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No Hero and No Faces: The Postmodern Antihero in Reza Ghasemi's *The Nocturnal Harmony of Wood Instruments*

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Abstract

Reza Ghasemi's novel, The Nocturnal Harmony of Wood Instruments, is an intriguing narrative of exile, portraying a nameless protagonist/narrator living in a dystopian microcosm. Hallucinating and self-delusional, he presents a collage-like picture of his life and the account of a novel of the same title he has apparently written. The present study investigates the diverse postmodern characteristics of the work such as metafiction, pastiche, paranoia, dissociation of meaning, looseness of association, and apocryphal history. These characteristic attributes are masterfully employed by the writer in a harmonious yet befuddling texture. This exploration of the postmodern elements serves as the necessary context for the depiction of the narrator/protagonist as a postmodern antihero. It is stated that as an inevitable outcome of dominance of postmodernism which carries with itself memories of disasters and traumas, the apocalyptic vision of the world, and an entropic picture of the universe, there is no room for heroism in its traditional and archetypal sense. Far from being a hero distinguished with heroic codes of action, and in contrast to charismatic heroes capable of leadership and worthy of admiration, Ghasemi's protagonist, it is proved, is an antihero unable to see any pattern in life and rarely its destination. Far from trying to establish his own personal, suprasocial codes, the antihero is always a displaced person and in relation to society, infrasocial. His self-centeredness makes him not only unheroic, but anti-heroic. The study traces the artistic rendering of the postmodern ambiance in the birth and development of an archetypal antihero.

Keywords: Reza Ghasemi, The Nocturnal Harmony of Wood Instruments, Postmodernism, Antihero, Persian Literature

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Introduction

> Happy are those ages when the starry sky is the map of all possible paths – ages whose paths are illuminated by the light of the stars. Everything in such ages is new and yet familiar, full of adventure and yet their own. The world is wide and yet it is like a home, for the fire that burns in the soul is of the same essential nature as the stars; the world and the self, the light and the fire, are sharply distinct, yet they never become permanent strangers to one another, for fire is the soul of all light and all fire clothes itself in light. (Lukács 29)

The age that Lukács speaks of is the blissful age of heroic ideals and epic glories. This is the great age when man is the center of the universe around whom revolve all the heavenly bodies. This is the great age of the unions, of man with man, of man with nature, of man with gods, of man with himself. This is the age when everything is as new as it is familiar. It is the "'premodern' moment characterized by wholeness, the unity of the subject and object . . . this is the moment of unity between sensible and intelligible" (Bewes 8). This is a wonderful, mythical, golden age; it certainly is not the contemporary era.

There might have once been a time when certainty was not unattainable and the quests for peace and absolution could have reached their ends. But the time is gone. In the postmodern time, either nobody embarks on any quests or if they do, they are doomed to fail. Totality and wholeness are no longer a possibility. No glory and honor is out there to be attained. And it is in such age that postmodernism is born. It carries with itself "memories of disaster, genocide, war . . . and the trauma of memory itself" (Middleton and Woods 81). It could be the only plausible reaction to the problems of such times. In Kaufmann's exploration of Nietzche's philosophy, postmodernism is "characteristic of end of an era":

> What is the mark of every literary decadence? That life no longer resides in the whole. The Word becomes sovereign and leaps out of the sentence, the sentence reaches out and obscures the meaning of the page, the page comes to life at the expense of the whole – the whole is no longer a whole. This, however, is the simile of every style of decadence: Every time there is an anarchy of atoms. (95)

To the postmodern writers, the trend becomes a form of resistance to the banalities of life. As Jean-Francois Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition* proposes, postmodernism implies the shattering of "the grand narratives" of Western history and civilization (15) as a result of a common distrust of modernist traditions and practices, and therefore it can be regarded as "a new Dark Age, a new barbarism" expressing "the sense that our inherited forms of knowledge and representation are undergoing some fundamental shift: modernity is coming to an end, strangled by its own contradictory logic, born astride of the grave which is now its abyss . . . as Nietzsche had announced the death of god earlier" (Waugh 7) .

Emig refers to what Lyotard calls the shattering of the grand narratives of legitimation including identity, gender, and sexuality (282) as a universal issue. It affects not only the people who had faith in the Western foundations of belief but those living in the East as well as those writers and artists from the east who for a variety of reasons have left their homeland and live a life of exile in a foreign land. The basic uncertainty and confusion has become a worldwide epidemic. Postmodernism has its roots in the terrors of the Second World War and the consequent disillusions; it developed throughout the era of the Cold War and the constant threat of the nuclear annihilation. As an ideology, postmodernism provides the writers and artists with the tools for presenting a picture of their society in what seems to be a rather distorted snapshot; yet, it is the mirror reflection of life in all its failed strategies and philosophies. In such age, the criteria of heroism and accomplishment are redefined so as to be compatible with the unheroic age of dissonances and discordance.

