

## Every Man is an Island: Decanonisation and Fragmentation in Reza Ghassemi's *The Nocturnal Harmony of Wood Orchestra*

Hoda Shabrang<sup>1</sup>  
Khatam University, Iran

### Abstract

Reza Ghassemi's first Novel, *The Nocturnal Harmony of Wood Orchestra*, is a unique example of Iranian postmodern novel. First published in the US in 1996 (Nashr-e Ketab-e America) and then by the Iranian publisher Cheshmeh, it was lauded as the Best Novel of the Year 2002 by Hooshang Golshiri Literary Award and as the 2002 Novel of the Year by the Press Critics' Awards. The protagonist/narrator of the story has fled the post-revolutionary Iran to Paris and ended up dwelling with a variety of typical exilic Iranians – a macrocosm of Iranian society. On the one hand, he has lost his roots; on the other, he cannot adapt to French culture and community. The present study explores the novel in the light of postmodernist point of view and posits that, aside from enjoying features of postmodern fiction in its narrative labyrinths, this work depicts a world with many of its elements rooted in superstitions, religious beliefs and contradictions that are unique to the Iranian mind. In the novel, prominent postmodern elements are traceable and concepts such as metafiction, vicious circles, grand narrative collapse and paranoia are incorporated; however, it is not merely an artificial collection of technical details. After the revolution, many Iranians left the country either because they were related to the previous regime and staying would have been fatal to them, or they could not tolerate the drastic changes in society which made living intolerable. This study aims to show how an Iranian immigrant turns to a specter (he belongs neither to the native culture nor the French) in exile and eventually metamorphoses to a dog. It is in fact a natural consequence of narrating the confusion of a contemporary man in exile who reflects the confusion and turmoil of the dystopian world around him.

### Keywords

Postmodernism, decanonisation, fragmentation, metamorphose, paranoia, metafiction

### Introduction

Reza Ghassemi (1949-), a well-known playwright in Iranian theatre, has started writing long fiction, as well as writing plays and music, and has gained a special place among Iranian writers. *The Nocturnal Harmony of Wood Orchestra* is his first novel

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<sup>1</sup> **Dr. Hoda Shabrang** is Assistant Professor of English literature at Khatam University, Iran. She is the author of seven academic books on English language and literature and has published, nationally and internationally, articles, papers, essays and reviews on literary texts and movies. Email: h.shabrang@khatam.ac.ir.

that was met with rave reviews. First published in the United States in 1996, the novel was awarded the best fiction award, the Critics and Press Award and the award for best first novel from the Hooshang Golshiri Foundation following its publication in 2002 in Iran. It was also acclaimed by the Mehregan Adab Award Jury.

*Nocturnal Harmony* is a notable example of Iranian postmodernist fiction. It is a story of an Iranian man, Yadollah, who is living on the sixth floor of an old building in Paris. He is a self-exiled person who is living with other immigrants that are mostly Iranian. He has this illusion that at midnight he is the only captain of this planet out of orbit (Ghassemi 14). However, with the entrance of Profit who introduces himself as a missionary of God, the tranquility of that building is disrupted and it ultimately leads to the murder of the protagonist/narrator.

The time of this novel is not linear or chronological but distorted and layered. The narrative labyrinths depict a world where the lines between reality and imagination are challenged and many of its elements are rooted in superstitions, religious beliefs and contradictions that are unique to the Iranian mind. We realise at the end of the novel that the whole story was narrated first by the dead protagonist/narrator who has been turned to a specter and cannot even recognise his face in the mirror. This specter seems to haunt the whole building and is frequently talking to the Angels of Death, yet his metamorphosis does not end there. Eventually, the angels decide to turn him into a dog as punishment. Unlike many of the contemporary Iranian novels, this novel's postmodernist tenets do not seem borrowed or artificial, but are rather inseparable elements of a story that revolves around the turmoil of a mind that reflects the turmoil of its environment.

Ghassemi, who has been an expatriate in France for many years, uses his theatre experience, as well as his knowledge of music and vast studies in novels and literary criticism, to present to his readers a novel that is both a good read and enjoys a great structure. What makes this novel a great work is that unlike many of the Iranian writers, Ghassemi has not sacrificed the story's narrative appeal to technical aspects, but rather via postmodernism, he was able to present a novel that despite being complicated, is neither vague nor shallow.

