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## Wartime Propaganda and Gender in Ahmad Mahmoud's *The Scorched Earth*: A Dissident Reading

# ABSTRACT

The Iran-Iraq War (1980–88) has been the subject of many aesthetic productions in contemporary Persian literature. The Iranian mass media during the war with Iraq described the armed conflict as holy and masculine, and propagated the replacement of the word “war” with “sacred defense” to urge authors to write within this established framework and reflect the ideals of the State. Opposed to such an ideological view of the war, the prominent Iranian novelist Ahmad Mahmoud began to express dissent in his works of fiction such as *The Scorched Earth* (1982). This study, therefore, analyzes Mahmoud’s scope of dissidence toward wartime propaganda and gender in the above mentioned novel to articulate how Mahmoud raises important questions regarding the State’s view of war and the established gender norms in Iran at war. It uses cultural materialist dissident reading and textual analysis to study Mahmoud’s contempt for wartime propaganda through the text’s portrayal of desperate people in Khorramshahr in the southwest of Iran caught between Iraqi airstrikes and artillery fires, and domestic problems including inflation, looting and mismanagement.

**Keywords:** Ahmad Mahmoud, *The Scorched Earth*, Persian fiction, Iran-Iraq War, gender dissidence, propaganda.

## INTRODUCTION

On 22 September 1980, Saddam Hussein's MiG 21s and 23s bombed Tehran's Mehrabad International Airport and at the same time his troops marched towards the southern cities of Iran such as Khorramshahr in Khuzestan province; officially an all-out war against Iran was launched. The Iran-Iraq War, as Karsh describes, is "one of the longest, bloodiest and costliest Third World armed conflicts in the twentieth-century" (83). Axworthy states that the reasons behind Saddam Hussein's attack on Iran are still arguable (267). However, it was most likely that Saddam Hussein wanted to replace Iran in the region as the mightiest military power, and put an end to Iran's influence on the majority Iraqi Shiite population who were sponsored by Iran to overthrow Saddam's Ba'ath Party and assassinate top Iraqi officials such as the failed assassination attempt on Tariq Aziz, Saddam's then Deputy Premier (Karsh 13).

When the war broke out, Iranian officials initiated several schemes for instrumental use of the conflict; ideologically committed to the ideals of the 1979 Revolution, these were aimed at fulfilling multiple sociopolitical ends such as providing adequate justification of war and hence the necessity of its continuation, and the purging of counter-revolutionaries and dissenters (Keddie 251). To that end, new vocabulary for the war with Iraq was introduced by government officials, including the use of "sacred defense" instead of "war." The officials described the conflict, Shams argues, "as a holy crusade against the sources of corruption and impiety" (175). Axworthy maintains that the Shiite theological beliefs such as *Ashura* (680 CE)—the day on which Hussein ibn Ali, the third Imam of Shias, was martyred in the Battle of Karbala—were used by the Iranian State to justify war and arouse people's passion for enlisting. In this way, the war is viewed as divine and having close affinity with the above historical event (268).

In the realm of art and literature of the war period, the Sacred Defense Cinema was established in 1981, and a considerable number of war films appeared on the Iranian screen. Moreover, the revolutionaries established the Centre for Islamic Art and Thoughts in the same year to feature the word commitment as the main responsibility of Iranian artists and authors. The Centre, as Shams explains, defined a committed artist as "a pious, loyal Muslim with artistic interests, whose works were in line with the ideals of the revolutionary promises" (169). The majority of Iranian film directors, screenwriters, artists and authors attempted to hold out those promises. It was in the early 1980s that the term "sacred defense literature" (also called resistance literature) was applied to works of fiction and non-fiction depicting the Iran-Iraq War and anti-Western ideals of the 1979 Revolution

(Shams 176). The literature of sacred defense is ideologically in line with the State; it interprets the war with Iraq, apart from propagation of being sacred, in terms of hostility of Western powers toward Iran's Revolution, and committed artists must arouse people's revolutionary and "religious fervor" to confront the West (Farrokh 369).