A prominent Persian writer of Iranian diaspora, Reza Ghasemi, deals with the struggles of his protagonist within the labyrinthine context of his novel, *The Nocturnal Harmony of Wood Instruments*. Being a self-exile himself, he makes the protagonist of his novel an exile living in France. The novel lacks any plot or characterization in the traditional form of it and all expectations of an intelligible beginning, middle and end are undoubtedly frustrated. The readers find themselves in an extreme of uncertainty and in an atmosphere very similar to the postmodern fiction of such great names as Pynchon, Coover, Barth, Barthleme.

From a socio-cultural perspective, postmodernism, with its emphasis on the dominance of anarchy and chaos, is a form of resistance to the banality and superficiality of the dominant culture. In the age of late capitalism and consumerism, postmodernism with its celebration of the mundane, the marginal, the ordinary and the profane provides a work of art which deals with what high art and culture has always regarded as unacceptable, taboo or low art. The postmodern product, therefore, as a means of resistance as well as a means of deriding and berating the highbrowism of the conventional and socially-accepted norms of art has created a sub-culture that is slowly yet steadily turning into a noteworthy culture itself. A postmodern product, Ghasemi's novel, portrays the subversion of the dominant social, political, religious and artistic discourses and presents a protagonist who can be classified as a postmodern antihero.

In what follows, the postmodern characteristics of Ghasemi's novel will be represented as a background for the central purpose of this study. The major concern is to define the protagonist of Reza Ghasemi's award-winning novel, *The Nocturnal Harmony of Wood Instruments* as a postmodern antihero who is located in the context of his own time and place as an exile living in a foreign country facing multiple personal, emotional, religious and psychological dilemmas and uncertainties. The postmodern atmosphere of the novel presents a character on the verge of total collapse. The postmodern elements of this book will be touched upon since postmodernism as the dominant literary discourse of the time can define and justify the failed attempts of the protagonist to live up to the ideals of heroism. There are a few scholarly studies which focus only on the postmodern characteristics of the novel (the most important ones are written in Persian), yet the nexus of the postmodern context and anti-heroism is left untouched.

"Investigating Modernistic Elements in Nocturnal Orchetrsa of Woods" by Khayef, *et al* (2015), considers Ghasemi's novel to be a modernist work through a rather formalistic study of narrative and structural elements; however, through a thorough and detailed listing of the postmodern attributes, the present study is focused upon proving the novel to generically belong to the postmodern tradition as postmodernism furnishes the ground for the coming into existence of the antihero. Hoorvash studies Ghasemi's novel as a postmodern text and focuses on how this postmodern background mirrors

the confusion of the modern man. And there are some other studies on this novel, published mostly at the time of the publication of the novel, in the literary journal, *Haft*, focusing on various aspects such as psychological perspective, Migration literature and representation of horror. Yet, none of the above mentioned studies deals with the concept of postmodern anti-heroism.

The Postmodern Inclination

Postmodernism has been the prevalent mode of writing since 1960s. In fact, the sixties and later decades were "transforming" periods in art and literature; "techniques grew random, styles mixed and merged, [and] methods became increasingly provisional" (Bradbury 198). In this period "the demarcation between mainstream and fringe art has eroded" and postmodernism, though "only part of the landscape," has "loom[ed] over anything else" similar to a "mountain range," "plodding over its peaks and valleys is no easy task" (122). Such era leaves the stage empty for the "dark domain" (Keesey 221) of postmodernism since all chances of ultimate solutions vanish and the only thing that remains is enigma and mystery. Therefore, the age itself and the literary dominance of postmodernism and related trends such as minimalism and iconoclastic art as well as plays written in the tradition of the Absurd all demanded a fresh look at who one might call a hero. Ghasemi's novel displays many of the distinctive postmodern attributes. The book is rich in allusion and symbolism and the blend of the protagonist's religious upbringing, superstitions embedded in him as a child, the problems and pains of exile in a foreign land and his diasporic experience, the rather subtle references to the political situation of his country as well as the deep philosophical and psychological issues that he has to deal with all create a rare postmodern collage of life in the contemporary times.

The first postmodern characteristic to be discussed is temporal disorder. Linda Hutcheon defines Postmodernism as a "contradictory enterprise: its art forms . . . use and abuse, install and then destabilize conventions . . . [in] their critical or **ironic** rereading of the art of the past" (23). This self-conscious distortion of history and concept of linear time can be achieved through various ways, as Brian McHale notes, such as "apocryphal history" (90), "creative anachronism" (93) and "historical fantasy" (94).