### **Literature Review**

Although several studies have been conducted on *Nocturnal Harmony*, few have discussed its postmodern traits. For instance, Khayef et al. attempt to prove that the novel is a modernist work through a formalistic study of narrative and structural elements (7). Sadeghi compares Ghassemi's work with Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* (43) and Valayi, after a short and general criticism, concludes that based on the capacity of the characters in the novel, if the author had dealt more with the plot, he could have written a more comprehensive and panoramic novel (40). Shahrokhi states that *Nocturnal Harmony* is a "novel within a novel" and compares it with Nabokov's and Milan Kundera's fiction (34). In a review, Gholami

calls it a modern novel where “characters are sometimes present and sometimes absent... but the reader is not confused” (7). However, the confusion of the reader cannot be used as a criterion for evaluating a literary work. In other words, one could not say if a novel depicts complications, but is still able to communicate with the readers, it is not postmodern. This type of carelessness can be seen in many of this novel’s reviews, but as Safarian states “the significance of this novel calls for more thorough and systematic studies” (13). Most previous studies have focused on the main character/narrator of the story and tried to prove that he is a modern man or an antihero. This study through a comprehensive detailed listing of postmodern elements proffers that the main character/narrator first turns into a wandering specter because he neither belongs to his native culture nor to the French culture. After haunting the whole building and its inhabitants, he is later reduced to a dog and loses all his human traits as a punishment imposed upon him by the Angels of Death.

### **Postmodern Inclination**

What is a postmodern novel? By analysing the structures and figures of speech in the novels that are categorised as postmodern, many critics point out a set of characteristics and techniques that are incorporated in these works. Glossaries of these features can be found in the works of Lodge and Wood, Lewis, and Hassan. A more comprehensive approach can be traced in the works of Brian McHale who finds a difference between postmodern literature and its predecessors in the systems governing literature of this type. In addition, to include the structural aspects discussed in the first approach, this view of postmodern literature also sheds light on the objective and philosophy behind the novelist’s choice of these techniques.

McHale explicates the difference between modern and postmodern fiction using the concept of the predominant element. The predominant element in modern novels has an epistemological orientation. Questions presented in this type of novels are directed toward understanding the world and the individual’s place in it. Therefore, their rationale is that of “the detective stories – meaning the literary kind of a full-scale epistemology” (131). The protagonist in modern novels attempts to find the truth by deciphering the world around him/her. He/she is heedless to what others call truth and wants to understand the world anew. So the protagonist tries to solve this enigma.

In postmodern novels, the protagonist’s attempt to decipher the world remains futile. This type of novel is in fact an indication of “the world’s resistance to interpretation” (Lodge and Wood 152) and, therefore, according to McHale, the predominant element in postmodern fiction is of an epistemological nature (134). The epistemological questions posed by this type of novels are related to the nature of the world, rather than its meaning, such as:

How can I interpret this world of which I am a part? And what am I in it? ...  
What is there to be known? Who knows it? How do they know it, and with  
what degree of certainty? How is knowledge transmitted from one knower to  
another, and with what degree of reliability? (McHale 9)

Foregrounding ontology in postmodernist novels becomes possible by depicting worlds where the lines between them are missing; worlds in which living can be similar to or different from our daily lives; parallel or entwined worlds where one cannot distinguish the real from the imaginary, and the main from the marginal. In an ontological realm, other questions will emerge:

What is a world? What kinds of world are there, how are they constituted, and how do they differ? What happens when different kinds of world are placed in confrontation, or when boundaries between worlds are violated? What is the mode of existence of a text, and what is the mode of existence of the world (or worlds) it projects? How is a projected world structured? (McHale 10)

### **Methodology**

By exploring different notions of postmodernism such as foregrounding ontology, metafiction, vicious circles, grand narrative collapse, paranoia, absence, uncertainty, time irregularity, disruption and metamorphosis, this article attempts to show how the main character/narrator who is a representative of Iranian community in exile, first turns to a specter. Radhakrishnan believes that the identity of the immigrant is related to both cultures yet at the same time it is neither this nor that. In other words, immigrant identity is related to anywhere and nowhere (322) and Emig states that in postmodern fiction, there is a "gradual regression into animalism" (281). At the end of the novel, the narrator is transformed into a dog which according to Islamic Law is *najis* – a word which means ritually unclean. The narrator cuts off all his roots which tie him to his motherland, yet he could not adapt to the French culture and community. During the whole story, we can see how uncertain and alienated he is, not only from the French community but also the rest of the building inhabitants who are mostly Iranian refugees because he has lost all that makes him a real human being.

