a future, and without it being virtually possible the revolution is impossible. It seems that the revolution should only go beyond the existing situation to reach that future; it should only break the existing order within its particular national situation. Nevertheless, what happens after the victory is the collision of the revolutionary subjects with this transcendental imagination, with a transnational order; an order that makes the imagination of a different future, a future that transcends 'the present,' impossible. Revolutionary subjects have crossed the barrier they could recognize between them and their future (the national pre-revolutionary state), but the future is not there. Hence, the transcendental revolutionary imagination that used to have a

strong presence in the subject's consciousness before reaching the state power and facing the objectivity of the forces governing interstate relations, collapses afterward. It is only in the moment of gaining state power, in the moment of the necessity of post-revolutionary action, that the objectivity of the presence of the world-scale socio-economic structure reveals the impossibility of revolution on a national scale and makes the imagination of the future impossible for the former national-revolutionary subject. 'These successful movements were then confronted with the realities of the limitations of state power within the capitalist world-economy. They found that they were constrained by the functioning of the interstate system to exercise their power in ways that muted the 'anti-systemic' objectives that were their *raison d'être*.' (Wallerstein, 1995, p. 69) In a more concrete sense, after gaining state power (which is the only way to 'triumph' in a peripheral revolution), the world-economic relations influence the balance of post-revolutionary forces biased toward pro-systemic ones. This confrontation disintegrates the revolutionary subjects' consciousness at the moment of facing the structural impossibility of their previous imagination. Thus the post-revolutionary subject, in response to this collapse, crawls in, or, to be more precise, is repressed inward to distance her/himself from the previous collective subjectivity, now made impossible. This crawling inside is an escape route from the agony of facing defeat and makes it possible for the subject to deny the impossible desire; but at the same time deprives her/him of the possible consciousness, reachable only at the moment of the defeat, that is the ability to see the greater enemy of the defeated anti-systemic revolution: the transnational socio-economic structure. However, with the repression comes negation; and the subject, unable to see the main enemy, directs his anger at 'immediate enemies' (to use Foucault's term⁴). A new ideology blocks the view immediately after the moment of confrontation—the moment in which post-revolutionary consciousness becomes possible. In Iran's particular historical case, that ideology is constructed by and at the same time constructing a postmodern subject, in its peripheral meaning as we have discussed.

The result of this inward repression is different based on the subject-positions in the nexuses of domination; Among which gendered subject-positions are determinant in our case study. Here it should be pointed out that between the first two temporal forms we have discussed, the first (i.e. the form that retreats to individual pasts) is significantly more common among women writers, and the second (i.e. the form that mobilizes a circular narrative of national history) has appeared mostly in the novels written by men. This distinction has a special meaning given the different socio-economic situations of men and women in that historical moment. The decade we are focusing on is also the period in which the economic policies of Iran's government have utterly turned toward neoliberal legislations like reducing the value of the labor force, reducing the social services, etc., which has in turn increased household expenses.⁵ One of the results of this situation, along with other social and cultural factors, is the widespread entry of urban middle-class women into the labor market. The women, now 'free' to sell their labor, face a rearrangement in the system of class-gender discrimination. Not only the double exploitation of unpaid homework continues in a more 'modern' way (still maintaining the structure of gender domination), but also the direct encounter with capital-labor relations requires a new ideological system of thought. What used to be known as motherhood, marriage duties, working out of kindness (the female version), and thus out of the market and wageless, now has to be reexamined in this new situation against the decisive question of the market: Does it worth it? The change is radical. It changes the way a woman thinks of her being a woman. The confrontation of the female revolutionary subject who had an active (and even at times trans-gender) presence in the revolution, with the impossibility of the revolutionary imagination, along with this socio-economic conversion, suppresses the female subject to its gender boundaries. Women take refuge from the made-impossible battle (revolution) to another battle (the battle of gender and only gender), which ties their subject-position with 'being a woman,' with gender. Hence, the position of female subjectivity in this decade always carries the compulsion to speak from the lower gender position. In this situation for a 'woman', speaking from a 'feminine' position becomes not a choice but a compulsion, and her voice is heard only on the condition that she speaks from that position. This shift also reduces the relationship between the female subject and her 'immediate enemy' to a fetishized gender-specific enemy. Now the women see themselves not as victims of a system that produces and is reproduced by patriarchy, but as victims of the patriarchal network as an independent discriminatory network in which most men act as agents. This generalized relation is in a rapport with the first temporal form, mostly written by female writers. In these novels, everything, no matter how collective they are, inevitably is transformed into an individual issue of the narrator 'as a woman.' The fragmented pieces of memory do not carry a history; hence it is not possible to situate them in any collective matter. All the individual sufferings and problems seem somehow to be someone else's fault, mostly another male family member. The narrative, ignoring the larger structure, divides the faults among individuals to build an immanent individual story. Thus, often at the center of the narrator's consciousness is a woman as a victim, surrounded by a circle of culprits (father, husband, brother, and sometimes other women). For instance, in one of these novels, *The Fish Sleep at Night* (*māhihā dar šab mi-xaband*) as the story is developing with returning memories of family struggles, the tension between a political activist and a police officer is reduced to the tension between a sister (activist) and a brother (police agent) within a family; since the tension is more about family honor than politics:

I say look!' This is the body that you wanted to remain a virgin in Savak⁶ and saved it. See now. Do you want to see that it got old in the mirrors and mirrors, again and again, and still a stranger? So let's see. Call again - call me and I...? This bottle drowns my sorrows, and this Russian sound takes me to the dense, snowy, white forests that I read and read in the Russian novels that sheltered me. I started with a novel named *The Flame*, and then with books that you and others like you forbade me from reading, and father burned them. (Ashrafi, 2004, pp. 66–67)

The suspension of the collective in this narrative form makes it impossible to locate these discriminatory relations in a totality and see the socio-economic structure in which gender discrimination is possible and even necessary; thus it constructs and is constructed by the privately gendered position of the female post-revolutionary subject.

In the second narrative form, mostly written by men, we are faced with a different situation regarding discriminative gender relations. Although the expulsion of women into a necessarily feminine subjectivity also forces the subjectivity of men into a gendered one, but the superior position always hides the network of discrimination in which it is situated as superior. Hence, the status of male subjectivity is understood as the genderless status of an Iranian (in our case, middle-class) citizen. A position that, of course, like the position of female subjectivity, is also situated within other networks of repression, including that of social classes and core-peripheral relations inside the nation-state. In this situation, the revolutionary subject of the urban middle-class man, facing the revolution's failure, finds himself as a class (and not as a gender), in the position of the revolution's victim; while the culprit's position is filled by the ruling classes and sometimes the former allies of the middle-class, i.e. the lower classes. No matter who is winning the revolution, or in other words, no matter if the revolution has a winning class at all, the middle-class, facing the material limitations, justifies the transformation to the non-revolutionary subject (the postmodern subject), by denying the revolution and projecting it on other classes. Who would take responsibility for a defeated revolution that has managed to take over the state? This conservative turn of the middle-class relies on the paradoxical situation of this class: both possibilities of alliance and conflict of interests with the lower classes. With the establishment of neoliberal governmental policies and postmodern ideology, the endless efforts to maximize personal gain leave no room for an alliance with the lower classes. The survival of the middle-class depends on this turn. In a post-revolutionary situation, in a peripheral country in the era of late capitalism, the middle-class—as a class—does not have another choice to survive. The alternative is to rebel against the system which would be a rebellion against the class benefits as well. At this point, they cannot remain revolutionary and, at the same time, 'middle-class' anymore. They have to choose, and the choice in the historical case of Iran had been the absolute negation of the revolution; not simply the specific historical experience they have recently had, but the concept of revolution as such. Since 'negation is, at the higher level, a substitute for repression', (Freud, 1963, p. 134) what has been repressed out of the limits of the subject's consciousness, that is the revolution itself, comes back as the object of its negation. The novels discussed here are an excellent moment to observe the form of this negation. So in these new narrations of history, the case is not that the middle-class is not revolutionary *anymore*, but that it *has never been* revolutionary; rather has always been the victim of revolutions during which the middle-classes have lost their lives, loves, money, and opportunities—these last two are specifically crucial since they separate the middle-class from the lower classes—for something in which they 'don't know why they have participated.' (Okhovvat, 2007, p. 189) Since in Iran's 2000, the lower classes were still closer to the post-revolutionary government (this changed in the next decade), the 'immediate enemy' of the middle-class (male) subject become the new national government emerging from 'the revolution of the lower class.' However, the relation of middle-class' subjectivity to the established state is no longer a revolutionary one, but only a relation of the victim and culprit; because as we have discussed, it has become impossible to return to a revolutionary subjectivity in this new state. Thus the unsatisfied drive of the future (the former revolutionary drive) ricochets towards 'the past,' and the subject is thrown into the depths of a constructed national history. What is made possible in the second temporal form, with its repetitive layers of time and the circular narration of history, is the construction of this middle-class (male) subject: crawled inside and standing at the endpoint (if it is possible to imagine an end for a circle) of the national past. This historical depth transforms the victim-culprit relationship, which is constructed in the consciousness of this class, into a 'historical' one—in its vulgar meaning, i.e. something that always has been the case—which is now made visible in this post-revolutionary situation. Thus there emerges—as a pivotal actant of this new 'consciousness'—a new belief: now that 'we know' the circle ends and the victim is going after his own and only own interests. In other words, we *know* that we made a revolution, and had the power to overthrow a state and make a new one, but nevertheless, we *believe* that power is despotic, that we cannot change it and we are always its victims, so we believe that one should just seek one's private interests. The belief justifies the shift from a revolutionary subject to a postmodern one. Here it should be pointed out one more time, that this turn in both subject-positions, is a formal one. This is not about losing 'the revolutionary' in the content of our consciousness, but it is about the structural limitation of our imagination in a historical era that is called 'late capitalism.' It is about a revolution defeated in form.