Ghasemi's nameless protagonist/narrator is inclined to fabricate a past for his story to give another dimension to his narration. Yet, the past that he creates is a mixture of the language of myths and legends. In the very beginning, for instance, he talks about a "mother among the mothers of mine, in a barn …" (Ghasemi11); not only does he create a collective association between himself and his homeland, he also alludes to the Virgin Marry giving birth to baby Jesus in a barn. In his distorted view of history, he tries to connect the immediate present with a shared past, a sense of collective history that has helped shape this immediate present; he talks about Mathield, the landlady and how she keeps forgetting where she is and what she is about to do at the moment and then suddenly asks the reader "have you seen the post-explosion Hiroshima? The view of melted clocks in the chamber of seconds?" (Ghasemi 11) Elsewhere, he connects his own absurd and hopeless condition to legends and myths that might be the fabrication of his own imagination; in talking about his problem with Raana he says: "in ancient legends, there is always a beautiful zebra who would seduce man" (89).

Apocryphal history is best defined as when "an ontological boundary between the real and the fictional" (McHale 90) is blurred. Some historical incidents or an account of well-known people are distorted or approached in order to accommodate the aims of the author. The real-life personality stepping inside the text is the writer himself. He once appears as the strict director for whom the narrator worked for a while. Yet, his appearance is felt even more by the identification of the protagonist/narrator with the author through various analogies. There are also subtle references to the atomic bombing of Hiroshima as well as the revolution in the narrator's country.

The novel not only disrupts the integrity of the past, but also corrupts the coherence of the narrative by "warping the sense of significant time, *kairos*, or the dull passing of ordinary time, *chronos*" (Lewis 124). The concept of non-linear time is presented as mobile, circular and multifaceted. The various timelines interfere with each other and the narrator talks about the passage of time and timelessness in various occasions. Time stops for people who have undergone severe emotional traumas such as Mathield who lost her first husband in the Nazi camps. Time has lost its inclusive and solid meaning: "when time stops for someone, there is no place in their mind, not for me and not for anyone else" (Ghasemi 12). Her forgetfulness is a defense mechanism

against her traumatic ordeals. In some chapters, the clock of Saint Peter's church strikes as if to remind the characters that time is rushing on; yet, at some crucial point, even the clock stops striking (Ghasemi 108); timelessness is the default answer to traumas. In some other moments, the two angels questioning the dead narrator tell him that, when dead, time has no meaning. It is eternal timelessness and concepts such as today, yesterday and tomorrow belong to another sphere, "day? Night? You are dead, just that!" (Ghasemi 84)

The second characteristic of postmodernist fiction is pastiche, derived from the Italian word *pasticcio* which, according to Oxford English Dictionary means "an artistic work consisting of a medley of pieces imitating various sources" ("Pastiche"). To Lewis, it is "a kind of permutation, a shuffling of generic and grammatical tics" (125). Referring to Barth's seminal essays, "The Literature of Exhaustion", and "The Literature of Replenishment" Lewis asserts that there is something distinctively distinguished "about the contemporary mania for impersonation." The solution which is offered is "sticking together the amputated limbs and digits in new permutations: by Pastiche, in other words" (125). Ghasemi's novel is a bricolage of psychological issues, religion, politics, superstition, exile, irony, and elements of fantasy.

The structural non-linearity further complicates the pastiche-like pattern of the novel. In a series of chapters, in a non-rational, non-intelligible order, the story of a group of exiles living together on the 6th floor of an old building is presented. In another scheme, there is the story of the nameless protagonist/narrator having a very bizarre meeting with someone who could be his son (of whose existence he has been unaware), or a total stranger (perhaps the killer who has been wandering in their neighborhood), or just a creation of his mind, an image of himself, a hallucination that startles him out of his senses. Yet, in another, very intriguing sphere, there is the story of the narrator after his death having a conversation with the two angels responsible for interrogating the dead on their first night in their graves. These story lines are arranged in a rather disorderly and unintelligible manner. The whole narrative looks like a collage of incongruous pieces pasted together in an incomprehensible fashion.

