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Crude oil and its false promises of modernization

Petroleum encounters in modern Iranian fiction

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Chapter 7

The “Failed Experience” of the Bakhtiyari people in Farhad Keshvari’s *Songs of the Dead*

Reynolds hugged the oily Mirza tightly and shook his hand firmly. He looked at the oil raining down, shouting “shut up, Mr. D’Arcy!” before coming back to his tent. After a while, he and a sleepy Bradshaw came out of the tent with glasses in their hands and stood in front of the well. They clinked their glasses together and, with their hands on each other’s backs, in front of the surprised gaze of the men at the well, started dancing.⁴⁷⁶

These are the words of Mandani Ahmadi, as he recalls witnessing the oil explosion above the city of Masjed Soleyman in 1908. Farhad Keshvari’s novel *Songs of the Dead* (*Sorud Mordegan*), published in 2013 in Tehran, tells the story of Mandani, a Bakhtiyari man who worked with George B. Reynolds and his team from the early days of the oil discovery until the end of the oil extraction era in this city.⁴⁷⁷ Mandani tells his story, which is also the story of the early days of the oil company in Masjed Soleyman, with the aim of being released from the nightmares and traumas that plague him in his retirement. The novel does not follow a linear storyline, but is written as a stream of consciousness narration, jumping from one event in Mandani’s life to another. Mandani, the protagonist and narrator, helped Reynolds search for petroleum on the hillsides of a village which later became the city of Masjed Soleyman. After finally locating the oil, he stayed on to work as a laborer for the oil company, living in one of the company districts of Masjed Soleyman.

Songs of the Dead is predominantly about dead people, with Mandani as the surviving witness who tells the stories of those who did not make it. From the very early days of the oil extraction, Mandani witnessed the deaths of many co-workers and family members as a result of the difficulty of the work and various illnesses. One of the incidents he describes is the death of the oil worker Gholamshah, who perished from an unknown illness, and whose remains

⁴⁷⁶ Farhad Keshvari, *Sorud Mordegan (Songs of the Dead)* (Zavesh, 2013), 15. All quotations from this novel have been translated by me.

⁴⁷⁷ George B. Reynolds (1853-1925) was a retired engineer who was working for William Knox D’Arcy and led his oil exploration team in Iran.

smelled so bad that nobody could come close to them. Mandani, committed to following Bakhtiyari traditions, sent Gholamshah's body back to his family. Other workers suffered the same fate as Gholamshah. Baran, Morad, Ali-Natur, and Karam all died while working for the oil company, and Mandani's son Yadegar died in exile after fleeing the police, who were after him because of his role in the 1953 coup d'état. Years later, moreover, Mandani's wife Shirin-Jan fell into an oil pit and drowned while trying to collect oil for cooking.

The story is written in the form of what I call a memory-story. In the novel's present, Mandani is a retired man sitting in his room, recounting, in the first person, how difficult it is to escape his traumatic memories. When he recalls the past, the narration switches to the third person, with Mandani appearing as the main protagonist. The story is divided into small sections of three to five pages. Each section travels through history, from the past to the present. It is clear that Mandani is haunted by his past. In one of the sections set in the present, he says to his nephew Jahanbakhsh, "the past is running after me and does not take its hand off me."⁴⁷⁸ He is, then, constantly trying to escape the ghosts of his past, which come to him often and do not let him sleep.

This chapter focuses on how Keshvari's novel engages with the discovery of petroleum and the formation of the city of Masjed Soleyman in the foothills of the Zagros Mountains as a failed experience for local people like Mandani. It reveals the way the traumatic experience of the oil encounter lingers as a failed experience that continues to haunt Masjed Soleyman long after the oil era.

One of the reasons for an experience to be considered failed and traumatic is if it faces limited re-enactments or is only re-enacted after a long delay. Cathy Caruth, in *Unclaimed Experiences: Trauma, Narrative and History*, argues that the response to a traumatic experience often occurs with a delay and may take the shape of an uncontrolled repetitive appearance:

In its most general definition, trauma describes and overwhelming experience of sudden and catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena. The experience of the soldier faced with sudden and massive death around him, for example, who suffers this sight in a numbed state, only to relive it later on in repeated nightmares, is a central and recurring image of trauma in our century.⁴⁷⁹

⁴⁷⁸ Keshvari, 165.

⁴⁷⁹ Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (The John Hopkins University Press, 1996), 11.

Delay and repetition, according to Caruth, are the two main characteristics of the re-enactment of traumatic experiences. *Songs of the Death* features both of these. The novel was published in 2013, more than a century after the discovery of oil in Masjed Soleyman, making it itself a delayed account. In its narrative, moreover, it repeats each incident that happened to the workers, both during and after the period of industrialization. The traumatic experience of the oil encounter in Masjed Soleyman is portrayed as returning in spectral form to Mandani after his retirement, finally yielding a narrative. In line with Caruth's theory of trauma, until Mandani finally tells his story, the oil encounter exists for him as an unrepresented reality. Even the story that is ultimately told in the novel is non-linear and incomplete, and blurs the boundaries between reality and myth, story and history, and memory and imagination.

Although there may exist representations of the oil encounter of Masjed Soleyman in oral history, or in fables and poems, published literary texts from Khuzestan emerged rather late. According to a recent history of the Southern School of Literature, *Southern Valve: The History of Fiction in Khuzestan Province* by Koroush Asadi and Gholamreza Rezayi, this School only started to give serious consideration to the oil encounter in Masjed Soleyman after the Iranian Revolution of 1979, and especially after the Iran-Iraq War.⁴⁸⁰ In the article "The Story of Masjed Soleyman and Oil Industry," written by Shapour Behian and published in a special edition of *Cinema and Literature* in 2019, the first story of the oil encounter in Masjed Soleyman was Bahram Heydari's *Lali*, a collection of short stories published in 1979.⁴⁸¹ In general, this article and the special edition of the magazine indicate that interest in the problematic role oil played in Masjed Soleyman in Iranian literature has only arisen in recent years, showing a delay in shedding light on the consequences of the oil discovery in the region.⁴⁸²

In this chapter, I will first review the history of the petroleum industry in the city of Masjed Soleyman, in order to explain the historical context engaged by *Songs of the Dead*. Then, I will analyze the novel according to Ernst van Alphen's notion of "failed experiences,"

⁴⁸⁰ Koroush Asadi and Gholamreza Rezayi, *Dariche-ye Jonubi: Tarikhche-ye Dastan-e Khuzestan (Southern Valve: The History of Fiction in Khuzestan Province)* (Nimaj, 2019).

⁴⁸¹ Shapour Behian, "Dastan-e Masjed Soleyman va Sherkat-e Naft" ("The Story of Masjed Soleyman and Oil Company") *Cinema va Adabiat (Cinema and Literature)*, 76 (2019): 180.

⁴⁸² This delay only concerns the representation of the petroleum encounter from the point of view of the local Bakhtiyari people in Persian literature and especially in fiction, as the story of oil was told in Bakhtiyari oral literature and songs. A good example is Darab Afsar Bakhtiyari, a well-known Bakhtiyari poet who wrote a poem about the petroleum encounter in Bakhtiyari dialect. Parts of his poems are used by Qobad Azar Ayin in his novel *Favaran* (2019).

as developed in his article “Symptoms of Discursivity: Experience, Memory, and Trauma.”⁴⁸³ Van Alphen distinguishes four characteristics that may make an experience un-representable. The problems of representation encountered by the Bakhtiyaris, and specifically by the character of Mandani in *Songs of the Dead*, in relation to their traumatic encounters with the oil industry, will be examined based on these four characteristics.