However, in the case of texts with oppositional ideas, the State has applied two approaches to contain them: censorship and interpellation. Firstly, those literary works that are not considered politically subversive may receive print permission after their oppositional and sensitive ideas are censored (Haddadian-Moghaddam 121).<sup>1</sup> For example, Esmail Fasih's war-centred fiction *The Winter of 1983* (1985) was banned from being reprinted for eighteen years because several sentences had to be removed from the text (Shahnahpur x). Interpellation is the other approach adopted by the State, and the term was coined and expounded by the influential French thinker Louis Althusser in the 1970s. He defines it as the process by which the dominant ideology "hails or interpolates individuals as subjects" in an attempt to make them agreeable with its own values (173). It can be said that this is a form of containment through which the dominant power contains the dissident text and uses it to disseminate ideological messages. This is how the war novel *The Scorched Earth* (1982), written by Ahmad Mahmoud (1931–2002), the prominent Iranian novelist from Khuzestan province, has been interpreted in post-revolutionary Iranian literary studies. Some state critics and scholars have described the above work as one of the most important texts in sacred defense literature. Such key figures include Torkamani-Barandouzi, who has identified the novel as the first work of fiction in the field of resistance literature (212), and Belghays Soleimani who praises Mahmoud's representation of revolutionary zeal and commitment to the Revolution (45). These critics have disregarded the novel's censure against the State's weak performance in time of war and its propaganda that the armed conflict is divine and embodies masculine virtues (De Groot 152).

Following Mikhail Bakhtin, Mahmoud produces a heteroglossiac novel (262) in which different points of view about war, people's resistance against Iraq's invasion in the absence of Iranian army and government, and their discontent over the ideals of the Revolution are represented. *The Scorched Earth* represents the first three months of war in the city of Khorramshahr with a linear narrative in five chapters. Mahmoud vividly depicts the horrors of war and the fall of a prosperous city to a derelict land piled up with dismembered human bodies and dead animals. Ardalani expresses that Mahmoud's fiction is regarded as one of the masterpieces of contemporary Persian literature and the first fictional text about the

<sup>1</sup> All the translations from the Persian primary and secondary sources are by the author.

Iran-Iraq War and its devastating effects on Iranians (31). The celebrated dissident critic and writer Hooshang Golshiri contends that the strength of Mahmoud's novel is its detailed and realistic descriptions of a war-torn city on the verge of ruin and destruction (208). The prime objective of this study, therefore, is to explore Mahmoud's disapproval of wartime propaganda and his gender dissident discourse in his anti-war fiction *The Scorched Earth* by using cultural materialist dissident reading, particularly the critical ideas of Sinfield and Dollimore, in the following sections.

## CULTURAL MATERIALISM AND READING DISSIDENCE

Alan Sinfield, Jonathan Dollimore and Catherine Belsey—disciples of the celebrated cultural thinker Raymond Williams—are recognized as the founders of cultural materialist theory in Britain in the 1980s (Robson 26). Their critical practice aims to explore literary texts in terms of historical-political context, marginalization and discursive power. The central aim of cultural materialists is to challenge traditional or conservative criticism that, in his *Faultlines* (1992), Sinfield defines as the process by which literary texts are interpreted in a way to be “politically agreeable” with the dominant ideology (21). This means that conservative readings aim to contain dissenting views from literary works. Considering Iran's post-revolutionary literary context, as noted above, the State has attempted to read dissident works, including Mahmoud's *The Scorched Earth*, as texts that espouse its ideology. Nonetheless, Dollimore holds that literary texts are usually inclined to resist this ideological agreement by indicating that there are contradictions or faultlines within the dominant ideology, and dissident readings can reveal them and undermine the effects of ideology (*Sexual* 121).