The next feature of postmodernist fiction is fragmentation. Postmodernism is the art of fragments: “We perceive in fragments, live in fragments, and are no doubt dying by fragments; should we not then, write in fragments, emphasizing thereby the strange disjunction, the even stranger juxtapositions that are parts of everyday experience of modern life” (Schickel 14). The story evolves by the putting together of the protagonist/narrator’s inner conflicts and the consequent internal dialogs, the representation of other characters through the unreliable eyes of the narrator, the conversations of the protagonist with the angels, the diary that he inserts within the story, the shattered and disturbing memories that pop up in his mind as he encounters various dilemmas, and other life experiences. As Sukenik puts it, postmodernist novel is "a cloudburst of fragmented events" (qtd. in Lewis 128). It is the only alternative since according to a character in Barthelme's "See the Moon", "fragments are the only forms” that can be trusted (107).

Lewis proposes that "the postmodernist writer distrusts the wholeness and completion associated with traditional stories," and therefore, "prefers to deal with other ways of structuring narrative." One alternative to avoid such completion is "the multiple ending" (127) or non-ending that does not yield to conventional closures through offering parallel denouements for a given plot. It is the state in which “everything we have read *is progressively unwritten* by what follows” (Bewes 15). This is another postmodernist strategy for destabilizing authority and berating the traditional sense of closure that would signify the existence of certainty and order in the universe. Ghasemi’s novel does not pose an epistemological problem that can be solved and therefore does not offer any answers. What it does is confuse the readers even more than they already are in the beginning. In the end, It is never known what the reality is, assuming there is a reality. Far from having a linear pattern, the novel presents a circular scheme in which the beginning is the end and the ending is the beginning. It is exactly what T. S. Eliot states in *Four Quartets*: “What we call the beginning is often the end / and to make an end is to make a beginning. / the end is where we start from” (58)

Another means of avoiding the traditional sense of completion and stability is addressing the readers directly, and thus, involving them within the action. Such kind of obligatory involvement is meant to draw them into the same vortex of confusion as the narrator. The narrator of the novel

frequently uses the second person pronoun "you" in what seems to be a conversation with the reader (though at times this "you" could be the image of himself or the angels he is conversing with). The narrator/protagonist ridicules his own narration and very often comments on it or explains it to the reader as "you", for example when he is talking about how Raana hurries to help Seyed walk back home (Ghasemi 28), or elsewhere he asks, "why am I telling these to you?" (Ghasemi 40). Elsewhere, he asks the readers to contemplate a series of events and then says: "In your mind, this is only a stupid theory created within the imagination of a paranoid" (Ghasemi 152).

Looseness of association is another characteristic of postmodernist fiction defined as "welcoming chance into compositional process" or rather welcoming a superior, more powerful authority as responsible for the events that take place in order to "disrupt the smooth production and reception of texts" (Lewis 128). The fear of conspiracy constitutes prevalent feature of postmodernist fiction. Lewis defines paranoia as "the threat of total engulfment by somebody else's system," which is a common feeling and experience to "many dramatis personae of postmodern fiction." Paranoia is, in fact, "an indirect mimetic representation of the climate of fear and suspicion that prevailed throughout the Cold War" (129). Postmodern protagonists suffer from what Tanner calls a "dread that someone else is patterning your life, that there are all sorts of invisible plots afoot to rob you of your anatomy of thought and action, that conditioning is ubiquitous" (15).

Among the many psychological problems that the narrator suffers from there is a constant paranoia that haunts him down till the very end. He seems to be aware of his own paranoia. In one part, for instance, he feels *they* are framing him trying to accuse him of murder, spreading lies and rumors and disturbance of peace (Ghasemi 62). Elsewhere, it is revealed that though he is the narrator and writer of a novel of the same title in which he is a narrator, and in spite of the fact that he believed he was creating these characters and playing with them as puppets, there is another layer of authority, a higher one which seems to have been enjoying his time sabotaging the narrator's plans and designs.

Such symptoms as "the distrust of fixity, of being circumscribed to any one particular place or identity, the conviction that society is conspiring against the individual, and the multiplication of self-made plots to counter the

scheming of others" (Lewis 130) all reflect a rampant paranoia. Lewis believes that "the imprisoning of the individual by outside powers," a consequence of paranoia, "propagates a panic of identity" (130) from which Ghasemi's protagonist suffers.

The next feature of postmodernist fiction is the existence of vicious circles which happen when "both text and world are permeable, to the extent that we cannot separate one from the other;" the literal and the metaphorical blend when the following occur: "short circuits (when the author steps into the text) and double binds (when real-life historical figures appear in fictions)" (Lewis 131). The element of self-refrentiality is prevalent throughout the novel. The title of the book is mentioned within the narrative as a novel written by the protagonist/narrator (Ghasemi 36). Elsewhere, the narrator tells the readers that he had written the novel years ago, before all the events; at the time it was an absolutely fictional story and he did not even know the characters (131). In another, yet more explicit situation, the narrator tells us that he was once an actor and had a very strict director named Ghasemi (169).