By considering the experience of the oil encounter in Masjed Soleyman as a traumatic, initially un-representable one, *Songs of the Dead* provides insight into the semi-colonial situation of Khuzestan, which lasted from the discovery of oil in 1908 until the wells dried out gradually in the 1960s. Previous chapters have discussed the dislocation, segregation, racism, and violence that occurred in Iran’s oil regions. In looking at *Songs of the Dead*, as well as at photographs of the oil encounter from Iran’s Petroleum Industry Museum, this chapter will focus on the traumatic experiences of the locals who were forced to live in oil company towns like Masjed Soleyman. Like the novel, the photographs, which are among the rare historical sources that testify to the working conditions of Bakhtiyari laborers during the early years of the oil industry, will be analyzed according to the four obstacles to representation established by Van Alphen. Just as the oil stories told in Iranian literature experienced a delay in their appearance, the establishment of the Petroleum Industry Museum of Iran in Tehran and other oil company towns was not decided upon until 2010, a century after the first oil well was dug in the country. A similar delay can be witnessed in other oil producing countries, due to the same process of failed or traumatic experience. However, unlike Keshvari’s novel, the Petroleum Industry Museum of Iran privileges the point of view of the central state, which leads to the same marginalization of Bakhtiyaris that occurs in the archives of AIOC.

The History of the Petroleum Industry in Masjed Soleyman

Petroleum was found in the foothills of a small village close to the ancient pilgrimage site of the Sarmasjed Temple in 1908. The village comprised the winter quarters of the Bakhtiyari tribe, who stayed in this warm area during the cold winter, and spent the summer months on the southern hill of the Zagros Mountains. The village, which was built on top of the ruins of the ancient, pre-Islamic city of Parsumash, turned to a company town when oil was discovered in this area by the team of the British-Australian William Knox D’Arcy, who had been searching for approximately seven years. Apart from the fact that this discovery changed the

⁴⁸³ Ernst J. van Alphen, “Symptoms of Discursivity: Experience, Memory, and Trauma,” in *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*, edited by Mieke Bal, Jonathan V. Crewe, and Leo Spitzer (UPNE, 1999), 24-39.

fate of Iran and the world, it created a new city of Masjed Soleyman. Abadan and Masjed Soleyman are known as the first and most important oil company towns of Iran, though they are very different from each other.⁴⁸⁴ While Abadan became the cultural capital of southwestern Iran, Masjed Soleyman experienced a different fate, as the city's residents never fully adapted to suddenly living in a modern city. In an article about the unskilled Bakhtiyari workers of Masjed Soleyman, Touraj Atabaki, an expert on the social history of the Middle East, and especially of Iran's oil industry, explains:

When, at last, the oil flared up at Meydan-e Naftun, in Masjid Suleiman, a sparsely populated region, the problem of mass recruitment of labor became one of the biggest challenges the oil company faced. Arnold Wilson recalled, "much labor is being imported from India, and much from other parts of Persia, some from the Gulf ports, and some from Turkey (Ottoman Empire)." The Indian workforce comprised the main trunk of semiskilled labor. Along with the activities of road construction and transport, the Iranian workers were mainly employed for unskilled work in the drilling task, except for masonry, carpentry, and painting, which was done mainly by Isfahani skilled workers. However, in the following year [1909-1910], the ethnic composition gradually changed in favor of a largely Persian workforce.⁴⁸⁵

As indicated by Atabaki, the growing Iranian labor force comprised both Bakhtiyari pastoralists and sedentary cultivators. He mentions, however, that "recruiting 'amale [labor] from the Bakhtiyari pastoralists soon became a major burden for APOC (Anglo-Persian Oil Company) because of the discrepancies between the lifestyle of the pastoralists and the APOC's requirements and guidelines for employees."⁴⁸⁶

The town was renamed MIS (an acronym for Masjid Soleyman) by the British. Its early population mainly comprised members of the Bakhtiyari tribe. The Bakhtiyaris are one of the largest tribes of Iranian pastoralists, and have lived for centuries in the mountainous area of Zagros, in southwestern Iran. The labor came from those who had the smallest flocks and the least land. Because of their low rank in the tribe, those recruited had to follow the orders of the Khans and other higher-ranking men. According to Atabaki, in the early years of the establishment of the oil company, the British Consul-General made an agreement with the Khans of Bakhtiyari: "According to this agreement, the Bakhtiyari chiefs received £2,000 per annum in return for supplying regiments of guards from their tribe and for protecting the

⁴⁸⁴ Ehsani, "The Social History of Labor in the Iranian Oil Industry," 361.

⁴⁸⁵ Atabaki, "From 'Amaleh (Labor) to Kargar (Worker)," 164. Although Atabaki uses the word 'Amale for the Bakhtiyari laborers, I will use "laborer" and "worker" instead, because 'Amale is considered disrespectful by the Bakhtiyaris.

⁴⁸⁶ Atabaki, 165.

company's property against robbery in Bakhtiyari territories."⁴⁸⁷ However, it seems that the chiefs never paid any of this money to the Bakhtiyari workers who guarded the petroleum wells. When oil extraction expanded, the company recruited more Bakhtiyaris, but their presence could not be counted on during the summertime because of their seasonal migration.⁴⁸⁸

Atabaki explains that the unskilled workers gradually adapted to the new lifestyle. The APOC built living quarters in Abadan and Masjed Soleyman in order to house its employees and workers. Kaveh Ehsani indicates in his article "Social Engineering and the Contradictions of Modernization in Khuzestan's Company Towns: A Look at Abadan and Masjed-Soleyman" that these quarters were designed by engineers with the latest knowledge of urban planning, and were modeled on cities like Manchester and Liverpool, rather than on existing Iranian cities. Ehsani notes that the company towns were not very successful, as the cultural and social conditions of Iran were not considered:

These designs were drawn at the corporations' headquarters, or in the offices of the professional planners. In other words, in distant places foreign to the locales where the towns were to be constructed, and by planners and designers who rarely had an empathetic knowledge of and insight into the needs and characteristics of these local societies.⁴⁸⁹

Much like Atabaki, Ehsani emphasizes that the people of Khuzestan in the early decades of the 20th century maintained pre-industrial habits. In addition, the new oil cities were cut off from Iran's central cities, such as Tehran and Isfahan. Notions of time and social life were, consequently, completely different from those in the center of the country. The houses and districts of the company towns were planned in such a way as to provide the highest quality of service for the oil company, but they were not suitable for the living habits of former pastoralists, as they were extremely small. There was, for example, no space for the workers to produce dairy products or handicrafts. Despite these problems, the city of Masjed Soleyman grew unimaginably fast. The 17,000 APOC employees, together with their families, formed the initial population. Later, the workers' districts were expanded: 10-foot rooms and 20-foot rooms were located around the oil wells instead of being grouped together as in other Iranian

⁴⁸⁷ Atabaki, 164. The details of the agreements can be found in Stephanie Cronin, "The Politics of Debt: The Anglo-Persian Oil Company and the Bakhtiyari Khans," *Middle Eastern Studies* 40, no. 4 (July 1, 2004): 1–31, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00263200410001700293>.

⁴⁸⁸ Atabaki, "From 'Amaleh (Labor) to Kargar (Worker)," 164.

⁴⁸⁹ Kaveh Ehsani, "Social Engineering and the Contradictions of Modernization in Khuzestan's Company Towns: A Look at Abadan and Masjed-Soleyman," *International Review of Social History* 48, no. 3 (2003): 376, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020859003001123>.

cities, and access to other districts was restricted. As a result, neighbors acted as close families, sharing happy and sad occasions.

Ehsani describes how the oil resources in Masjed Soleyman dried up in the late 1960s, and how its wells were shut down between 1980 and 1981. During the Iran-Iraq War, the city became one of the government's army base centers, and the company houses and facilities were given to the army. Today, Masjed Soleyman is a mid-sized town. While the old inhabitants sought refuge in other cities or foreign countries, many have moved there from the surrounding villages and people are keeping the history of the oil industry alive. There is also a growing and strong local patriotism associated with the city, also among Iranians in diaspora.⁴⁹⁰

Stories of the Oil Encounter in Masjed Soleyman

The story of the oil encounter in Masjed Soleyman began to be told largely after the 1979 Iranian Revolution. Though writers such as Ali-Murad Fadayi-nia (1946-) and Nasim Khaksar (1943-) wrote about the rural areas of Masjed Soleyman prior to this, their stories are not very deeply connected to the concept of the oil encounter. Among the earliest collections of short stories about Masjed Soleyman and the oil encounter is Bahram Haidari's *Lali*, published in 1979. *Lali* is the name of one of the workers' districts of Masjed Soleyman, located at a considerable distance from the city center. The stories are about the living conditions of the Bakhtiyari people in this district, with a focus on poverty and the stark contrast between the Bakhtiyaris' traditional lifestyles and the living conditions of the district. As noted by Shapour Behian in "The Story of Masjed Soleyman and the Oil Company," *Lali*, unlike previous stories of the south, involves mixed languages and accents, as well as references to palm trees and the scent of fish and the sea.⁴⁹¹ In *Lali*, Behian argues, the main concern is the empty space that was left when the wells of Masjed Soleyman dried out. It shows how only the low-ranked workers, who were mostly from the Bakhtiyari tribe and who had left their pastoralist lives behind to settle in the city, remained, struggling with poverty, starvation, and displacement.