For Sinfield and Dollimore, dissidence is at the centre of their critical theory since it is informed by “the conflicts and contradictions within power” (Brannigan 111). For Sinfield, dissidence is a way of resisting an “exploitative social order” (*On Sexuality* 51); it is an opposition to official policy. To show an example, in his reading Shakespeare's *Othello* (c. 1603), Sinfield argues that the play presents two conflicting views on marriage simultaneously: individualism and patriarchal domination (*Faultlines* 42–44). On the one hand, Renaissance humanism places emphasis on individualism or the freedom of action and thought, and in the play Desdemona uses this principle and defies Venetian courtiers (patriarchal system) to express her autonomy in choosing Othello. On the other hand, at that time marital bonds, especially among nobles and high ranking courtiers, were pre-arranged by the male heads of the households (46). In *Othello*, Brabantio, Desdemona's father, shows his seething resentment

at his daughter's secret marriage since he was the guardian of his daughter and arrangement of Desdemona's marriage is his responsibility. The occurrence of such internal conflict within the dominant ideology enables a dissident author such as Shakespeare to articulate his dissident attitude that may destabilize the effects of ideology (Brannigan 174).

Drawing upon political theory, feminism, gender and sexual studies, queer studies, and social history, cultural materialist theory adopts a multidisciplinary approach to examine the confrontation between the dominant and the marginalized or dissident groups (Milner 151). When the mode of resistance adopted by the dissident identities has its basis in gender, Dollimore calls it gender or "sexual dissidence" (*Sexual* 21). Sexual dissidence seeks to identify and challenge oppressive discursive power that misrepresents and excludes gender identities. This form of dissidence constitutes resistance based on destabilizing the repressive order through "transgression" which is an act of deconstruction and "underpinning and endorsing the philosophy of individualism" (325). Stated differently, this means that gender dissidence is a way of re-discovering the self within the structures of discursive power by transgressing established norms.

Regarding Iran's post-revolutionary literature, Afary contends that cases of sexual and gender dissidence have arisen due to the State's enactment of discriminatory and stringent laws on Iranian women and their rights from the 1980s onward (2). Najmabadi argues that Iran's Constitution is founded upon conservatively religious principles that restrict sharply personal freedom and rights, particularly for women; compulsory veiling, unjust laws regarding divorce and child custody regulations are notable cases in point (8). One important faultline related to Iran in the 1980s, to quote Paidar, was that the State recalled Iranian women to participate in all sociopolitical events of the country, from presidential and parliamentary elections to mass demonstration against some Western powers like the US and the UK, at the same time as it imposed severe constraints on women including compulsory veiling (323). During the war, another contradictory policy was that the Iranian State launched different training programs for women to use weapons, yet there was no intention of dispatching female soldiers to front lines due to the masculinization of such places and the patriarchal culture of the country. Paidar goes on to say that it is expected of women to be mothers of the nation and bring up revolutionary children (262). Given this fact, Mahmoud's *The Scorched Earth* is significant because of its inclusion of major female characters including Naneh Baran and Golabetun's sister who challenge gender discrimination and the patriarchal society of Iran in the 1980s. In the novel, there are examples of female objections to the conservative view of women and their public roles, such as a stranger who questions: "why they don't want to hear the names of the women?" (Mahmoud 50).

## WAR, HORROR AND DEATH

*The Scorched Earth* is distinguished from other Persian literary works with the *topoi* of war in that it expresses disapproval of the State's sponsored programs designed to associate war with notions like sacredness, spirituality, masculinity, and the burning desire for martyrdom on the front lines. The martyrs can enjoy the companionship of Husayn ibn Ali whose death has been commemorated annually by the Shiite population in Muharram the first month in the Islamic calendar. Mahmoud's novel questions such a propagandistic view of war and martyrdom by representing the death, destruction, and violence caused by external forces (the Iraqis) concurrent with the shameless exploitations of self-seekers and opportunists in the domestic context. The novel represents internal problems such as high inflation, looting and rape in Khorramshahr as the catastrophic effects of war have been amplified in war-torn regions (Buroumand 438). Mahmoud deconstructs the spiritualization of war, and his prediction that the military conflict with Iraq will be long has its basis in the evidence founded in Iranian mass media and government officials' remarks. Notably, as the eminent Iranian historian Parsadoost writes, the speech of Iran's then President Mohammad-Ali Rajai (1980–81) in the United Nations Security Council Meeting on 17 October 1980 indicated the continuation of war: "The war will be long and people-oriented" (598). One ideological justification for the continuation of war was that defeating Saddam Hussein's army would form a Shiite imperial power extending from Iran to Iraq for the purpose of liberating Palestine from Israel (Hiro 64). As Abrahamian states, a motto was also created by the revolutionaries: "The Road to Jerusalem Goes Through Baghdad" (*History* 161).