Another characteristic of postmodern fiction is language disorder, represented by the fragmentary and loosely-connected pieces of narrative. Postmodern and Poststructural thinkers relate this language disorder to "insanity" or "schizophrenia." Leotard refers to the use of "metaphors of fragmentation" in order to "convey the splintering of knowledge into a plethora of incommensurate discourses." And Guattari and Deleuze speak of "Schizo-analysis" and "make a surprisingly everyday equation between mental breakdown and the contemporary movement." This prevalent mode of schizophrenia in contemporary fiction is primarily employed as "an analogy for the collapse of traditional socio-economic structures" (Lewis 133). On the surface, the language might seem sound and natural; however, a closer look reveals the disturbed mentality underlying the narrative. The protagonist/narrator of the novel suffers from various mental problems to which he himself admits. One can never be certain of the sanity, truth and reliability of what is narrated. Such disorders that affect the language he uses account for the disjunctive pieces of narrative and also the incoherent plot structure.

Brian McHale in his *Postmodernist Fiction* differentiates modernism and postmodernism with regard to the nature of the Dominant. The Dominant in postmodernist fiction is ontological. One does not deal with the problems of knowing so much as one is concerned with the problems of being (6-11). In Ghasemi's novel, there are various ontological levels intermingling and overlapping with each other. On the one hand, there is the ontological level of home as a faraway and much-desired entity in time and place, a place the protagonist loves and at the same time has abandoned hoping for a better life, and the ontological level of France where he resides and feels like a stranger, an outcast. The 6th floor of the building where he lives is yet another ontological level; he compares it to a small planet where he is the soul captain for a while (Ghasemi 13). The peace is disturbed by the entrance of Prophet who starts a sick cycle of harassments leading to the death of the narrator. There is the ontology of the text/story in which characters are involved in a series of events. Yet, there is the level of the narrator/protagonist who is at the same time a fictional character and a real life character.

There is the question of authorship in the novel as well which imposes another level of ontological disturbances. Postmodern fiction is metafictional; it is always preoccupied with the process of writing and authorship. The authority of the writer and his/her reliability is questioned. It is revealed that the novel is written by someone so far not known. The narrator states that Seyed has been writing a novel in which the protagonist is the hero (Ghasemi 26) and by the end, it is realized that Seyed had been manipulating everybody including the narrator. In another part, the narrator mentions that he has written a novel called *The Nocturnal Harmony of Wood Instruments*. Yet, it is also suggested that he is just a fictional character in the book that the real readers in their physical reality, are reading. Such mixtures of ontological levels which overlap create the incongruities typical of postmodern fiction.

The discontinuity between the fictional and the factual does not stop here. The protagonist/narrator, it is revealed in the process, is dead. The two angels tell him that "a good writer is a dead one" (Ghasemi 83); In fact, he has been dead from the very beginning. Is he the (anti)hero, a fictional character, a real character, or the author? Is he the producer or the product? The other characters turn against their creator; Seyed has been deceiving everyone all along, and Prophet revolts in a manic manner against the narrator

and in one interpretation of the story kills him. The narrator states that Seyed was merely a fictional character in his book; now indifferent to him, he assumed an independent existence challenging the narrator/author, "how far man's power of seduction can go, how far the power of writing!" (Ghasemi 184). As Bewes puts it, "when the distinction between inside and outside is abolished, the characters of a work are played alongside the book, outside the text. Their 'virtuality' is made continuous with the 'actuality' of the book as event" (9).

There is no "safe ontology;" the "experience of loss that is the consequent of abandoning such ontologies is viewed as unsettling and terrifying" (Emig 271). The narrator/author has left the safe ontology of home/homeland and this abandonment results in the gradual development of his delusions and the disintegration of the self; he literally vanishes as an individual and metamorphoses into Gobic, the landlady's black dog. This disintegration takes place gradually and is foreshadowed best in that the protagonist/narrator fails to see his own reflection in the mirror. What is more interesting is the gradual loss that he endures concerning his sexuality. It is implied in the text that he was once married and had a daughter back in his homeland. Even when he lives in France, he is potent and he gets married once more with a woman who is known only through her initials. He might even have a son. It is told that he used to sleep with Raana as well, but the gradual loss of his sexuality results in his desire to "turn physicality into an abstraction" (Emig 272). The body turns into a concept. Judith Butler believes that bodies "indicate a world beyond themselves; this movement beyond their own boundaries [that is the desire to turn physicality into abstraction] is a movement of the boundary itself" (ix). This movement enables the protagonist/narrator to gain an imaginary omnipresence and this preeminence makes him feel godlike; he plays god with his fictional creature in his metafictional narrative.