Another renowned writer of Masjed Soleyman petrofiction is Fath-Allah Biniyaz (1948-2015), who published 15 novels, 8 collections of short stories, and 7 books of literary criticism, and was among a group of well-known writers from the southern school of Iranian literature. His most famous novel is *The Place as Wide as Nothing (Makani Be Vos 'at-e Hich)*, published in 1990, in which he writes about class divisions among the Bakhtiyaris and the oil

⁴⁹⁰ This information was conveyed to me by Shahram Khosravi, Professor of Social Anthropology at the University of Stockholm, who generously read and commented on this chapter.

⁴⁹¹ Behian, "The Story of Masjed Soleyman and the Oil Company."

company's disturbance of their living conditions. Biniyaz's stories mostly illustrate the contrast between the nomadic life of the Bakhtiyaris and their life in the company town of Masjed Soleyman.

Another story about Mosjed Soleyman is *Mim: Khabname-ye Marha-ye Irani (Mim: The Lullaby of Iranian Snakes)* by Bahram Haydari, published in 2006. It tells about a poor family in which the son, Mim, is always sick from malnutrition, sitting passively in the corner of their house's yard in Bi-Bayan. Mim's father, who used to be a shepherd, is portrayed as having turned into an old man after only two years of working in the sulfur factory, one of the side factories of the oil company of Masjed Soleyman. The story implies that Mim's illness is exacerbated by the busy and chaotic lives of the workers in their neighborhood. The poverty of the un-skilled workers in the neighborhood is the main theme of this story.

Daryoush Ahmadi is a writer who was born in Masjed Soleyman in 1956. He became interested in literature in his teenage years, when the city "because of its relation with the west and its special geography, as well as the poverty which was all over the city, was the birthplace of poets and writers."⁴⁹² Ahmadi's representation of Masjed Soleyman also has a certain latency to it, as he did not publish his first collection of short stories, called *Our Small House (Khane-ye Khuchak-e Ma)*, which won several literary awards, until 2016. As in *Songs of the Death*, the protagonist of the stories is a retired man who, by telling the story of his life in Masjed Soleyman, charts its different historical stages, conveying the message that most of the people of the city have died due to the Iran-Iraq war or the chemical attacks, went crazy because of the bombs, or were injured, executed, or captured by the Ba'thist regime, while those who survived are trying to tell their stories.

Another writer from Masjed Soleyman is Qobad Azar Ayin (1958). Despite the fact that his stories do not have much literary value according to Asadi and Rezayi, Azar Ayin has access to the Petroleum Industry Museum's archives and uses the information collected there in his stories and a recent novel, *Favaran (Eruption)*, published in 2018 and introduced by the Petroleum Industry Museum's website as "a written museum."⁴⁹³ By turning the historical incidents of Masjed Soleyman into stories, Azar Ayin makes them more lively and tangible. Unfortunately, because his stories privilege the official point of view of the Islamic Republic, his stories do not focus on the social and cultural impact of the oil encounter on the lives of the locals, but instead repeat familiar anti-foreigner tropes.

⁴⁹² "Zendegi-Name Dariush Ahmadi," *Paygah Khabari Namaname* (blog), accessed June 17, 2021, <https://tinyurl.com/3pstuw3b>

⁴⁹³ Asadi and Rezayi, *Southern Valve*.

The southern school of literature has become very active in recent years. Blogs, magazines, and other literary publications and writer's associations have represented the history of the region of Khuzestan. Asadi and Rezayi introduce many of the writers of the southern school in their book *Southern Valve: The History of Fiction in Khuzestan Province*. The stories produced by the southern school repeat previously mentioned post-colonial sentiments and anti-western ideas, but their main purpose is to show the tensions between the Bakhtiyaris' nomadic lifestyle and the semi-forced modernization they went through in Masjed Soleyman after the arrival of the oil industry.

Among the writers of the southern school, Farhad Keshvari is most successful in revealing these tensions. Keshvari was born in the oil company district of Aghajari, but lived and worked for many years in Masjed Soleyman and its suburbs, and most of his stories are about this particular location. His stories about the oil encounter are mostly flashbacks to the early days of the oil industry. As such, they reveal the latency in representing this period that is central to this chapter. Furthermore, as in *Lali*, "Mim: The Lullaby of Iranian Snakes," and *Our Small House*, poverty is a main theme of Keshvari's stories. His Bakhtiyari characters are portrayed as torn between the imposed modernity of the oil industry and their former pastoral lives on the hillsides of the Zagros Mountains. The Bakhtiyaris' difficult lives in small houses with large families are a common theme, as is the absolute poverty of locals in the post-oil era.

Among all the works of Iranian literature that refer to the encounter between the Bakhtiyaris and the oil industry in Masjed Soleyman, I have chosen Keshvari's novel *Songs of the Dead* as the main text to analyze in this chapter, as it covers most of the history of the oil industry in this city and places particular emphasis on the way the oil encounter has existed for a long time as a failed encounter that haunts the local population in disturbing ways. In the following section, I will analyze the way the novel presents the oil encounter in Masjed Soleyman as a failed experience through the work of Ernst van Alphen.

Characteristics of the Failed Experience of the Oil Encounter in *Songs of the Dead*

In his article "Symptoms of Discursivity: Experience, Memory, and Trauma," Ernst van Alphen delineates the reasons why some traumatic experiences are unrepresentable. He begins his article by saying that "according to common sense, experience is something subjects have, rather than do; experiences are direct, unmediated, subjectively lived accounts of reality. They

are not traces of reality, but rather part of life itself.”⁴⁹⁴ He continues by showing that this idea has been challenged in recent studies by the feminist scholars Teresa de Lauretis and Joan W. Scott. According to them, “experience is not so direct and unmediated as is usually assumed, but is fundamentally discursive.”⁴⁹⁵ This means that “experience depends on discourse to come about; forms of experience do not just depend on the event or history that is being experienced, but also on the discourse in which the event is expressed/thought/conceptualized.”⁴⁹⁶ Instead of assuming that “individuals exist, and they have experiences,”⁴⁹⁷ which would mean that “experience *constitutes* subjectivity,”⁴⁹⁸ Van Alphen argues that the relationship should be reconceived so that subjects are the effect of the discursive processing of their experiences.”⁴⁹⁹

Such processing, moreover, may not always be possible; the discourses governing a particular community or society may mark it as non-articulable. In other words, the fact that individuals are involved in a particular incident is not enough to have a “successful experience” of this incident that makes this incident and the individual’s role in it intelligible. There are times, therefore, when individuals partake in an event, but fail to experience it. In Van Alphen’s words:

I shall focus not on experience but rather on what I call “failed experience,” that is, trauma. I shall analyze trauma as an experience that has not come about and that shows negatively symptoms of the discursivity that defines “successful” experience. People often speak of “traumatic experience” or traumatic memories”; I, however, shall argue that the cause of trauma is precisely the impossibility of experiencing, and subsequently memorizing, an event.⁵⁰⁰

On the basis of the discursive nature of experience, then, Van Alphen concludes that trauma takes the form of an impossibility of experiencing and, subsequently, memorizing an event.