### **Discussion and Analysis**

The ontological despair is taken into account in Reza Ghassemi's *Nocturnal Harmony* and puts the world of story into question. The reader, in this novel, enters a maze which makes emancipation impossible. The novel begins with the narrator's fear and despair; he is an Iranian man in exile living in a small attic in a six-storey building in Paris. The story opens up with a narration about the narrator's confrontation with one of his neighbours called Profit, a mighty rough youth from Javadieh (a poor area in Tehran), who claims that he is a missionary of God and hears God's voices and commands. Aided with several flashbacks, the reader

receives more details about the narrator's life in that attic and his relationship with other neighbours who are mostly Iranian, especially Sayyid (this name refers to a Muslim claiming to be a descendant of Prophet Muhammad), a good-tempered handsome young man who seems to be the only friend of the narrator, and Raana, a young woman living with the narrator. Along with Profit's attack on Sayyid (he claims God asks him to do so) and threatening him with a knife, life for the inhabitants of the sixth floor enters a crisis that the narrator summarises as: "Saint Paul's church bell struck fourteen times and I felt my little planet got out of the orbit" (Ghassemi 14). As the previous sentence shows, this incident is in fact like releasing a safety lever of an ontological crisis that devours the narrator's life.

The second narration of the novel, that cuts off the first immediately, depicts the narrator on his burial night being interrogated by two angels, Nakeer and Munkar (in Islamic eschatology, they are angels who test the faith of the dead in their graves). One of these two angels reminds him of a German expressionist movie, Murnau's *Faust* (Ghassemi 15) and the other an American Indian in Miloš Forman's *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* (Ghassemi 83). This indicates that the main character/narrator of the story is already dead and has become a specter while narrating the whole story. This narration, according to the logic of the outside world of the novel must be the narrator's imagination, with the first narration being absolutely realistic; they merge together and affect each other in a way that the realism of one and imagination of the other seems impossible. During these interrogations, the reader becomes familiar with a third narration which represents the narrator's confrontation with a young man who might be his 14-year old son, his doppelganger, or a picture of the narrator as an adult. By opening a diary of the former officer in the middle of the novel, a new narration emerges that is linked with the three earlier narratives by a "parallel montage technique" and illustrates a world where there is no border between its various layers (Eslami 19).

It seems that the narrator's life is flowing in different layers and levels which are parallel or crisscrossing. In some parts of the novel, movements of chess pieces represent the relationship among the characters of the story; however, from the narrator's point of view, life on the chess board is more "realistic" than the routine life: "Most night I came to Sayyid to compensate the grief of failure in other arenas with the taste of victory on chess board (where the battle meant, and seemed more realistic than other battles)" (Ghassemi 72). On the other hand, the narrator does not acknowledge the boundary between imagination and reality and says:

To comprehend the truth I do trust my own imagination more than what happens in reality. You know better that people's behaviours and words are nothing but a cover to conceal what is going on in their minds. (Ghassemi 63)

According to Sartipi, in the postmodernist world, "the search of truth little by little turns into a labyrinth that an explorer is lost within its corridors" (165). The narrator who is in search of Profit's motivation for the attack at the beginning, gradually

engages in a murder that shows the victim is nobody but himself. During this experience, he creates a world with a mixture of superstitions, religious beliefs, historical backgrounds, films and imagination and getting lost in it seems inevitable.

The most significant source of the ontological questions in *Nocturnal Harmony* is in introducing the narrator as the writer of the novel. Patricia Waugh's theory makes it possible to explain this with the term "metafiction" in speaking about postmodernist novels, defined as fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality (54). In other words, metafiction exposes itself before the reader as a writing full of literary devices and not a realistic image of truth because there is no absolute truth in the postmodern era. Each truth is constructed, and each construction can be the truth. Whatever is written, apart from being bizarre and unbelievable, can be realistic or unrealistic like the novels of Jane Austen and George Eliot (owing to this point of view, a novel is a constructed and independent truth and is not the representation of the world outside; the most realistic novels are as far from the world outside of the books' pages as science-fiction novels). The difference between postmodern novelists and the realists is that a postmodern novelist does not pretend to represent the external truth and enjoys exhibiting fully his/her novel with literary devices.