Another important feature of postmodern fiction is a serious concern regarding the end: an apocalyptic vision of the world under the disguise of irony. In Ghasemi's novel, such apocalyptic vision is a personal point which symbolizes the larger impending doom that affects all. There is no possibility of rebirth in its traditional sense since the rebirth is not a regeneration; it is degeneration. The narrator suffers from self-destruction. The tension between

man and his surrounding world is too unbearable. Time is not ripe for the birth of any heroes. Even the community that the old, idealistic landlord, Eric François Schmitt has hoped to build, the utopia that he had the dream of creating, turns to a despicable and isolated dystopia. In postmodern fiction very often, there is a "gradual regression into animalism" (Emig 170) which is literally materialized in Ghasemi's novel. Thus, what could be a journey of initiation eventually turns out to be another doomed failure. The world is dying in an "irreversible movement toward chaos and inertia" (Emig 174).

Postmodernism, Hite believes, is "a general 'condition' of social reality" (324). All the representations of the world are equally unreliable and therefore the whole essence of life is doubted. It is a powerful "critique of normative and epistemological foundations" (Stone-Mediatore 126) and the postmodern antihero disclaims the authority of discourses produced by the society and the frameworks that these discourses impose on the individuals. The metanarratives, Hite believes, are the "stories a society colludes in accepting an adequate account of reality and thus as ground for its ethical and ideological judgments" (324). All arts are iconoclastic and so is postmodernism. It has the spirit of rebellion in the rejection of existing fundamentals and its willingness in challenging what was the sacred foundations of life. It presents that which is unpresentable.

The Postmodern Antihero

Postmodernist fiction "tends to mediate a sense of multiplicity, fragmentation, instability of meaning, dissensus, [and] the breakdown of grand theories" (Waugh 49) and displays a variety of "indeterminacies, paradoxes, refusal of metanarratives, [and] anti-foundationalism" (32). It deals with those subject matters and traditions that were until now regarded as "marginal or the other" (34). Petrović asserts that postmodernism is "a state that every species must enter before it becomes extinct;" that "western democracy has become a secret Culture of Death" and "postmodernism is its final phase" (290).

Therefore, one can only conclude that for a writer dealing with metaphysical problems of a time which is characterized by such disorder and fragmentation, a world moving toward entropy, postmodernism is the sole means of being heard. Ghasemi's book responds to these demands. Nathaniel

Hawthorne once said, “a hero cannot be a hero unless in a heroic world” (qtd. in Edelstein 42). The point is that standards of judgment according to which one character may be described as heroic or unheroic or even antiheroic are definitely framed by the social, political, economic, and cultural aspects of the time and place in which a character is placed. It is the question of misplacement of the character and judgment according to the heroic standards that might not be valid anymore. According to Frye's definition of myth, mythologies "measure the universe in human terms, telling us what statures and powers humankind can claim" (44) Therefore, myths provide the patterns for individual action.

Many myths "follow the hero monomyth pattern, the story of the hero with a thousand faces, as Campbell calls it" (17). He discusses the ancient patterns of myth and the myth of the hero. The various heroes appearing in diverse works of literature are different facets of one single character, hence the hero with a thousand faces. The hero is first presented as he inhabits his ordinary world. It is the place where he is summoned to take on an adventure. He is reluctant at first but is encouraged by the wise old man to cross the threshold; he encounters tests and helpers; he endures the supreme ordeals. He seizes what he has come on the quest for and is pursued on the road back to his world. He is resurrected and transformed by his experience. He returns to his ordinary world with a treasure that benefits his world.

Although the individual is a very important factor in the concept of heroism, what makes an individual heroic, unheroic or even antiheroic is basically a function of the time and place he lives in. There is a spectrum one side of which is labeled “hero” and the other side “antihero”; Ghasemi’s nameless protagonist is very close to the antihero end and whatever attempts he makes, consciously or unconsciously, to be heroic turn out to be just another failure.

C. M. Bowra believes that "the epic idea of heroism, in short, presupposes a view of existence in which man plays a central part and exerts his power in a distinctive way" (5). Ihab Hassan defines the ancient hero as "an epic character, a figure somewhere below the gods and above the common run of man, and his fate . . . remains essentially a mortal and human fate" (56). Such a hero usually has a "solitary death or displacement," and "remains outside the order," while his destiny is "in the end lonely and unique" (58).