In the remainder of his article, Van Alphen presents four kinds of obstacles or representational problems that disrupt the process of having successful experiences, and that thus lead to failed experiences:

1. Ambiguous actantial position: one is neither the subject nor object of the event, or one is both at the same time;
2. Total negation of any actantial position or subjectivity;
3. The lack of a plot or narrative frame by means of which the events can be narrated as a meaningful coherence;

⁴⁹⁴ Van Alphen, “Symptoms of Discursivity” 24.

⁴⁹⁵ Van Alphen, 24.

⁴⁹⁶ Van Alphen, 24.

⁴⁹⁷ Van Alphen, 25.

⁴⁹⁸ Van Alphen, 25.

⁴⁹⁹ Van Alphen, 25.

⁵⁰⁰ Van Alphen, 25.

4. The plots or narrative frames that are available or that are inflicted are unacceptable because they do not do justice to the way in which one partakes in the event.⁵⁰¹

In what follows, I will analyze the failed experience of the oil encounter in Masjed Soleyman portrayed in *Songs of the Dead* along the lines of these four representational problems.

1. Ambiguous Actantial Position

In describing the first problem of representation that can lead to a failed experience, Van Alphen suggests that the survivors of a traumatic experience, in this case survivors of the Holocaust, “‘split’ their selves in reaction to what happened to them in the camps.”⁵⁰² When such survivors describe their experiences, they ascribe their memories to somebody else, enabling them to pretend the trauma did not happen to them. Van Alphen states that the ambiguity of subjectivity and objectivity in their descriptions mark a position in which the person who is experiencing an incident does not have any agency or responsibility towards the things that are happening. What this makes clear is that the person experiencing the trauma does not know their exact role in the incident; they “underwent the event passively,” and are not sure about having any choice with regard to considering their position towards the incident.⁵⁰³

In Keshvari’s novel, Mandani tells his nephew Jahanbakshsh how, at the beginning of the 20th century, he was one of the low-ranked Bakhtiyaris who entered Masjed Soleyman with Reynolds to search for petroleum. Reynolds and his team had been looking for petroleum in the foothills of the Zagros mountains for over seven years and already received a letter from D’Arcy that he will not waste more of his capital on Persia, and that they have to come back to England. As Reynolds is about to admit defeat, they found oil on the hillside of the village of Masjed Soleyman, which would soon be established as a company town.

Here, I want to turn to a photograph from the collection of the Museum of Petroleum to illustrate the notion that workers like Mandani were assigned an ambiguous subjectivity in the process of discovering oil and establishing the oil company. Figure 7.1 shows the first oil well of Masjed Soleyman and documents the initial encounter of the inhabitants of southwestern Iran with the oil industry. In it, petroleum can be seen bursting from the ground in an uncontrolled manner. The caption of the photograph on the British Petroleum (BP) website reads: “The discovery of the well at Masjid Suleiman in southwestern Persia, where

⁵⁰¹ Van Alphen, 28.

⁵⁰² Van Alphen, 28.

⁵⁰³ Van Alphen, 29.

oil was struck in May 1908, the first commercial discovery in the Middle East.”⁵⁰⁴ The photographer is unknown but was probably one of the employees of William Knox D’Arcy. The photograph gives a historical image of Bakhtiyari workers in the early days of the discovery of Masjed Soleyman. It shows the encounter of the two Bakhtiyaries with the first oil well and the landscape in which the city would develop. This photograph represents the moment that initiated petroleum culture not only at Masjed Soleyman, but also in Iran and the Middle East.



*Figure 7.7: Photograph of the early oil encounter*⁵⁰⁵

The photograph shows Reynolds’ team and two Bakhtiyaris, located some distance from the well. In its composition, the photograph reveals the ambiguous actantial position of the locals in relation to the oil encounter, signaling how, in Van Alphen’s terms, they were neither subjects nor objects of the event. Indeed, the peripheral presence of the locals in the picture seems accidental and arbitrary; it is clear that they are not the subjects of the photo, like Reynolds and his team, or its object, which is the oil.

⁵⁰⁴ “First Oil – 1901-1908 | Our History | Who We Are | BP.” Accessed March 12, 2021. <https://www.bp.com/en/global/corporate/who-we-are/our-history/first-oil.html>

⁵⁰⁵ “First Oil – 1901-1908 | Our History | Who We Are | BP.”

In *Songs of the Dead*, Mandani describes how, when the well reached the oil, Reynolds stood in front of it and began to dance with Mirza Ebrahim, his foreman, and they made a toast. Mandani recounts how he stayed on the sidelines and watched as this took place, much like the Bakhtiyari men in the photograph. According to Mandani, the workers did not know why they were doing the work they were doing or what it would lead to. As they were working on this well, and later on the wider establishment of the oil industry, they could not fully understand their position in relation to it. Much like the photo, Mandani's story portrays the unskilled workers, who could not communicate with the British, as bystanders, forced to observe rules dictated by the Khans of the tribe.

According to Mandani, in the early days, the workers did not believe that the foreigners had come this far just to search for "smelly petroleum" and suspected there was more at stake. Molla-Teymur, one of the workers, tells the others:

A petroleum pond! Can you believe it? This foreign man came from the other side of the world just because of this smelly pond? No, mister! They have a treasure map. No! So you say they are just looking for smelly petroleum, which does nothing but burn? No, mister, you are fooled! You are cheated! You want to leave your dead ones and follow this man? They are looking in the ruins of the ancient city for gold and jewelry. What are you looking for after them? You naive people!⁵⁰⁶

Mandani confesses that he, too, did not believe that Reynolds was just looking for petroleum when he saw him looking at a map inside his tent: "Maybe he was reading the treasure map to find the talisman?"⁵⁰⁷ He confesses that this question had not left him during all the months he accompanied Reynolds.

The workers' ambiguous position was also connected to the fact that they did not understand the value of petroleum. Mandani asks Mirza Ebrahim, the head of the workers who speaks English and has a good relationship with both the Khans and the British, why Reynolds is working there: "You said his home is far from here and that he came from a foreign land, spent months in a ship, passed deserts and mountains, and finally reached here. Is he looking for gold or treasure?"⁵⁰⁸ Mirza Ebrahim replies: "if I knew the answer, Reynolds would not be here now."⁵⁰⁹ When Mandani insists, Mirza responds that petroleum is a black treasure and "the new treasure of the world."⁵¹⁰ Even after Mirza tells Mandani about the value of oil,

⁵⁰⁶ Keshvari, *Songs of the Dead*, 7.

⁵⁰⁷ Keshvari, 7.

⁵⁰⁸ Keshvari, 8.

⁵⁰⁹ Keshvari, 8.

⁵¹⁰ Keshvari, 9.

Mandani remains doubtful. It is clear that he cannot fully understand his role in the oil encounter.

Mandani and his fellow workers have no choice but to help Reynolds and his team even though they do not know what they are doing and why they are working there. At the beginning of the story, when Reynolds is very stressed by the letter from D'Arcy, oil is finally found. While he is working on the steam machine, Sattar, another worker, calls out to Mandani:

“Mandani!” He heard Sattar’s voice. Sattar was standing on the stairs of the steam machine and looking at him with a smile on his face. Mandani got up, went down the stairs, and when he reached the ground he heard the sound of an explosion, and rain fell over him. In the light of the lantern he saw the black drops of petroleum around the derrick and Sattar’s body. He could smell the foul scent of the petroleum pond in the air. He ran to Reynolds’ tent and shouted “Mister! Mister Reynolds!” Reynolds, half naked, looked at Mandani’s body, which was covered in petroleum from head to toe. Mandani showed him the rain of petroleum showering over the derrick of the well. Reynolds ran with his short trousers and passed Mandani. He heard the sound of the oil, looked at the derrick, and shouted “Oil! Oil!”⁵¹¹

This is known as the most important incident of early 20th-century Iranian history, which changed the destiny of the people of the region forever. As in Figure 7.1, the Bakhtiyaris in the novel, who cannot know the impact this incident will have on their lives, do not celebrate it; they merely watch Reynolds and the other foreigners.