In *Nocturnal Harmony*, the reader's attention is directed to the literary devices in various ways, for example, with verbal repetition and manipulation of clichés. Although some critics attribute these repetitions and manipulations to the writer's language incompetency, their appearances are so obvious and the language so unskilled that they could only be there by the writer's deliberate intention. By compelling the narrator to repeat particular phrases, the writer represents language deviance unnaturally. Some of these phrases are common clichés presented in language, such as "lockjaw" (Ghassemi 18), and some others become clichés due to their frequent repetition in the text, such as "my little planet" (Ghassemi 13). The narrator goes as far as asking for permission to play with clichés:

Ranna stood up. Eavesdropped for a second, then with the fear of a mother that suddenly realised her child has gone to the edge of a pool, jumped up toward the door (as the age gap between Ranna and Sayyid does not let the phrase be used just like it has been written then let's say with a little manipulation: with the fear of a mother that suddenly realised her man has gone to the edge of a pool, jumped up toward the door). (Ghassemi 28)

Characters' names in the novel can be studied from a metafictional point of view. It is believed that in metafiction "names are used in a way to exhibit the writer's arbitrary dominance and arbitrary relations of language" (Lewis 94). The most prominent example of this in the novel may be "Sayyid Alexander," a name that merges an absolute Islamic and traditional part to a western part in order to illustrate the black humour of Iranians' depression in a foreign country, those

whose despair of their past and present has provoked the crisis in adapting traditional roots to a modern life which results in the loss of identities. Sayyid, like Alexander the Great, dreams of imperialism and conquers the sixth floor of the building successfully. Names such as Profit and Kalantar (Sheriff), comparable to allegorical medieval plays, ironically relate to the characters' position in the text. The lost beloved of the narrator is "Mahboob" (Beloved) and his youth soulmate is "M.A.R" (snake). The way of naming reminds the reader of the fact that these characters are fictional not real. To emphasise the fictional world of the story, the author gives a name to each character arbitrarily and contrary to names in everyday life.

There is another common method in metafictional novels in which the author writes in a way so that the story refers to the text itself. This is a strategy of investigating the meaning of reality as a construction. In fact, metafiction is a kind of story that discusses writing the story itself or provide criticism of related theories. In postmodern fiction, there is often a character who is writing a story or the writer is present in the story and talks about the fiction.

The concept of vicious circle that Barry Lewis introduces as a characteristic of postmodern fiction refers to this part of the text in his article "Postmodernism and Literature":

Vicious circles arise in postmodern fiction when both text and world are permeable, to the extent that we cannot separate one from the other. The literal and the metaphorical merge when the followings occur: short circuits (when the author steps into the text) and double binds (when real-life historical figures appear in fictions). (Lewis 104)

Lodge and Wood use the term "short circuit" to indicate the combination of completely different narrative aspects (the obvious fictional aspects and the parts apparently based on reality) in the same text (187). Generally, "vicious circle" is an ontological technique that ends up in disordering the present global borders in the story. According to Waugh, the first issue in metafiction is the question of framework: What is the framework that distinguishes reality from fiction? (Waugh 195). Short circuit is in fact a technique for breaking the frameworks. This kind of fraction happens several times in *Nocturnal Harmony*. The narrator remarks that "Sayyid used to write a story at nights in which I was its protagonist" (Ghassemi 25). So it seems that the novel we are reading is the same novel that Sayyid is writing. A few pages later, in the interrogation of the first night of the burial, Faust Murnau refers to a book that the narrator wrote in his lifetime:

Is it confirmed that these notes are related to a book called *The Nocturnal Harmony of Wood Orchestra* that you published with a fake signature?

It is not true. This book has never been published.

The nearby friend said: 'this is the same answer you gave in the book.'

I said: 'and you asked the same question.' (Ghassemi 36)

In this dialogue, the narrator is introduced not only as the writer of the book, but also indirectly as the author on the cover. The narrator's false signature is probably Reza Ghassemi's signature that is known by the reader as the author of the novel. This begs the questions: Who is the real author: Reza Ghassemi, the narrator or Sayyid? Sim states that "One of the problems we are left with when we dispense with grand narratives or central authorities of any kind, is how to construct value judgment that others will accept as just and reasonable" (7). In other words, when the reader cannot recognize who the real author of the story is, relying on him and his story seems confusing and even impossible.

Another instance of a vicious circle happens when the narrator describes his acting memories in a play which was "directed by a bad tempered and a tyrannical man called Ghassemi" (Ghassemi 169). Here, Ghassemi as the novel's author, someone who wrote and directed several plays before leaving Iran, enters the novel as a real character; so both "short circuit" and "double bind" take place at the same time. In another place, the narrator's use of characters such as Nakeer and Munkar, can be seen as an example of double bind in the text. Because the Angels of Death who are supposed to be intimidating interrogators after death are appearing as two western movie stars in different occasions in the novel. When talking about the bed that was put in the room by the righteous landlord, he always says "Jean Jaures' bed." Jokes of well-known French and Iranian characters are repeated in different parts of the novel:

Fereydoon's trained biceps kept going up and down and I could see the frantic ghosts of Montesquieu, Dante, Robespierre and Jean Jaures in the middle of the dust that were wandering around so angrily because of this untimely resurrection. (Ghassemi 172)

What complicates the novel even more is the fact that there are several versions of *The Nocturnal Harmony of Wood Orchestra*: the handwritten version and the revised one which the narrator is changing and distorting secretly throughout the novel. It is not possible to determine whether the book in the readers' hand is the the first of these two versions or even a third. The narrator's goal for this distortion is said to deceive the angels on the first night of burial. However, if the novel is written to change the process of interrogation, then how is it possible that the interrogation itself is reliable in the novel?

Faust Murnau showed me the book and said: 'you knew this day would come and that's why you wrote your letters of act in advance and as you wished not as it really was in order to deceive minds.' (Ghassemi 63)



This gets amplified on page 163: “Eric Francoise Schmidt picked up the book on the table and turned to page 163” (Ghassemi 163). The reader, assumed to be the narrator’s audience, now feels that he is reading a book written by him with the narrator’s landlord. This standpoint does not remain stable in the novel; it keeps changing. However, this innovative and dramatic layout is a way to get readers’ attention to the fictitious, metanarrative and ontological world of the novel. Waugh states that, “The most important topic for metanarrative writer is writing itself not the writer’s consciousness. Metanarrative questions the writer as the God and does not assume a Godlike role for him” (187). It means that the writer is no longer fully aware of the fictional world and the destiny of the people who live in it. Lyotard states that the destruction of metanarrative in postmodern era can be a reason for less important authority and writer’s dominance on a postmodern text. He states that

Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives... the narrative function is losing its factors, its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goal. It is being dispersed in clouds of narrative language... where, after the metanarratives, can legitimacy reside?  
(xxiv-xxv)

Metanarrative or grand narrative is a term introduced by Lyotard in his classic work *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, in which he encapsulated a range of views which were developed at the time, as a critique of the institutional and ideological forms of knowledge. Therefore, metanarratives are ideological and philosophical systems which were formerly believed to be able to explain and categorise human beings’ experience and awareness and “the reality” was assessed only by them. Lyotard announces that in the postmodern era “the grand narrative has lost its credibility” (37). As an example, Christianity and Marxism are two metanarratives which have become dubious matters in contemporary time. The God-like position of the writer in the text is challenged and this is not approved in postmodern literature. The aware and authoritative writer of the previous novels is now a writer “who blushes in the book, teases the readers, has a tug of war with characters and even loses in some moments in order to fixate his position in the novel” (Lyotard 66). *Nocturnal Harmony*’s narrator is not an exception in this matter. As the character Ali Motlagh points out, the narrator’s murder by Profit – apparently a character of the book he has written – proves the author’s lack of authority and a failure of metanarratives (17). When the narrator finds out his characters are out of his dominance, he enters their games and mischievously tries to manipulate their destiny and his own as he wishes. He says:

Sayyid was a fictional character of a book I had written many years ago. Regardless of me he is continuing his independent life. His skill in play and his power of innovation in creating new paths encouraged me to play his game

so I can find out how much is human power in seduction and where is the extension of pen's spinning on the paper. (Ghassemi 184)

However, it seems that the narrator himself does not have any idea about the destiny of the characters he created. He does not know about the death of Sayyid and is surprised when he finds out that Sayyid has not ever had any heart problems (Ghassemi 158). The narrator accedes to his characters' desires and compares his power with the power of God on Judgment Day. The name of the narrator, mentioned a few times throughout the novel, is Yadollah (hands of God). Although maintaining the God-like position of the author is one of the main concerns of *Nocturnal Harmony's* narrator, he loses this position during the course of the narration. In fact, he introduces himself as a coward using literature as a weapon to gain power.

In that time I knew none of the characters, not even Sayyid and Raana. Then my life turned to be like this book. After Profit's attack... I used to revise this book most nights.... Sayyid and Raana that somehow figured out the story of the book tried to understand what I was writing every time we met and also tried to change and extort all the story so I have second thoughts in my judgments. Well, you know the writer should have mercy upon his readers so I changed the stories especially because this situation put me in a desiring situation. I could see the fear of literature is much more than the fear of Judgment Day. (Ghassemi 131-32)

Another example of the metanarrative collapse is the concept of decanonisation which Hassan introduces as one of the aspects of Postmodernism: an activity in which the holiness and authority of postmodern literature is dissolved (196). This kind of decanonisation can be seen in Ghassemi's religious wordplay in the novel:

I said: 'see Mr....'  
 Why are you laughing?  
 It was Faust Murnau who addressed me. I cleared my throat and incoherently answered: 'to be honest... but at last...'  
 But what at last?  
 But at last... your name...?  
 What's wrong with my name?  
 Ignoring what I was saying, I answered: 'you know our language!'  
 Faust Murnau took a look at his notebook: 'a pervert mind! It's also written here.' (Ghassemi 17-18)

Further, the choice of the name "Profit" for the character who attacks Sayyid to make him reveal Mahdi's hiding place is an important part of the novel. The fact that this is followed by the narrator's attempt to discover who and where Mahdi (this name is significant since it refers to an eschatological redeemer of Islam who,

according to some Islamic traditions, will appear and rule for a while before the Day of Judgment) is, shows Ghassemi's smart unbiased choice to play with religious beliefs although the novel's characters have a great deal of superstitious fears.

Fear is one of the main motifs of the novel and has a close connection with paranoia and this according to Lewis is one of the main features of postmodern novels (99). Thomas Pynchon, an American novelist, believes that paranoia "is the discovering of the connection of everything" (qtd. in Nicol 47). Characters who try to form epistemological and detective-like points of view, in order to interpret an inexplicable world, suffer from bewilderment and fear, which ultimately leads them to paranoia.

In *Nocturnal Harmony*, after stabbing the narrator, Profit finds himself face-to-face with a dilemma: the more he tries to solve the dilemma, the less result he gets and the situation gets worse than before. In the end he finds himself a victim of a conspiracy with no clear culprit, whether it is in his own mind or something real; a conspiracy in which everyone is involved, even the turtledove birds sing every morning "he should be hanged" (Ghassemi 125). "Suddenly I found myself trapped. A mysterious hand, skillfully, first cleared everything around me so as no one would hear me out, he ambushed me, when it was time, to stab me in the back" (Ghassemi 108). It is interesting that the mysterious hand seems to be the narrator's hand itself. Accordingly, the whole story is transformed to "a complicated game... [in] which everyone... was a predator and prey" (Ghassemi 155). The narrator who seems to be a victim of an unknown crime, will be accused by Faust Murnau for "several cases of murder" (Ghassemi 46) and at the end, he confesses that he was aware of Profit's mental turmoil and started to manipulate his mind and incited him to commit murder, with the victim being the narrator himself (Ghassemi 186-87). This obvious self-destructive game ridicules the epistemology of detective stories and poses it as an impossible and insufficient ground. In the detective stories, most of the time a murderer has enough reasons which motivates him to kill the victim; however, in this novel the victim/narrator tries to fake these reasons for the murderer by pretending that he is Satan in order to give Profit any right to kill him.

Hassan believes that selflessness is a feature of postmodernist literature, that postmodernism targets the traditional self and results in attention evasion – false flat and shallow character, without internal/external aspect – or the opposite, which is self-reproduction and reflection (196). This situation is consistent with the characters in the novel. Sayyid, a young hypocrite in need of popularity (and is very successful in this matter) to get some better facilities, writes in his daily notes: "the wrinkles of the face reveal his intensions! He was in search of a means to change his face with a mask..." (Ghassemi 158). Changing a face with a mask would, in other words, suggest a false character. The means that Sayyid uses to help him reach his goal is the Lisancsia pills, a tranquiliser with many side effects, but most importantly it shows the effect of one being outwardly calm with no concerns. It is

not only Sayyid who is consuming Lisanscia but also most of the characters. In other words, the other characters are also in search of removing the depth of the "self" and transforming themselves and wearing fake masks. They duplicate themselves and challenge the concept of "self." The novel's narrator claims that he does not have an identity and every moment he is reincarnated into another individual (Ghassemi 80). In addition, he makes many other characters of the novel similar to himself. For example, Sayyid plays music and writes just like the narrator. Even though Profit appears to be the enemy of the narrator, he paints like the narrator. According to Zarlaki, "the writer has written the same character for the individuals in the novel, but he has taken different acts out of them" (41). The confusing speech that Ali gives about the different names of the sixth floor residents is another interesting example of the duplication of the self throughout the novel.