Heroism demands decisiveness, action and grandeur; while Joseph Campbell defines it as a process of departure, adventure and return (Edelstein 32). The original word hero in Greek meant warrior and it embraced all the attributes associated with epic warriors; the hero, according to the heroic code of behavior, favors honor, glory, loyalty and generosity and deplores treachery, meanness, triviality and cowardice. They are charismatic characters capable of leadership and worthy of admiration. Hero is "the high name we give to those to whom we turn for strength in an effort to find ourselves a motive or in the worse an effort to create in ourselves a conscience" (Gurung 2). Through the glorification of will and action, heroes are "exemplary" when "associated with uncontrollable, darker forces" (Brombert 5).

On the other hand, Hassan defines the modern antihero as "a regressive figure" who eventually "returns to the archaic motive of alienation," and his "role as a scapegoat, his clownish and grotesque antics, his excess of gesture and disposition, [and] his merciless questioning and distortion of reality qualify him eminently for ridicule" (59-61). Similarly, Seigneuret defines an antihero as one who "is never able to see any Pattern in life and rarely its Destination," and "far from 'trying to establish his own personal, suprasocial codes' [the antihero] . . . is always a displaced person and in relation to society, infrasocial. His self-centeredness makes him not only unheroic, but anti-heroic." The antihero is "keenly aware of his environment, but he is alienated from intellectual and religious traditions." He is, in fact, "a temperament interfacing or, more accurately, in osmosis with its environment" (59-61). The antihero has a surface identity and a passive inclination; he is rather a fade-out than a perceivable presence. The antihero is victimized by the superstructures of his time and is usually crushed down and consequently disperses in the ontological zone of his fictional existence. In Frye's definition of the different shades of heroes, therefore, the antihero falls in the category of the ironic mode as he is superior in nothing, offering a sense of absurdity and disappointment (33-35).

The age is not a heroic age. Time has changed and so should the criteria of judgments. Thus, the ideals of heroism should not be "subject to a moral universe" (Joustra and Wilkinson 94). As a result, the social significance of the hero is lowered to that of the common man or even below the ordinary and the charismatic nature is shoved back. Social acclaim was crucial in the

making of the hero; absence of such social recognition is definitely seminal in the making of the antihero. The antihero is one who is displaced, victimized and alienated, infrasocial, at times a rebel who defies the order that tries to frame him. The "heroic avatar" (Hassan 56) has definitely altered in the postmodern times.

Ghasemi's protagonist/narrator is, therefore, a postmodern antihero, characterized by indifference and apathy. He is dysfunctional and suffers from various mental problems such as self-destruction, time pauses, mirror problem and paranoia. He is delusional and his hallucinations are best shown in his meeting with a very enigmatic personage that could be his son, a stranger or himself. He sees himself as occupied by his shadow who, he claims, has taken his place by force for a long time. His anonymity is a very crucial and decisive feature. He does not even have a fixed identity. In claiming "epistemological authority" (Emig 282), naming is an indispensable step. He is even denied of the luxury of a name. His sexuality gradually vanishes. To Emig, sexuality is a "constitutive element in contemporary constructions of meaning. It is linked with the modern concept of the self . . . with our ideas of cultural normality and the authorities and mechanisms that construct and uphold it;" however, like a wild animal, it also "disturbs the conceptualization and stability of the above concepts. It permits the self an extreme form of manifestations, yet also undermines it thoroughly" (281). The protagonist disintegrates and transforms into an inferior being, a dog.

As an exile, he has failed to accept the roles that society and his homeland demanded of him; the "exclusionary and divisive practices of dominant culture" (Stone-Mediatore 125) then is hugely responsible for the erasure of his identity. He had a problem with the ways through which he could identify with his "social and cultural roots without re-inscribing the rigid binaries and norms of the dominant culture" (125); he cannot identify himself with such ideology. In his "exposure to a plurality of perspectives" and his experience "of not quite fitting into any single identity" (126) he well fits the role of antihero.

Heroes are defined as brave and valiant. Antiheroes are, however, doomed to be cowards who dare not take action. The protagonist himself confesses that "I was brought up to be afraid of everything" (Ghasemi 10). He ironically questions the embedding of such ideology in the tradition of his

nation as he lists a number of Persian poems all of which advise the listener to be over-cautious and prudent. For instance, while Seyed is almost getting killed by Prophet, he is unwilling to take actions and rescue a friend. And after he does it any way, he questions the sanity of his deed (Ghasemi 44). Inaction is more of an inclination in him than action. He is even unwilling to take part in conversations in order to defend himself (Ghasemi 77 & 90).