On other occasions, too, Keshvari shows how the reaction to the rapid process of industrialization that follows the discovery of oil remains limited to the foreigners and high-ranking workers of the company, excluding unskilled workers. When the first railroad in Masjed Soleyman is launched, the British celebrate in a big tent with tables full of food, while Mandani is in charge of beheading the sheep behind the tent. The railroad, which is specifically designed to carry petroleum from the well to the tankers and then on to Abadan, plays an important role in the advancement of the oil industry. When the train is doing its work for the first time, Mandani and Mirza Ebrahim are standing in the distance looking at the British:

Mandani cut the sheep’s throat and released it. He stood and looked at the train with a knife in his hand. A blond man was standing in the locomotive. A black hand was holding the white stick of the flag of the United Kingdom out of the window. The locomotive passed Mandani and he said, “wasn’t that man with the flag the Indian Khoshhal Khan?” Ten empty containers passed Mandani. He went slowly towards the tent of the British, who stood in front of it. The ground was still shaking beneath his legs. His shirt was covered in sweat, and stuck to his body. The train stopped, and the blond man stepped off the train. The British shouted, “Hooray! Hooray! Hooray!”⁵¹²

⁵¹¹ Keshvari, 14.

⁵¹² Keshvari, 19.

In this way, the novel makes clear that the success of the company was considered a British success and a success for the leaders of the Bakhtiyaris. Mandani and the other workers know that a celebration is going on, but not of what, and they are also physically excluded from the sites of celebration: the tent and the train. There are many moments in the novel when Mandani describes himself as someone who is “standing aside and looking” without having an important role in the incident, or any special feelings towards it. He is a passive observer, looking at “the hands of the men and women with their full glasses in the air.”⁵¹³

At first, the fact that Mandani is not the subject of these incidents and is also not aware that he is the object of the British presence in the region does not seem to trouble him. Only after years of working for the company, he comes to realize he is being oppressed as an *‘amale*, but he still is not in a position to take any action to change it. It is this failed experience of oppression and impotence that haunts him in the form of nightmares during his retirement.

The impotent position of Mandani and the other workers is also signaled by the ambiguous narrative structure of the novel, which has Mandani switch between the first person to the third person. In describing the ambiguous actantial position as a way to convey a failed experience, Van Alphen mentions that Hayden White “argued for the necessity to develop a new kind of language, ‘a new rhetorical mode’, in order to be able to talk about the Holocaust.”⁵¹⁴ This new mode, which White calls the middle voice, is one “that would allow a different subject position in relation to the event.”⁵¹⁵ *Songs of the Dead* can be said to use a middle voice as he conveys the failed experience of the Bakhtiyari workers to his nephew, many decades after the events. The third and first person used by Mandani can be seen as, respectively, the passive and active voice of someone trying to represent a failed experience. As Van Alphen explains:

The active, as well as the passive voice, situate the agent or actant outside the action as such. The agent is the subject or object of it. The middle voice, on the contrary, situates the agent inside the action. The agent takes part in the action or event without being either the subject or object of it. The agent is being affected by the action without being directly the object or subject of it.⁵¹⁶

In the novel’s past, spoken about in the third person as “he,” Mandani is passive: “Mandani was happy because of the happiness of the British and Mirza, who were surprised when they

⁵¹³ Keshvari, 19.

⁵¹⁴ Van Alphen, “Symptoms of Discursivity,” 29.

⁵¹⁵ Van Alphen, 30.

⁵¹⁶ Van Alphen, 30.

saw the petroleum pond.”⁵¹⁷ In the novel’s present, as the “I” who narrates his life story to his nephew, Mandani takes the active voice, enabling him to look at his younger self with a certain distance and to indicate that he now has more insight in the situation than he had at the time. It is the combination of the passive and active voice that creates a middle voice capable of conveying how, as a worker, Mandani was affected by the oil industry’s actions (part of them) without being its subject or object, and how, in his retirement, he is finally capable of turning the failed experience into if not quite a successful one (Mandani’s traumatic memories haunt him until his death), at least a less unintelligible one. I will return to the novel’s narrative structure when I explore the third representational problem distinguished by Van Alphen, that of the lack of a plot or narrative frame.

2. *Total Negation of Any Actantial Position or Subjectivity or Denied Subjectivity*



Figure 7.8: Photograph showing a Western geologist and a Bakhtiyari man⁵¹⁸

⁵¹⁷ Keshvari, *Songs of the Dead*, 7.

⁵¹⁸ This photo is taken from the Petromuseum.ir website. It does not have a caption or catalogue number. <https://fi.uy/ydzw>.

To explain the total ignorance of a situation which results in a failed experience, Van Alphen argues that there are situations in which the subjectivity of the person in the situation is “reduced to ‘nothing,’” adding that “in these situations, the survivors did not even experience their role/part in it as that of an object. Their existence as human beings were totally denied. They played no actantial role whatsoever, which put their subjectivity as such in jeopardy.”⁵¹⁹ Van Alphen refers to this as “denied subjectivity,” where the subject is equal to nothing. He notes that:

In Western culture the individual subject is held responsible for his or her own destiny to an important degree. One is responsible for how one acts. It is precisely because of this individual responsibility that it is possible to form one’s own subjectivity by means of consciously chosen behavior. When one does not make any conscious choices, one is in fact not one hundred percent a subject.⁵²⁰

This not being considered “one hundred percent a subject” is one of the main characteristics of European colonialism’s treatment of the colonized. Europeans took full control and responsibility over their colonies, which made the colonized society unable to make choices or feel responsible.⁵²¹ The Bakhtiyaris in Masjed Soleyman were similarly dispossessed, especially initially.⁵²²

Figure 7.2 is a photograph showing a Bakhtiyari man and a Western geologist. It exemplifies the way local workers were not enabled to be full subjects, but instead assigned to a position of unawareness, unconsciousness, and sheer nothingness. There is no mention of the name of the photographer, but according to the BP website the photograph was taken in 1926. The website of the Petroleum Industry Museum of Iran, when consulted in 2019, described the photograph as follows: “A geologist mapping near the Asmari mountains.” In this description, tellingly, there is no acknowledgement of the presence of the Bakhtiyari man standing beside the geologist. We do not know who this man was, why he is standing near the geologist, or what was on the sign he is holding. All of these things were clearly not important to the person who archived the photo and, as a result, the Bakhtiyari man’s subjectivity has been erased. From the photograph itself, it can be surmised that he may not have even been aware that he

⁵¹⁹ Van Alphen, “Symptoms of Discursivity,” 30.

⁵²⁰ Van Alphen, 30.

⁵²¹ Miriam Bruhn and Francisco A. Gallego, “Good, Bad, and Ugly Colonial Activities: Do They Matter for Economic Development?” *Review of Economics and Statistics* 94, no. 2 (May 2012): 433–61, https://doi.org/10.1162/REST_a_00218.

⁵²² In later years, local agencies resisted the colonial actions of the oil company. As Sharham Khosravi notes: “I have heard many times that Bakhtiyaris took money and did not do the job. They were responsible for the security of the roads but did not follow the contract. All this shows that the British company did not have full control” (private communication).

was being photographed, as he does not look into the camera. As I was writing this chapter, the website of the Petroleum Industry Museum was updated and the photograph is now presented as evidence of the interference of the Russians and the British in Iran.⁵²³ This shows that the museum continues to focus on the Western character in the photo rather than on the Bakhtiyari worker.

On the BP website, the same photograph also appears under the entry for WWII. The description of the photograph given there, “a BP geologist using instruments to conduct a survey in Persia, 1926. A local guide stands by his side,” is followed by an account of BP’s activities during WWII. Here, the presence of the Bakhtiyari man is acknowledged, but his role in the geological survey – beyond being a guide – is not specified; he is reduced to no more than a bystander. The text accompanying the photo on this part of the BP website emphasizes how BP helped win WWII, decontextualizing the photograph from the state of the oil industry in the earlier period of the 1920s.⁵²⁴

This photograph, then, illustrates how the experience of the Bakhtiyaris is erased or marginalized in the archival memories created by the Petroleum Industry Museum and the BP website, in the service of, respectively, an anti-Western agenda and a pro-petroleum one. The erasure of the Bakhtiyari man’s subjectivity in Figure 7.2 is present not only in the descriptions of the photograph, but also in its composition. The geologist’s active stance, looking through the survey instrument, contrasts starkly with the Bakhtiyari man’s passive, observant one. There is also a physical distance between the Bakhtiyari man and the geologist, separating the former from the act of mapping by the latter that is being documented by the photographer. All these elements conspire to deny the Bakhtiyari man, despite his manifest presence, an actantial position and subjectivity.