Hassan believes that manipulating language to construct the reality of "I" and forming a multi-layered self is submerged in its own absence in order to avoid interpretability (196). For Hassan, characters in the postmodern novel can "exist or not" (Waugh 91). A clear example of a question of absence can be found in *Nocturnal Harmony*. The narrator of the story claims that he is not himself and his body has been occupied by his shadow (Ghassemi 23); he does not see himself in the mirror which indicates that he is a ghost. Being emotionally devastated at the age of fourteen because his beloved drowned, he hides himself behind his shadow to be safe from all the world cruelty around him. Accordingly, the shadow or the picture in the mirror is no longer an extension of the narrator's self but an independent identity and a separate life created by him to be traumatised, and the narrator blames his shadow or specter of his absence. In fact, the mirror "sickness," is not only an indication of identity crisis and schizophrenia but also, from a different perspective, can be a sign of enthusiasm and will to "not be," an enthusiasm which is mentioned in the novel (Ghassemi 140). It can also be interpreted that he has lost his previous centre as an Iranian and has no opportunity to fix his centrality; he neither can escape from his Eastern identity nor completely accept the Western one. Cameron believes that immigrants or colonised people lose their identities because they do not belong to any culture and become non-existent in the real world, like a specter (383).

Therefore, "nonexistence" is no longer the opposite of "existence" and disrupts the balance of epistemology's usual dichotomy of "to-be or not-be" and recreates it in this order: to be/not to be in which world? Does being in any of the worlds in the text necessarily mean nonexistence in other worlds? It seems that the narrator is simultaneously present in all the worlds in the text, while being absent from them. This has sunk the world of the novel into a hollow of doubt and uncertainty.

Uncertainty or indeterminacy is one of the most important features of postmodernism (Hassan 196) which is easily traceable in *Nocturnal Harmony*. In the

world of this novel, nothing is certain. In his review of the novel, Pourahmad, a famous Iranian director, points out that the author describes the horror of the horse that the narrator has never seen,

Enters a pact with us and gets our agreement on the fact that nothing is ‘certain’. The narrator has not necessarily seen what he says and writes, and things are not necessarily as the narrator says and they probably are as they don’t seem to be.” (Pourahamad 7)

The narrator’s contradicting remarks also add to this sense of uncertainty. For instance, he states that Raana does not speak French (Ghassemi 90), and in another passage he posits that Raana has committed suicide after reading the French translation of the narrator’s book (Ghassemi 84). Also, the narrator first says that painting is not his job (Ghassemi 26), and then states that he paints houses. In *Nocturnal Harmony*, even the name of the landlord’s dog is not very clear. The narrator writes that Eric Francoise Schmidt yells at his dog, “Gabic,” every day and lashes him, but the landlord’s wife who is suffering from dementia reminds the narrator every time that “Gabic” is dead and this is another dog that looks exactly like the last one, and says a new name each time. This complicated situation becomes vivid in the following conversation:

... ‘What’s this one called?’  
 Gabic.  
 I believe it was called Ero last time.  
 Ero died.  
 Gabic was also dead!  
 Yes, this is Wolf. (Ghassemi 138, 149)

The narrator’s confrontation with his son is also depicted in a way that one cannot speak in certain terms. The narrator claims that his son has murdered him or his shadow, but the day after this confrontation, the son’s suit is at the narrator’s room, and the narrator goes to see his landlord. Which one should be considered the murderer in this situation? This part of the novel is also interesting from another angle. The narrator who relates the events of his life in Eric Francoise Schmidt’s apartment, his youth and his death, uses the past tense; however, he uses the present tense when he narrates the confrontation with his son through the landlord’s dog’s point of view at the end of the novel. This mode of storytelling disrupts the rational sequence of time.

Waugh speaks of the full-scale collapse of the temporal and spatial orders of narration in *Metafiction* (181) and Lewis considers time irregularities as one of the characteristics of postmodern literature (85). Time in *Nocturnal Harmony* has turned into a problematic issue that highlights the epistemological aspect of the novel: “things like ‘today’, ‘yesterday’ and ‘tomorrow’ are for that place. When do you

think you are now? Day? Night? You are simply dead, that's it" (Ghassemi 84). In the world after death, like the planet Tralfamadore in Kurt Vonnegut's novel *Slaughterhouse-Five*, time is static, nonlinear and inclusive of all times. However, this same world is described using words in the past tense and therefore, constructs and contradicts itself. The narrator's time lapses are another clear indication of time irregularities in the novel.