Told by an unnamed male narrator, the novel begins with the news coming from Baghdad Radio that Saddam Hussein's military forces are on the verge of a full-scale attack on Khorramshahr and other border cities of Iran. The Radio announces the deployment of hundreds of Iraqi tanks on the borderline, causing fear among the citizens of Khorramshahr, as well as the narrator's brother, Saber who is critical of Iranian media that are totally silent about the news of war, causing great anxiety for the people. Saber laments: "why the government, the President, or the country's officials are all silent about the Iraq's tank regiments ready to attack; why they aren't saying anything?" (Mahmoud 8). The novel's criticism of the silent Iranian officials and their lack of attention to the rising tensions with Iraq weeks before the war can also be traced in the writing of Parsadoost criticizing the State's reluctance in confrontation with Iraq's repeated airspace violation by its highly supersonic Soviet fighter aircraft MiG-25 the Foxbat, along with several other reported serious border conflicts

between the two nations just a few weeks before the full-scale invasion of Iraq (293). At the outset, the novel presents a climate of distrust in State affairs and policies about the war and people's sense of despair and desolation in Khorramshahr.

The novel's narration captures every single detail of quotidian life in Khorramshahr. Dastgheyb argues that the realistic descriptions of the local people, situations, and events powerfully convey the sense of life in the city before the war (32). The novel's first pages, in addition to the grim news of the deployment of Iraqi troops near the border, focus mainly on the peacefulness of the city. The narrator describes the convivial atmosphere of Khorramshahr as he walks around the city and observes people's various activities such as "a wedding ceremony, children's playing games, and the zigzag movements of powerboats in Karun River" (Mahmoud 14). However, from the spread of the news of the invasion, anxiety surrounds the city and it gradually sinks into chaos and destruction by the eruption of war. Karsh writes that it was reported that around 7,000 people were killed in Khorramshahr in the early weeks of war, due to which the Iranian media changed the name of Khorramshahr to *Khunin-shahr* or "City of Blood" (27).

Reflection of Iran's political events in the 1980s can be seen in Mahmoud's text; specifically, it points to the policy of purging the Army after the 1979 Revolution by sacking or executing high ranked officers. The narrator catches a conversation among some strangers in which one of them expresses his regret that "our Army is disbanded" (Mahmoud 15). In this regard, Kamrava writes that according to official reports of Amnesty International between 1979 and 1981 "some 2,444 executions" were carried out by the revolutionaries, and the news of the executions became an everyday reality on Iranian National Television (18). Many high ranked officers were executed and around 12,000 personnel were sacked. The weakened state of the Iranian Army and the silence of Iranian media including the local radio stations forced the people of Khorramshahr to remain in the city and react promptly by building bunkers and setting up patrol posts in the streets to confront the invaders (Mahmoud 28–30). Distrust in the State's performance and management in war-torn regions is expressed by the citizens who have to take matters into their own hands, including confronting criminals and lawbreakers. In truth, the revolutionary State did broadcast a great deal of propaganda against the Pahlavi monarchy and sponsored its radical views, from purging political dissenters to official censorship of books; it underestimated Iraq's full-scaled invasion from the southwestern to western borders of Iran, actually a length of 900 hundred miles (Parsadoost 81).

The novel graphically portrays the adverse outcomes of war in Khorramshahr, such as the eruption of chaos and horrified civilians rushing

to escape the city. The narrator reflects people's conversations from different backgrounds and attitudes; however, they are all unanimously in agreement that their city is forsaken by the government and the Army cannot defend them against the invasion (Mahmoud 17). This is an important reason why Mahmoud gives very minor roles to government officials and military personnel in his fiction. What can be understood from the first chapter is the distantiation of the people from the State, and Mahmoud reflects this public discontent as the narrator's brother laments: "The State? What can I say? I think it's deep asleep!" (35).