The “nothingness” of the position of Bakhtiyaris is also emphasized elsewhere on the BP website. The section labelled “Our history” contains a subsection titled “First oil – 1901-1908,” which features photographs of D’Arcy, Reynolds, and Bradshaw, as well as photographs of the first well and some documents. The last two photographs in this subsection portray delivery drivers of the early days of the oil industry in the US. In this collection of eight photos referring to the early history of BP, there is not a single reference to the Bakhtiyaris,

⁵²³ The description of the photograph has also been changed to “Nofuz Rusie va Englis Dar Iran” (“The Russian and British Interfere in Iran”).

⁵²⁴ “Through World War II – 1925-1945 | Who We Are | Home,” bp.com, accessed October 2, 2020, <https://www.bp.com/en/global/corporate/who-we-are/our-history/through-world-war-two.html>.

underlining how their role in the creation of the oil industry in Iran is still being ignored by BP, even a century later.⁵²⁵

Songs of the Dead suggests that, besides the fact that the Bakhtiari workers had no choice with regard to their role in the oil industry and little understanding of the extraction process other than through the daily orders they received, a feeling of nothingness was also produced as a result of the semi-colonial characteristics of the oil company. Mandani remembers how, as a result of the inhumane working conditions, Almas, one of the workers, went insane. He recounts an occasion when Almas was shouting and telling other workers that he was not Almas anymore, but had turned into a frog.⁵²⁶ Mandani describes Almas as looking at the oil well derricks and saying: “These irons made me a frog. I am not Almas. I am a frog!”⁵²⁷ He continues:

Was I a wise man?! [Now that] I said YES [to their orders] so many times, I turned into a frog. Oh God, oh man, oh prophet, I am not Almas. I am a frog. The mountains and valleys were uneasy because of me. Now, any dog and any person can come and give me orders. All the thieves have now turned to guardians. The bastard Tomson is cursing me. I am a frog, I am not Almas! [...] Mister, I am a frog. If I was Almas, I would make you blind.⁵²⁸

Here, Almas questions the wisdom of having obeyed orders for so long that he no longer has a sense of himself as a human being capable of saying no to orders. That they can indeed no longer say no is made clear in the novel when, together with Mandani and other workers, Almas asks for a day off. When Mirza Ebrahim, the head of the workers, hears about their request, he forces them to replace a soil hill during the night. When the workers protest, they are made to work the day after as well, and the next night. It is during the second night that Almas loses his temper and utters the above-cited words.

Almas’s sense of losing himself and being reduced to a frog, an unvalued animal that is also ranked below other animals (such as the dogs Almas mentions), is a consequence of the workers’ inability to take actions and decisions, and of their obligation to say yes to their supervisors. Almas curses Tomson, a British employee of the oil company. While he is shouting, Tomson asks Mirza what happened to Almas, and Mirza replies that Almas’s father has died and that he is crying for him. Mirza is also the one who calms Almas down, telling him that Tomson has heard him and has ordered him to be fired. Almas replies to Mirza: “my

⁵²⁵ “First Oil - 1901-1908 | Our History | About BP | BP Global,” bp.com, accessed March 1, 2017, <http://www.bp.com/en/global/corporate/about-bp/our-history/first-oil.html>.

⁵²⁶ *Almas* is the Persian word for diamond.

⁵²⁷ Keshvari, *Songs of the Dead*, 56.

⁵²⁸ Keshvari, 57.

father is not dead. I am myself dead. Worse than that, I have turned into a frog.”⁵²⁹ By this, Almas means that his subjectivity has been completely negated; he is less than a dead person, less than a human, essentially nothing.

This sense of nothingness reoccurs in the novel when Mandani tells his nephew that the workers could not show any reaction to the death of their loved ones or the maltreatment of their fellow workers. Van Alphen believes that, apart from the inability to make decisions, it is also the inability to react to the death or suffering of others that negates subjectivity, again taking the camps of WWII as his example:

When a family member, a friend, or even a total stranger is being maltreated or killed, one is supposed to interfere. Failure to do so corrodes one’s subjectivity. In the camps, however, inmates were constantly in the situation of not being able to interfere although the situation asked for it.⁵³⁰

In this situation, the death of the other becomes a failed experience for those who survive. As Van Alphen adds: “the consequences were not so much for those who were being maltreated or killed (they were going to be killed anyway), but for those who had to watch it.”⁵³¹ In order to make this no longer a traumatic, failed experience, it is necessary, according to Van Alphen, “to abjure the concept of subjectivity that associates passive looking on with morally weak or not fully grown subjectivity.”⁵³² This results in a different notion of subjectivity that would allow an acknowledgment of the power relations that rendered intervention impossible, while still recognizing those in the camps – and the Bakhtiyari workers unable to help Almas – as subjects.

Songs of the Dead makes clear that Mandani struggles with feelings of guilt concerning his forced passivity. He describes how, in the early days of the oil industry, the workers waited for the announcements of deaths made by Dr. Young, the physician of the company, who would curtly say, of a worker involved in an accident or suffering from disease, “he died,” after which everyone would continue working as if nothing happened. Mandani is equally incapable of reacting to the deaths of his family members. When Yadegar, his only son, dies from illness while he is escaping the guards of the state after the 1953 demonstration against the coup d’état in Masjed Soleyman, Mandani is not even able to cry at his gravesite as they never find out where he was buried. When Mandani asks nomads where they buried Yadegar, they reply: “to

⁵²⁹ Keshvari, 58.

⁵³⁰ Van Alphen, “Symptoms of Discursivity,” 30.

⁵³¹ Van Alphen, 31.

⁵³² Keshvari, *Songs of the Dead*, 31.

be honest, we buried him during the night. It was still dark when we began our journey again.”⁵³³ Mandani then asks for “any sign? Any stone? Hill? Tree?,” but the man can only say that “it was in a valley.”⁵³⁴ Although Mandani searches for Yadegar’s grave for years, asking many people, travelers and nomads alike, he cannot find it. Consequently, the death of Yadegar remains unbelievable for Mandani and his wife, a traumatic failed experience: “How do you know he is death when you haven’t even seen him?”⁵³⁵ The story of the deaths of his wife and his only son, together with those of his fellow workers, reveals that Mandani felt absolutely powerless and in a position of nothingness in relation to the incidents that happened to and around him, and that can all be related, directly or indirectly, to the oil industry.

If the contribution of the Bakhtiyari worker in Figure 7.2 to the oil industry, by guiding and assisting the geologist, is ignored in how the photograph is framed by the Petroleum Industry Museum and the BP website, the novel allows the workers and other locals that died as a result of the oil industry in Masjed Soleyman and elsewhere over the course of the 20th century to be remembered as those who built and kept the industry going, even as the grueling work ruined their bodies and minds. As the novel makes clear through the character of Mandani, the locals were unable to make sense of their experiences at the time because they were made, by the British and by their own leaders, to feel that they were nothing and that their lives were expendable, but in Mandani’s retirement their story can finally be told as something else than a failed experience, and as turning them back into subjects.

⁵³³ Keshvari, 200.

⁵³⁴ Keshvari, 200.

⁵³⁵ Keshvari, 201.