7. A Utopian Potential within the 'Eternal Past'

This suspension of 'the present,' the projection of 'the past' on it, and the resulting eternal constructed past which, like a poisonous gift, is always with the peripheral subject, arises from the same historical moment as the subject trapped in endless moments of 'the present' in the core. Both subjects have lost 'the future,' but then again in the core, it is lost in the sense that no one is looking for it or even imagining it anymore; for the eternal present, with its singular joys, pleasures, and emotions, holds the subject within itself. While on the periphery, there remains a lacking future, an impossible dream that is, in fact, a constructed picture of the core at the moment. What has become impossible is to reach this everlasting dream: to become the core. So that is how 'the time' is constructed for a peripheral subject: a promised future behind a suspended present and a swollen constructed past that makes them both impossible to imagine.

A recent critical book (published in Persian) addresses this issue in contemporary historical studies in Iran. *Naming the Suspension*⁷ (*nāmidan-e ta'liq*) narrates how 'the present' is made unavailable in the particular case of Iran; in other words, how it is de-historicized, and made incomprehensible, inexplicable, and unchangeable, in the consciousness of the subject in this particular nation-state, due to the collaboration of the constructed historical depth of the nation and the desire to reach a future that is present in 'West.' However, if we were to look at this picture in the context of the universal nexus that has made it possible, again, the distinction of the paradoxical actualizations of postmodern subjectivities in the core and periphery comes

into play. The distinction between a wandering subject in the 'explosive presents' and a wandering subject in the swollen past. This distinction in the temporal state of the subject makes a substantial difference when it comes to the structural limits of its consciousness. In de-historicizing the subject by throwing it into a constructed national past, a kind of temporal consciousness is made possible, which is impossible for the subject of eternal presents. For in the suspension of 'the present,' there exist a possibility of comprehending the materiality of this historical moment –of which temporal suspension and de-historicization are common characteristics- by the very feeling of deprivation; that is, when the subject does not locate itself in history but feels its presence through the concreteness of the daily life. The distinction between a subject overfilled with singular satisfactions, and one reproducing the dissatisfactions of perpetually unanswered drives is the constant feeling of a lack. This utopian potential makes it possible to analyze a 'positive hermeneutic'⁸ in the narrative temporalities of the discussed novels in which 'something is always missing'. Although this feeling of deprivation itself emerges from the dream of a future when 'we' will 'finally' live in a core-like situation—a temporal structure squarely rooted in an Orientalist picture of the world and is represented in the content of these novels as well—, in its form, it bears the utopian possibility of 'wishing for something else.' Therefore, while both subject-positions share the lack of historical time in the era of late capitalism, the core position, always satisfied, remains blind to this matter; however, in the periphery, the possibility of feeling the lack of a future is saved, not in the content but in the form of consciousness.