The narrative becomes much darker and gloomier especially in the second chapter. The descriptions of death and destruction, as well as the sheer horror of the characters' experiences, are the focus in this section. The psychological trauma experienced after airstrikes or artillery bombardments almost cripples everyone in their homes: "Suddenly a blast wave shook the building . . . The lights went off and everyone was shocked" (40). The narrator decides to stay in Khorramshahr together with his two brothers, Khaled and Shahed, whereas his other family members have left the city. Khaled is later killed during an airstrike, and Shahed, suffering from PTSD, is sent to Tehran to be hospitalized in a mental institution. The sounds of the blasts at nights, the news of the deaths of the narrator's friends and acquaintances, and the dispersion of dismembered bodies all over the streets create a deep sense of despair and horror for the characters and readers even. At the end, Mahmoud demonstrates that Khorramshahr has fallen from a cheerful and bustling city to a ruined one:

Large numbers of people are trying to leave their places, to go out of the city by every possible transport means. Many have also left the city on foot. . . . The news of the missile strike on the city of Dezful which buried the people under ruined buildings has brought a sense of violence, ruthlessness and unfairness to Baghdad Radio's threat. Tehran Radio has announced that 70 people have been martyred and over 300 injured during the missile attack on Dezful. (75)

There are, as the above passage shows, many moving portrayals of death and ruin. The descriptions of the dead and the demolished buildings challenge the wartime propaganda that, as Axworthy maintains, front lines are sacred places of "Shi'a martyrdom" and purgation of the soul (268). This indicates the novelist's oppositional stance, which deconstructs the spiritual image of the military lines propagandized by the State. According to Sinfield, dissidence works within power structures and is inseparable from them (*Faultlines* 47). In the novel, wherever there is a description of religious and spiritual fervor for war, it is immediately interrupted by moving portrayals of death and despair. The text draws attention to the disturbing aspects of



war, for example prolonged blackouts, desolate streets and desperate people living in their dark basements listening to Khorramshahr Radio, a station which, instead of giving the news of war, plays religious, propagandist-based songs about the scared defense, as it celebrates the martyrdom in the front lines: “Martyrs of Khuzestan . . . The day of Khorramshahr, the day of City of Blood, the day of Faith” (Mahmoud 103). At the end of the novel, all the houses on the narrator’s alley are destroyed by a missile strike, including that of Naneh Baran, the Mechanic Mohammad, an enlightened dissident factory worker and the narrator’s friend, with his family. The narrator recounts the death of many citizens, whether strangers or acquaintances; thus, more than several hundred deaths are narrated which shows a preoccupation with death and destruction.

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### THE CRACK IN SOCIAL ORDER: THE RISE OF NANEH BARAN

As has been argued earlier, after the 1979 Revolution the social standing of Iranian women has been diminished due to the State’s significant amendment of the Constitution in which many new articles based on the Islamic viewpoints were added, including Islamization of the country and imposition on male-female clothing (Saikal 89). The second half of the novel reflects on such key issues and opposes the masculinization of the Iran-Iraq War through representation of dissident gender politics. As such, the text raises important questions on gender roles and the status of Iranian women in the post-revolutionary era. The female characters, such as the mother of the narrator and Golabetun, a young, peaceful wife, are represented as enlightened and caring mothers in contrast to male opportunism. Almost all the female figures in the text show their objections to the patriarchal culture of Iran; for instance, Golabetun’s teenage sister defies a conservative society by her appearance in public: i.e. wearing tight jeans and having unveiled hair.

The most fascinating female character in the novel is Naneh Baran—a middle-aged widow—who transgresses the boundaries of the society and challenges the State’s definition of female roles and duties in a time of conflict. As the war escalates and there is no government interference, she takes the matters of her neighbourhood into her own hands by patrolling the streets, wearing military uniform, fastening an ammunition belt around herself, and holding a powerful G3 rifle manufactured and used by the Iranian Army. Here, cross-dressing has been used for the purpose of changing gender roles and subverting traditional views on women. As Dollimore points out, it is an act of defying societies

that have been founded on religious and male-dominated principles (*Radical* lxv). Naneh Baran's cross-dressing urges the re-evaluation and re-definition of female rights and responsibilities, as well as a deconstruction of the masculinization of war.