3. Lack of a Plot or Narrative Frame



Figure 7.9: Photograph showing workers fitting an underground oil pipe⁵³⁶

A third factor that can lead to failed experiences, according to Van Alphen, is being in a “narrative vacuum.”⁵³⁷ Van Alphen describes this vacuum by explaining that it occurs when those involved in a traumatic situation like the Holocaust cannot understand the connections between events, or relate them to the past and present. Although the situations of the Holocaust and the oil encounter in Iran are in many ways different, both produced failed experiences. The camp inmates and the workers were both unable to say what kind of event they expected and to refer to themselves as “I” in telling their memories. Van Alphen adds that, in a traumatic situation like this, “you cannot tell where in the event you are standing” because you simply do not know where you started and where you will end up, or what you can expect:

Events never stand on their own. We experience events not as isolated happenings, and happenings cannot be experienced in isolation. Events always have a prehistory, and they are themselves again the prehistory of events that are still going to happen.... It is, however, the

⁵³⁶ This photo is taken from the Petromuseum.ir website. It does not have a caption or catalogue number. <http://www.petromuseum.ir/pages/once-upon-a-time-archive>.

⁵³⁷ Van Alphen, “Symptoms of Discursivity,” 33.

form in which we experience and represent events that turns events into a continuous sequence.⁵³⁸

When the form in which we experience and represent events does not allow us to turn the events into a continuous sequence, a failed experience ensues.

The photograph shown in Figure 7.3 is not displayed on the website of the Petroleum Industry Museum of Iran. I received a copy of it during my visit to the archive of the Petroleum Industry Museum in Tehran in March 2016. I decided to use this photograph for this section because there is so much going on in it, without the elements quite coming together. First of all, the working conditions under which workers are putting a pipe inside the ground appear very chaotic. Second, there are many workers around the pipe who do not seem to be there to work. Third, no attention is paid by most of the workers to the action of the photographer, and the workers are looking in different directions.

Looking at this photo from the early years of industrialization in Iran, the process it depicts could be framed in a Western narrative of industrialization, but not in any of the narrative frames available to the locals. The position of the British man with the hat standing on the left side of the photograph is one of control: he knows why he is there and what the oil pipe is for. However, the position of the Bakhtiyari workers is more difficult to characterize, as some are working and some appear to be just standing by. The man on the left side of the photo takes a position which is roughly equivalent to that of the British Man and could be a Bakhtiyari foreman. The fact that he is positioned behind the British man signals his lower status. The workers themselves are clearly not in control but being overseen. Signaling this is the fact that they are all standing on the opposite side of the trench from the British man and the Bakhtiyari foreman, or in the trench, occupying a lower position in the photograph's composition. Some of the workers appear fascinated by the photographer, while others remain focused on the job at hand or look in the British man's direction.

The fact that the Bakhtiyaris are portrayed wearing their traditional clothing not only makes clear that they are unskilled workers, but also points to their pastoral lifestyle, which they suddenly had to give up in order to become oil workers. This is the most repeated idea in all the stories about Masjed Soleyman written from the perspective of the locals. Although stories of Masjed Soleyman were published only belatedly, the central theme of many of these stories is the contrast between the pastoralist lifestyle of the Bakhtiyaris and the western, capitalist lifestyle imposed by the oil company. Touraj Atabaki's classification of Bakhtiyari

⁵³⁸ Van Alphen, 33.

workers as unskilled workers highlights that, for them, everything was new in the early stages of the oil industry. Local workers had no previous knowledge of this industry and their being put to work within it was sudden and unforeseen, meaning that they could not fit their experiences as oil workers into any established narrative frame.

As Atabaki notes, in its early days, the oil industry in the remote areas of southwestern Iran, and far from main cities such as Tehran, Isfahan, and Tabriz, was similar to a closed factory, having minimal interaction with the host country, except for when it came to taking its workforce from local tribes. Kaveh Ehsani points to the total control and isolation of the oil industry by the APOC:

From the beginning of the oil industry in 1908, the access and control over “the field”, which included the proto-urban zones and settlements that grew around oil wells, pumping stations, and service centers for pipelines and transport and communication lines servicing the oil industry, were treated jealously by the oil company, sometimes to the point of paranoia. When Wassmus, the German consul at Bushehr, went for an unannounced visit to Masjed Soleyman in 1910, he was stopped by the company's Bakhtiyari guards, and expelled from the region “looking very disconsolate”. The entire region surrounding Masjed Soleyman was treated as simply off-limits to anyone, and assiduously guarded as a protected enclave by the APOC.⁵³⁹

Iranians who lived in other parts of the country had even less access to the oil industry than Wassmus, and were consequently unable to follow the strategic industrialization that was taking place in the midst of WWI.

The isolation of the oil industry – the way in which it was shrouded in secrecy – is one of the main factors that made it difficult for local Iranians to tell the story of what was happening in the oil encounter “as a meaningful coherence” in Van Alphen’s terms. Moreover, preceding the oil encounter in the region, there had not been anything remotely similar. Everything in this situation, therefore, was so new and unexpected that it could not be reasonably connected to anything else by the locals.

In the photograph, the Bakhtiyari workers do not strike an orderly pose like the British man pictured, but seem to be standing randomly around the pipeline being built. Keshvari’s novel similarly lacks a linear, straightforward plot and focuses on Mandani trying to order, without much success, his disordered memories. In his effort to put the puzzle pieces of his memories together and create a logical frame, he returns to each incident several times, never assigning it a definitive place or arriving at a fully coherent account.

⁵³⁹ Ehsani, “The Social History of Labor in the Iranian Oil Industry,” 119.

In *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma Narrative and History*, Cathy Caruth describes how traumatic experiences repeat themselves. She uses Freud's ideas, developed in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, about catastrophic events and the reaction of those who passed through these events. Caruth writes: "Perplexed by the terrifying literal nightmares of battlefield survivors and the repetitive reenactments of people who have experienced painful events, Freud wonders at the peculiar and sometimes uncanny way in which catastrophic events seem to repeat themselves for those who have passed through them."⁵⁴⁰ Caruth emphasizes Freud's point that "these repetitions are particularly striking because they seem not to be initiated by the individual's own acts but rather appear as the possession of some people by a sort of fate, a series of painful events to which they are subjected, and which seem to be entirely outside their wish or control."⁵⁴¹ According to Caruth, what Freud means by trauma is a "wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind"; the wound of the mind affects the "mind's experience of time, self and the world," and, unlike the wound of the body, is not fully known and available to consciousness "until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor."⁵⁴²

In *Songs of the Dead*, Mandani, as both the protagonist and the storyteller, shares his traumatic and failed experiences in a non-chronological order, repeating them several times. He does not finish recounting an event in one setting, but goes back to the event several times, sharing what he remembers. For example, he often repeats the fact that the location of his son's grave is unknown. Each time, he retells the story of his son's death, adding details, and then jumps to another memory, as if it is not possible for him to finish telling this traumatic experience, as if he cannot fully grasp it. It is as if, every time, he is trying to remember more accurately, but in the end a perfect memory and fully coherent story always remain outside his grasp.

4. *Inadequate Plots or Narrative Frames*

The last but not least of the obstacles to representing trauma involves survivors not fully being able to reconstruct what happened to them in the past. Van Alphen believes that sometimes a failed experience is so grinding that one's self is killed in the process, which creates a narrative paradox, as it is not possible, within established narrative modes, to have an essentially dead person tell the story of their continuing life:

⁵⁴⁰ Caruth, 1.

⁵⁴¹ Caruth, 2.

⁵⁴² Caruth, 3.

As I explained earlier, [in a traumatic experience] it was necessary to kill the self in order to live. But by means of which conventional plot or narrative framework can this be told? In terms of no traditional narrative continuum is it possible to have died in the past and to continue living in the present. . . . this implies that the basic feeling of being dead, or of continuing living as a dead person, is not narratable.⁵⁴³

In outlining this obstacle, Van Alphen gives the example of the death of camp survivors, whose life after the camps does not count as living. This is not a symbolic death, but a real death of the self, as becomes clear from the statement of one of the survivors cited by Van Alphen: “I died in Auschwitz, but no one knows it.”⁵⁴⁴

As previously mentioned, in *Songs of the Dead*, Almas, one of the workers, completely loses himself while obeying both the Khans and the British, and calls himself a frog. His condition is such that he cannot see himself as a human being anymore. As Van Alphen notes, the failed experience can be so destructive that representing it is impossible, because no (human) survivor remains, even when some do live on. The situation is so difficult or the victims so dehumanized that the survivor cannot be fully alive by the end of it, becoming unable to put together a story or to pass the story along. Another possibility is that the situation is so jarring that survivors cannot believe that they survived it.