Thus it can be said that both subject-positions are postmodern, that is, they are 'free' from the 'history' but trapped in this 'freedom' or, as Terry Eagleton puts it, they are 'pressed to the point where continuities simply dissolve'; a point at which 'history becomes no more than a galaxy of current conjunctures, a cluster of eternal presents, which is to say hardly history at all.' (Eagleton, 1996, p. 46) However, there is a concrete truth in the way this de-historicization is actualized in the peripheral subject's consciousness. This suspension of the present is not, as some might think, just the result of the collaboration of two constructions: the national past and the dreamy 'west.' Instead, it emerges first of all from an objective situation that has deprived the subject of the possibility of a cognitive understanding of his present and its place in history; that is late capitalism. Any effort for overcoming this de-historicized consciousness needs to start from the possibility of concretely understanding where we stand at the moment. Because any form of future imagination needs a present moment that is situated in a meaningful historical narration, it could be argued that this form of losing the temporality to an 'eternal past' rather than an 'eternal present,' bears the utopian possibility of imagining a future in a relation to the critical awareness of the present historical situation. To look at it from a different angle, the dream of the unattainable future, the dream of 'becoming The West,' although in its content is part of the ideology that reproduces the illusory picture of the West, in its form, retains the ability of 'wishing for some future.' An ability that does not let the peripheral subject be completely detached from their historical status; and draws the lack of access to 'the present' into the margins of their consciousness.

8. Conclusion

The analysis of frequent narrative temporalities in the awarded post-revolutionary novels in Iran unfolds in two paradoxical yet dialectically complementary aspects. On the one hand, they are mediating between the post-revolutionary social orders and the individual experiences in an ideological way that is structurally in line with maintaining the existing socio-political relations (with an exception for the third form as discussed). As a common characteristic, the temporal structures through which these novels are building their narrations rely on the invading returns of 'the past' (in the form of personal flashbacks or historical destiny) which makes 'the present' inaccessible and 'the future' unimaginable. Therefore, everything is passed and the past is eternal. The article argues that the narratives written in these temporalities are incapable of constructing the relation of the collective situations and the individual stories in the consciousness of the novels and lean, as a result, toward isolated and singular representations of the individual experiences. This is the point in which these narrative structures are interwoven with the socio-economic post-revolutionary relations that are based on detachment from collective movements and emphasis on personal success and profit.

On the other hand, within the internal tensions and ruptures of these narrative forms, there is a potentiality for going beyond the dominant social order and pushing the limitations of imagination further. That is because, in a peripheral situation, this 'eternal past' that has suspended the present is always juxtaposed with a future that is the impossible dream of 'becoming the west'. It is discussed through the article how this wish is delusive in its content but utopian in its form since it retains the potentiality of imagining a different social order in the structure of consciousness of a peripheral subject. That is not to say the second aspect can negate the first one, but rather to insist on the utopian impulses of resistance against the structure (both the literary and the social) latent in these novels.

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Endnotes

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- ¹ The 1979 revolution in Iran, overthrew the Pahlavi monarchy and resulted in the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran. For more information about that historical period of Iran: (See Abrahamian, 1982, pp. 496–530)
- ² The corpus of this research is 29 novels that won one of the three mainstream awards, Golshiri, Mehregān, and Yaldā, between 2001 to 2011, among which this article is concentrated on *The Fish Sleep at Night (māhihā dar šab mi-xaband)*, *The Nocturnal Harmony of Wood Orchestra (Samfoni-ye Šabāne-ye Orkestr-e Chōbhā)*, *Names and Shadows (nām-hā va sāye-hā)*, and *Who Would Believe, Rostam? (Āe Kasi Bāvar Mikonad, Rostam?)*.
- ³ The Iran-Iraq war began in 1980 and lasted for eight years.
- ⁴ Foucault uses the term in his article “The Subject and Power” for describing a characteristic of the so-called “anti-authority struggles”: “These are ‘immediate’ struggles for two reasons. In such struggles people criticize instances of power which are the closest to them, those which exercise their action on individuals. They do not look for the ‘chief enemy but for the immediate enemy. Nor do they expect to find a solution to their problem at a future date (that is, liberations, revolutions, end of class struggles). In comparison with a theoretical scale of explanations or a revolutionary order which polarizes the historian, they are anarchistic struggles.” (Foucault, 1982, p. 708)
- ⁵ For more discussions about this issue see: “Hybrid Neoliberalism: Capitalist Development in Contemporary Iran” (Valadbaygi, 2020)
- ⁶ The name of Iran’s security forces before the 1979 revolution
- ⁷ An important book in a new current in critical historical research in Iran that is trying to comprehend (or re-comprehend) the “national situation.” *Naming the Suspension* is not a “historical book” in its common sense, but a book that wants to problematize the ideologies of national historiography in Iran.
- ⁸ For a critical explanation of ‘positive hermeneutics’: (Jameson, 1981, pp. 285–286)