The war almost destroyed Iran's social-economic structures and caused inflated prices, the formation of black markets, and mass unemployment in many cities and towns (Amirahmadi 173–74). It also seriously challenged the stability of ruling clerical power and undermined the male authority in Iranian society. Mahmoud reflects these issues throughout his text by showing the decline of social system, male authority, and the aggravation of the chaotic situation in Khorramshahr. In the second half of the text, it is women, mainly housewives and widows, who are engaging in earning money from different occupations to protect their families, characters such as Um-e Mossadegh—a wife whose husband is dispatched to the military line—working as a cleaning woman (Mahmoud 194). The narrator variously describes the utter chaos in the city, and one important scene is when thousands of people are stuck at the train station. He is contemptuous of the station staff giving the tickets to their own families and acquaintances, or selling them with much higher prices; he also witnesses people's involvement in all-out brawls over boarding the train and how many individuals are injured because of the stampede (68–70).

Lack of order and legal enforcement leads to an exponential increase in the number of crimes and offences in war-torn regions such as the narrator's city. Different crimes such as theft, looting, robbery, and the rape of young women are major issues addressed by Mahmoud. This is an important reason that female characters articulate themselves and that their presence in public expands further, in contrast to the patriarchal belief that women's responsibilities are recognized only in the domestic sphere. Mahmoud shows that the increase in the crime rate encourages women's participation in restoring order in the neighbourhood. The narrator retells several accounts of house burglary in daylight and the indifference of various forms of law enforcement to take action, including revolutionary armed forces patrolling the streets (153–54). He is critical of their engagement in identifying counter-revolutionaries instead of offering protection. The novel illustrates that real crimes remain unpunished while alleged misconduct or conspiracy is confronted. The narrator's car, for instance, is stopped by a young Revolutionary Guard to be investigated in this respect:

He bends to search the stuff in my luggage . . . It was evident that I had no control of my temper. I, unconsciously, stretched out my arm to grab his handgun, yet I controlled myself, clenched my fist, lowered my arm, and took it behind myself. (152)

The novel includes an account of civilians being stopped on the streets by the Revolutionary Committees (established in 1979 to suppress counter-revolutionaries and dissenters), and when the narrator's neighbourhood reports the hoarding of food products by the greedy shopkeeper Kal Sha'ban, their complaint is dismissed by the law enforcement officers. Overall, following Brannigan, the novel is a place of struggle between power structures and discontented people (111).

Kal Sha'ban is an opportunist exploiting the chaotic situation of his city, and in spite of his family's departure, he has decided to stay and accumulate his capital by hoarding, and overcharging for, food products. He justifies his actions by stating that he is a committed revolutionary who has participated in all state-sponsored demonstrations to date. In fact, he is the antithesis of Naneh Baran and Mechanic Mohammad who have focused on the improvement of the living condition in their neighbourhood. Unlike Kal Sha'ban and his discreditable conduct, Naneh Baran tries to maintain the fading order by confronting illegal acts. She and Mechanic Mohammad encourage others to put an end to Kal Sha'ban's opportunism without seeking help from the law enforcement forces; they finally loot Kal Sha'ban's warehouse and shop (Mahmoud 202). The indifferent behavior of government officials is telling even when Kal Sha'ban himself sues the looters and demands justice.