In describing the meaning of trauma, Caruth analyses the poem cited by Freud in his analysis of catastrophic experiences. The poem, called “Jerusalem Liberation,” is a romantic epic by Torquato Tasso, the Italian poet, and prompts Caruth to ask: “is the trauma the encounter with death, or [the] ongoing experience of having survived it?”⁵⁴⁵ She adds that the characteristics of a traumatic experience relate to confronting death rather than life; trauma is about confronting catastrophic events that keep repeating themselves for the survivors, who are, as it were, killed each time they remember the events, and yet have no way to escape them as they are not actually dead. According to Caruth, it is “the oscillation between a crisis of death and the correlative crisis of life; between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival.”⁵⁴⁶ This relation between trauma and death, I contend, also shapes *Songs of the Dead* and is very much connected to Mandani’s position as the survivor of the failed experience of the oil encounter, which he feels has not just

⁵⁴³ Van Alphen, “Symptoms of Discursivity,” 35.

⁵⁴⁴ Van Alphen, 35. Although there is no doubt that the oil company and the camp differ in many important respects, the experiences of the workers and inmates can both be seen as “failed experiences” in Van Alphen’s sense.

⁵⁴⁵ Caruth, 7.

⁵⁴⁶ Caruth, 7.

taken the lives of his co-workers, son, and wife, but also his own, even as he continues to live. In his narration, he mentions several times that life is unbearable for him.

Mandani is a traumatized character, who feels responsible for telling the story of those who did not survive. His account focuses on the conditions under which the non-survivors died and the causes of their deaths, all of which are linked to the oil industry. From the beginning of the novel, Mandani talks about his memories of having to deal with the corpses of his fellow workers, of going up and down the hills to bury the corpse of Gholamshah. Later on, as he recounts his fragmented memories, he remembers all his friends who died next to the well, by the derrick, or from illnesses, regretting the fact that their deaths will be forgotten. He also narrates how he was once talking to his son Yadegar and complaining that the industry was killing people, and that any activity resulted in workers dying without leaving any trace, except in his stories, which do not amount to actual memories:

Mandani put his head up. His cheeks were wet [with tears]: All of these are fake offers! Who are the noblest of creatures? In these days [after the coup d'état], even dogs have more feelings than human beings. Who remembers that there was a man called Baran, who was barbecued by the fire of the well? Who remembers Gholamshah, whose corpse was carried by a donkey, and was so stinky that everybody fled from it until it reached Masjed Soleyman? Who remembers Karam, who was in the prison of Sheikh Khaz'al for two years and seven months, and who, when he was released, fell sick and died after three months? Who remembers Morad, who was killed by the gas of the well? Do you know these people because I told their stories, or have you seen them yourself? I swear to God, if you have a child, your child won't remember their names!⁵⁴⁷

Yadegar belongs to a new generation and disagrees with his illiterate father, as he believes stories can last, especially in writing: "My child will remember and will write all these. He will write so that they will not be forgotten."⁵⁴⁸ Of course, in the novel, this belief is itself undermined by Yadegar's death and his unmarked grave.

The story of his wife Shirin-Jan's death constitutes another unacceptable plot for Mandani. Her death is the most traumatic one for him and is directly due to petroleum as a material substance. One day, while Mandani is waiting for Shirin-Jan to come home, he sees Golabetoon and Abrisham, two women who usually accompany Shirin-Jan in bringing oil for cooking. They tell him that they saw Shirin-Jan's bucket, but not her. Mandani runs to the pit of oil in the downhill part of their district:

⁵⁴⁷ Keshvari, *Songs of the Dead*, 178.

⁵⁴⁸ Keshvari, 178.

He looked at the oil pit. He swallowed the stinky and unbearable smell of the gas of the pit, took off his shoes, and folded his trousers up to his knees. With the stress that was in his heart, he stepped into the oil pit, feeling dizzy from the gas. He walked on his unsteady feet until his foot touched something soft and he whispered “Shirin-Jan!” He wanted to scream. The smell of gas carried him to the inside of the oil pit. He bent over and put his hand into the pit. After a while, his hands touched the underarm of a woman who was none other than the owner of the bucket.⁵⁴⁹

Mandani describes how his life becomes dark and unbearable after this incident:

The valley was turning in front of his eyes. He went back and pulled the woman’s hands... He stepped out of the pit, falling to his knees as he laid Shirin-Jan next to the bucket. Her face, blackened with oil, was circling in front of his eyes. He closed his eyes and held his face in his hands to calm down. He heard Golabetoon and Abrisham’s cries. As he opened his eyes, he put a finger on the blackened vein on Shirin-Jan’s neck and his forehead on her oily shoulder and cried with a muffled sound...⁵⁵⁰

Here, petroleum is represented most directly as a noxious physical substance: it reeks, it is black and sticky, and the gases coming off it cause dizziness. Instead of turning oil into a metaphor, as happened in most of the modern fictions I have studied so far, Mandani presents it as literally deadly. For Mandani, it is oil that has murdered all those whose deaths he has described. Significantly, although Mandani mentions the dead from the beginning of his account, until the scene describing the death of Shirin-Jan, no murderer is identified. It is only in this scene, the climax of Mandani’s story, that it becomes clear that petroleum is being indicted as having killed many Bakhtiyaris who worked in or were dependent on the industry, while others were imprisoned as a result of the political atmosphere induced by the industry, inciting them to escape to and die in the mountains.

Conclusion

As I wrote in my Introduction, each chapter in this study is dedicated to a particular era of modern Iran. This last chapter, however, has covered no specific era, but more than a century of the presence and subsequent absence of petroleum in Masjed Soleyman. I would like to call it the “Era of Silence concerning the Bakhtiyari workers,” a period for most of which the experiences of the local Bakhtiyaris (except the Khans and higher-ranked members), despite their crucial role in the oil industry, were silenced and, as I have made clear through my discussions of the photographs from the Petroleum Industry Museum, erased. Only recently

⁵⁴⁹ Keshvari, 238.

⁵⁵⁰ Keshvari, 238.

has this silence been broken in Iranian literature, most notably, I would argue, in Keshvari's *Songs of the Dead*. As one of the many books published recently about Iran's petroleum regions and industry, *Songs of the Dead* has not yet received the attention of critics and literary experts of modern Persian literature. In this chapter, I have analyzed it as portraying both the silencing of the Bakhtiyaris, which rendered their experiences inaccessible even to themselves, except as traumatic returns, and the emergence of ways to articulate these failed experiences in the form of narratives that will ensure that these experiences will not be forgotten.

Songs of the Dead presents the Bakhtiyaris as silenced but capable of belatedly finding ways to speak, just as the photographs of the early days of the discovery of oil in Masjed Soleyman allow the perceptive viewer who is willing to look beyond the framings of the photographs by the Petroleum Industry Museum and the BP website to witness the role played by the Bakhtiyaris in the establishment and growth of the oil industry and the city of Masjed Soleyman. In Keshvari's novel, the dead whose stories are recorded by Mandani – Karam, Gholamshah, Baran, Yadegar, Golabetoon, and Shirin-Jan – together represent the Bakhtiyaris who had their lives disrupted and taken by the oil industry. The city that they lived and died in is built on their labor but never recognized their contribution. While the oil industry allowed the Bakhtiyaris to settle in houses, to go to school, to have contact with the world outside their tribe, and to enjoy roads, electricity, oil, gas, and other modern conveniences, it also took their life and turned their experiences into failed ones by poverty, war, and displacement.

In order to be accountable myself, I must add that the history of the Bakhtiyari tribe and their interactions with other Iranians and foreigners, especially at petroleum extraction sites, is a very sensitive topic and that this chapter has not covered all there is to say: other ghosts remain that should also be listened to. However, through *Songs of the Dead* and the photographs from the Petroleum Industry Museum of Iran we can get a sense of the traumatic conditions in which the unskilled workers in the early days of the oil industry lived, worked, and frequently died.