The violence and bravery turns inward, instead. His self-destruction is best clarified in his own words: "I'm always fighting with myself doing what is not to my advantage; it is just because I'm not me; that I'm kicking not myself but my shadow. The shadow that has kicked me out and for years, has taken my place" (Ghasemi 24). The question of the split self and blurring of identity, of the self and shadow constantly in war, is at the center of postmodern recipe for a perfect antihero. This is the gradual disintegration of the antihero. He keeps questioning himself and the surrounding world. A postmodern Hamlet, he wanders in the interior world of his mind: "What is more unpleasant than wind carrying your window and you don't know where!" (Ghasemi 150). He stays away from incidents and then questions himself: "not interfering… how far can it go?" (166) He sees himself in the mirror and deduces that he is dead. He compares the image that he sees with Faustus's Mephistopheles (174). The essence of conflict is between him and his shadow and until the very end of the text we can never know who is telling the story, the self or the shadow.

There is no glory, no need for glory, no call for glory; so there is no hero to take on glory. "The old gods are dead or dying and people everywhere are searching, asking: What is the new mythology to be, the mythology of this unified earth as of one harmonious being?" But, there are "no more intact monadic horizons: all are dissolving" (Campbell 5).

Nadine Gordimer defines home as "the final destination of the human spirit beyond national boundaries, natal traditions" (52). The nameless protagonist has left his homeland, crossed geographical boundaries and resided in the open territory of Europe, yet he is unable to find the destination of his soul. That is why as an individual he is fragmented and incomplete. He has lost consciousness. He is in a state of constant and endless not-knowing. The loss of the sense of identity and the search for it has become a doomed

cycle of ominous repetitions of failure. The quest has lost its glorious essence; the hero has been metamorphosed into an antihero.

This novel does not show that much explicit elements of literature in Diaspora; however, there is an undeniable sense of loss and the need for belonging. The transnational movement of people necessitates "interpersonal and intercultural relationships with both their host societies and their societies of origin" (Tambiah 1). Yet, the narrator seems to have lost both the connection with his homeland and the ability to interact with others in the host community. This rootlessness leads to his passive defiance and antiheroic stance. He lives a rather secluded life in a rented room with minimum facilities; he has a rather atypical life pattern and had it not been for the shared bathroom, the sole space connecting the people of the 6th floor of Eric François Schmitt's building, he would have had no substantial human relationship. He is displaced and this "deterritorialization" (Tambiah 1) affects his selfhood. Inevitably, then, he starts to break off his ties with the only person he feels close to, Seyed. He is decentered, and, in his diasporic existence, has not gained the ideals he hoped for. As Safran suggests, home should be "a place of eventual return – a place to maintain or restore a continual relationship" (83) with the roots. For the protagonist, this place of roots and origins no longer exist as a possibility in time and space.

Grace believes that "the global diasporic experience of displacement and disorientation, exile and alienation is one in which a reevaluation self is not only appealing but also necessary" (9). Such a reevaluation does not take place and this is one more reason for the split personality and the resultant delusions. He might have tried exile in order to plant his roots not in land but in ideals; the ideals fail him the way his land has. He is in a constant movement toward an unachievable destiny; in the postmodern world, as Bauman believes, "all of us are, willy nilly, by design or default, on the move. We are on the move, even if physically we stay put; immobility is not a realistic option in a world of permanent change" (4). The diasporic existence intensifies his antiheroic inclinations as he is unable to make meaningful connections between his past and present, and, thus, feels there is no room for decisive stances of action and heroism.

Conclusion

Literary texts are cultural products shaped by the interaction of the various discourses of the time and in turn help shape the conditions of their time; in fact, they are discourses themselves. They give voice not only to the dominant discourses, they also prepare the ground for the less powerful and marginalized ones. Ghasemi's novel is a product of the literary dominance of postmodernism. Religion and politics are in the background and he implicitly reacts to some traditionally-held view of man and his world promulgated by the authority of these two powerful discourses. Ghasemi writes his novel as a reaction to the prevalent yet unwritten discourses of entropy, uncertainty, anarchy, atheism, fragmentation, chaos and the unconscious in a world crushed by the traumas of war, alienation of the individuals scattered around the globe, awaiting the nuclear apocalypse, in short, the postmodern era where the only means of heroism is being an antihero. Through the investigation of prominent postmodern attributes of the novel and the consequent context of unheroic atmosphere, Ghasemi's protagonist is proved to be an antihero since in his non-active struggle to make meaningful ties and connections, he manages to make an impact so as to illuminate the existential impossibility of heroism.

> We need something. A guide. A talisman. A set of rules. A compass to steer us through this everlasting night. Our youth is spent searching for this guide until we . . . some give up. Some say there is nothing. There is chaos. We are born into chaos. But this is . . . no. This is too painful. This is too awful to contemplate. This we deny. Am I right? (Ravenhill 84)

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