This type of time fragments, in addition to the jagged and episodic structure of the novel, indicates the disrupted nature in the world of *Nocturnal Harmony*, which in the views of Lewis and Hassan are among the main features of postmodern literature and depicts the uninterpretable nature of the novel's world by stressing the lack of coherence or relation between the novel's different elements. The concept that the narrator describes as surrendering to the "authority of the moment" (Ghassemi 139) is in fact the individual's lack of need for interpreting the world to establish the bonds between the present and the past and the future. If there was only "moment," there would be no past or future, and there would be no fear or doubt, memory or wish. Everything is present as it is absent, as understandable as it is uninterpretable. If there was only "moment," there would be neither enigma nor a need for solving one, nor the disappointment and regret at its unsolvable nature. The wish for living in the moment is in fact the narrator's solution in the face of the epistemological questions that surround him; a solution that deems him exempt from the need to answer these vague questions. The novel's unexpected ending is in fact the reflection of such a wish.

Unlike the realist and naturalist novels that usually present a certain ending, and the modern novel with its disappointing denouement, "in postmodern novels we end with a multi-layered, false and artificial ending or a parodic imitation of an ending" (Lodge and Wood 157); the ending in postmodernist novels, like their other elements, indicate the constructed nature of truth. The unbelievable and extraordinary ending of *Nocturnal Harmony* is also in proportion with its epistemological orientation. In the penultimate chapter, when the narrator's conviction on his first night in the grave is finished, Faust Murnau's verdict is that: "Well, Sir! We have no other business here. Your crime is obvious. If you don't want to confess, it is your problem. Your soul is evil. To clarify it, you will be demoted" (Ghassemi 185). Therefore, the reader assume that the narrator is dead and he is doomed to be in hell forever and this is the end of the story. Yet in the next section, readers find themselves in Eric Francoise Schmidt's room and discover that the landlord's dog is the narrator of this part of the novel. It seems that Gabic is the reincarnated or metamorphosed version of the narrator, although the narrator has already mentioned meeting Gabic, and now it is the dog that narrates the final part of the novel, imitating the endings of eighteenth and nineteenth century novels with a parodic tone. It narrates the destiny of all the sixth floor inhabitants. The narrator metamorphosing into a dog is an indication of the relation between the narrator and the world; on the other hand, it is the ironic and

sarcastic yet voluntary choice of the narrator for survival. An ending that at first sounded like a horrible catastrophe, gradually gives way to a sarcastic version of heaven; in the end, most of the characters leave the apartment, except for Sayyid (whose death we become aware of) Benedict, and the mad Frenchwoman. In the end, even Eric Francoise Schmidt suddenly “drops dead” (Ghassemi 190) to ensure the narrator that there will be no lashes tomorrow and he will be free to lead a dog’s life without memories of the past or worries of the future and live in the “moment” for the first time. In fact, it seems that the book that the narrator has written (by which he has determined the destiny of the novel’s characters directly or indirectly) has helped him reach a wish that is fulfilled.

### Conclusion

Taking into consideration the points mentioned in this article, it can be concluded that *The Nocturnal Harmony of Wood Orchestra* is an Iranian postmodern novel that depicts the ontological vagueness of the world, or worlds, that the narrator resides in. The ontological complications of the novel are in a way that the reader is prompted to question the nature of the world/worlds that are depicted in it. In *Nocturnal Harmony*, the line between imagination and reality, the world of the text and the world of the author and the reader, life and death and existence and nonexistence are disrupted to the point that even the narrator’s paranoid mind does not understand them. The turmoil and uncertainty in the novel is born from the turmoil and distress of the main character who is the narrator. He has left his homeland, crossed geographical boundaries and resided in the territory of Europe, yet he seems to have lost both the connection with his homeland and the ability to interact with others in the host community. That is why as an individual, he becomes fragmented, uncertain and finally turns to the specter and all his quests to make meaning out of this world remains futile.

In portraying this ontological bewilderment, this novel incorporates several techniques from postmodern literature. The novel’s language is cluttered and irregular, and metafictional. Names and expressions are used in a way to show the artificial and constructed nature of the novel. By the collapse of grand narratives such as the authority of the writer, the distance between the characters and the writer is removed and the author’s narrator feigns in the novel that the reader is reading in order to stabilise his status. The question of identity is a confusing enigma for the narrator and all the other characters and it is only through selflessness and absence that one can diminish its crushing pressure.

Reza Ghassemi uses these techniques and characteristics so masterfully that they are well-fit and placed in the novel, and consequently, turns this work into a good read in its genre. The issues and contradictions that come in the life of an Iranian who is estranged, contradictions and segregations inherent in the Iranian history and culture, and issues and concerns of living in a postmodern world are artistically projected in the structure and content of this novel. It presents an image

of the modern man who turns to a wandering specter first because he has lost his native Iranian roots and cannot accept and adapt to the French culture and community, eventually incarnating into a dog, which is ritually unclean according to Islam.

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