Before the rise of Naneh Baran as the watchwoman of the neighbourhood, chaos, disorder and male indifference are central in the second and third chapters (Eshaghian 166). Here, both war and internal problems have created chaos. Mismanagement and inefficient organization loom large when groups of escaped people return from makeshift camps set up on the plains outside the city. The contradiction is that the State has advertised the safety and suitability of the makeshift camps, yet the reality completely contradicts this: "The government has set up many small camps near the towns, villages, and roads with a few tents and a water tanks. They are not enough!" (Mahmoud 88). The people's decision to return to Khorramshahr is affected by improper facilities and poor living condition, mainly due to the fact that "Baghdad was buoyed up by accounts of rapid military, political and economic decline in Iran" (Hiro 36). In short, Mahmoud's making use of faultlines is aimed at undermining the authority of the dominant ideology by highlighting the fact that inconsistency and contradiction are revealed within it (Sinfield, *Shakespeare* 10).

As the narrative progresses, crisis becomes dominant and existing laws are totally ineffective in governing the city. The narrator retells the words of different individuals in Mahdi Papati's coffeehouse, a friend of the narrator, arguing and objecting that the Government is incapable of running the nation in such dire circumstances; as a result, the rate of crime and people's

confrontations with criminals have sped up: “Here in Ahwaz, day by day, theft and robbery are increasing . . . even in the daylight!” (Mahmoud 231). For this reason, the narrator’s neighbourhood attempts to fight criminal acts, and the novel’s reflection of street execution is a reference to real events of executions held by the revolutionaries in Tehran and other major cities in the early 1980s. In this connection, Dabashi writes that, with the aid of radical supporters and without initiating legal prosecutions, several cases of executions of the alleged counter-revolutionaries were carried out in the streets (3). Public executions were very rare in the history of Iran, yet after 1979 they were performed at an elevated rate and between 1979 and 1982 many individuals were executed in order that the newly established State be protected (Abrahamian, *Tortured* 126).

Owing to the high number of lawbreakers, and the government and military officials’ inability to stop them, Yusef Bi’ar, a house burglar, and his accomplice Ahmad Feri are executed by Naneh Baran and a young boy accompanying her. The angry people seize them as they are committing burglary and loading their truck with another’s furniture. They, then, become the jury, with Naneh Baran as the judge and executioner. After the incident, Naneh Baran is apprehended by the revolutionaries and kept as a prisoner in a mosque. Due to the pressure of the people and the moving speech of the Mechanic Mohammad about the necessity of social justice and the fact that the execution was people’s unanimous verdict, she is finally released. The street execution of two burglars can also be understood as a reference to Iran’s government officials who, because of the sensitive circumstances of the country, had announced that criminals must be executed immediately (Akhavan 85).

The execution scene in the novel echoes such governmental announcements. Given the absent government, Naneh Baran rises to restore the order and confront illegal acts. During the trial and execution of the burglars, the narrator’s description of Golabetun’s sister is interesting. She openly defies the compulsory veiling law: “She is wearing jeans and her long hair is falling over shoulders” (Mahmoud 239). In 1980, the new Iranian Parliament passed strict regulations on veiling and clothing. According to new articles, wearing clothes such as jeans, short-sleeved shirts, ties and skirts were banned in public, with the justification that those pieces of clothing, as Najmabadi puts it, are “cultural markers” of the West and the Pahlavi regime, entirely in disconformity with the Islamic viewpoints (242). The sister’s appearance catches people’s attention, and at the moment of the execution of the burglars, the narrator describes the wrathful look of some strangers concerning the girl’s clothing. Following Dollimore, her freedom of clothing in a conservative and male-dominated society is a transgression of existing constraints, and an expression of personal freedom (*Sexual* 117).

Mahmoud's gender dissidence pushes forth the idea of re-definition and re-examination of female responsibilities in the country at war. According to conservative Iranian society, the main responsibilities of women are recognized indoors to bring up and nurture children in the home environment. The ruling clerics were not tolerant of those attitudes towards women and their roles outside the framework of the established principles and the Islamic laws. Panah contends that, for them, "the idea of gender equality" was considered "a Western plot" (59). On the contrary, Mahmoud shows that Naneh Baran is always present in public; indeed, there are few scenes in the novel in which she is indoors. She not only patrols the streets at nights, but also runs a household of homeless women and war widows, like Golabetun and her sister, who have lost their house during airstrikes and artillery fires. As an older woman, Naneh Baran rejects the accepted conventions on gender roles and dress code. She also has socialist tendencies and proudly proclaims to a group of men: "Law? . . . The people and their opinions are the law!" (Mahmoud 270). The novel's oppositional view of gender consists of changing gender roles in a way that Naneh Baran with her G3 rifle and military uniform appears as a militia to maintain order in her neighbourhood. It is evident that Mahmoud's view of a mainstream society is based on the active participation and cooperation of both sexes (Torkamani-Barandouzi and Kabiri 64); in this manner, his attitude is in disconformity with the exclusion of women due to the rise of religious conservatism as the significant consequence of the Revolution.

Male characters such as Kal Sha'ban and Yusef Bi'ar are portrayed as exploitative and as criminals, and this policy of misrepresentation also seems true to revolutionary forces whom Fazel, the narrator's close friend, accuses of confiscating the personal properties of the citizens labelled as counter-revolutionaries (Mahmoud 207). On the other hand, there is no misrepresentation of women in the text; all female characters are shown as caring and confident figures whose sense of responsibility falls on the betterment of social life. The novel's representation of gender openly questions conservative point of view of women in public. A woman like Naneh Baran comes into view when the male social order collapses. Mahmoud represents gender dissidence that transgresses the established norms in the Iranian society and creates "a sense of social decline and disorder" during the war (Dollimore, *Death* 77); he also holds that active participation of women is required for the progress and development of Iran which is faced with external and internal difficulties.

All in all, *The Scorched Earth* begins with people's peaceful daily routines and activities in Khorramshahr and ends with the fall of that city and the destruction of its houses and buildings. In the alley where the narrator and

other important characters live, a missile attack destroys all the houses. Naneh Baran, the Mechanic Mohammad with his family, Golabetun's sister and even Kal Sha'ban are among the victims of the massive blast. Mahmoud's fiction represents all types of characters with different classes and attitudes. What they have in common is that they are all victims of war, whether good or bad, rich or poor. The use of journalistic narration to accurately portray their struggle to survive in a war-torn and forsaken city is Mahmoud's distinctive style of documentary realism in Iran's historical fiction writing. *The Scorched Earth* questions wartime propaganda and its cover-up of the brutal realities of war such as death, violence, exploitation, and eruption of chaos in Southern provinces (Buroumand 438). The novel emphasizes that Khorramshahr is ruined because of Iraq's military invasion, and of domestic conflict with exploiters and opportunists, as well as the State's weak performance during the war.

## CONCLUSION

Ahmad Mahmoud's anti-war novel *The Scorched Earth* (1982) holds a prominent place in the post-revolutionary literature. The novel, as discussed in this study, questions the wartime propaganda of the Iranian State and its perpetuation of gender inequality in Iranian society. It represents the struggles of citizens of Khorramshahr with Iraq's invasion and internal problems such as exploitation, theft, looting and high inflation that crippled the city. Quite contrary to the spiritual image of war cultivated by the State, Mahmoud captures sinister aspects of war such as its excessive violence and destructive impact on Iranians. A dissident reading of Mahmoud's fictional work indicates that the novel challenges a conservative view of women and the embodiment of war in masculinity by changing gender roles. The novel represents Naneh Baran as a concerned watchwoman seeking to preserve order in her neighbourhood by wearing military costume and carrying an automatic rifle. The text's gender dissidence also consists of showing female appearance in public, especially the case of Golabetun's sister whose every appearance in the neighbourhood generates criticism and unease from the male characters due to her western style clothing and unveiled hair.

This form of representation appears transgressive especially in a society under a clerical government which has imposed draconian restrictions on personal freedom and expression. Mahmoud's characterization is a constitutive part of his dissident view in the way that he gives very minor roles to government and military officials; in contrast, he dedicates the majority of dialogues and narrated scenes to ordinary characters who are

mainly from the working and middle classes. In short, in post-revolutionary literary studies, reading dissidence is an important task because these texts are sites of the encounter between discursive power and oppositional discourse that can cast light on the potentiality of dissidence in Iranian literary texts, especially those written during the wartime period.

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