

Narrative as a Testimony: Second-Person Narrative Technique of Atiq Rahimi in Relentless Odyssey of Resilience and Retribution of Dastaguir

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Abstract: This paper examines the second-person narrative technique employed by Atiq Rahimi in *Earth and Ashes*, focusing on its transformative role in conveying themes of resilience and retribution. By situating the reader within Dastaguir's perspective, Rahimi creates an immersive experience that heightens emotional engagement and fosters empathy. The narrative is compelling enough as a reiteration of the trauma and shared suffering of Afghanistan's turbulent past, and Dastaguir symbolizes the strength of those minds that violence and sorrow have touched. It softens the line between the reader and the protagonist to challenge the readers to respond to the moral realities of Dastaguir's plight. This analysis shows the importance Rahimi places on the use of a narrative technique in working out the themes of memory, guilt, and the attempt to pursue revenge, which subtly enhance the understanding of effects of psychological warfare found within war literature. The results will show potential routes for further research on the topic of using second-person narratives in various pieces of war literature, indicating a broader potential applicability of the method for narrating trauma and survival.

Keywords: Second-person narrative, Testimony, Trauma, Resilience, Retribution, Atiq Rahimi, Dastaguir

Introduction:

Atiq Rahimi's *Earth and Ashes* (*Khakestar-o-Khak*) is one major contribution to contemporary Afghan literature. It tries to analyse the deep impact war brings on an individual as well as collective societies [1]. Published in minimalist style, the novella tells the story of Dastaguir, an old man, who embarks on a tragic journey to tell his son, Murad, the news of the destruction of their village and that his relatives are lost. Situated within the context of the Soviet invasion in Afghanistan in the 1980s, *Earth and Ashes* probes into issues of loss, despair, resilience, and moral ambiguity. It stands out in the body of Afghan war literature because of its unrelenting exercise of emotional and psychological trauma; there is an important place occupied in these discourses for *Earth and Ashes* regarding the lived experiences of most of the Afghans during a time of deep conflict (Khan 187-196), (Roston 105).

That is a unique narration style of Atiq Rahimi, in Afghan writing, interlacing the elements of allegory and realism; the style he used for writing is mainly spare and elegiac yet included with crucial emotional intensity and philosophical thinking on human suffering as well as survival (Mozafari 105). Sometimes, often involving unorthodox techniques of narration like fragmented narration and shifts of perspective that makes reflection on the cacophony of war and trauma. Among the curiously singled-out tools applied in *Earth and Ashes*, perhaps the most distinguished is second-person narration - an extremely rarely used technique of narration in modern literature [4]. This method of narration

allows Rahimi to challenge other forms of narrative, to immediately involve the reader in the protagonist's journey and consequently, in a powerful interdependent connection between the narrative and its readership.

The second-person narrative is a powerful literary device that serves multiple functions. It creates an immersive experience by directly addressing the reader, which blurs the boundary between narrator and audience, compelling the reader to inhabit the protagonist's emotional and psychological landscape. This method is usually employed in literature for the creation of sympathy and for heavy emotions; a reader gets positioned in the inner life of the character (Saadah 54). For instance, in "*Earth and Ashes*," Rahimi applies the second person both in constructing the novel itself as testimonial and as asking the readers to witness Dastaguir's pain, repentance, and endurance facing heavy loss.

This paper focuses on Rahimi's strategic use of the second-person narrative technique in *Earth and Ashes* and how it transforms the novella into a form of testimony. By employing this narrative device, Rahimi moves beyond merely telling a story and instead constructs a narrative that compels the reader to engage with the protagonist's trauma as a personal and collective testimony of war. This paper will discuss how this approach enhances thematic development in resilience and retribution, which are very fundamental aspects of Dastaguir's journey (Qader 122). Through a second-person point of view in narration, Rahimi takes the reader into a moral and emotional spectrum of observation where the narrative becomes a universalist account of existence and revenge.

There are three central aims of this study. First, it studies Rahimi's use of the second-person point of view in *Earth and Ashes* and investigates how such narrative technique may immerse the reader into the protagonist's consciousness (Kingsbury 639). Second, it seeks to show how the structure of the second-person narrative re-contextualizes the novella into a testimony-as it pens down the account of trauma of the protagonist simultaneously being a wider witness to the historical context of Afghanistan's war-affected landscape. Finally, the paper investigates the emotional and psychological effects of the second-person narrative on the reader, examining how this technique enhances the reader's connection to the themes of resilience and retribution, and how it elevates the novel from personal tragedy to a collective meditation on the consequences of war.

1. I. Symbolism of Resilience within the Narrative

Resilience of Dastaguir is the overarching theme seen in the whole tale of *Earth and Ashes*, but it also signifies Dastaguir's inner turmoil and outer conflicts. The idea of resilience in the novel goes beyond to Dastaguir's emotional and psychological endurance as traverse through the traumas of war loss, and senselessness of living.

1.1 I.I Character Analysis and Development

Dastaguir's resilience is demonstrated through his physical journey to deliver devastating news to his son, Murad, about the destruction of their village. His endurance is not only physical, walking hours to the coal mine, but also deeply emotional, as he grapples with how to convey the tragic death of his family. Dastaguir represents silent strength, carrying heavy sorrow but he still strives to do the right thing as a father. His monologue describes this perpetual tension between his intense suffering and the need he has to move forward in that gruelling task:

"The truth is, your heart is burdened. It's been a long time since a friend or even a stranger listened to you" (Rahimi 10).

Rahimi brings out the emotional isolation of Dastaguir in these lines, all but underlining the above-said fact that resistance has to do with carrying one's pain silently, as there is hardly any comfort or understanding from others.

1.2 I.II Symbolism of Resilience

Correspondingly, through landscape and imagery, too, the novel symbolizes Dastaguir's endurance: The unforgiving Afghan countryside, plagued by war, parallels his ravaged mental landscape. Descriptions of the novel have often referred to the coal mines while relating the dismal future of Dastaguir. The use of ashes in the novel, for example, acts as the representation of destruction and survival (Qader). While all were reduced into ash, it signifies that despite the destruction, life still goes

on. Rahimi uses this imagery to refer to the fact that, just like the land, Dastaguir needs to arise out of the ashes of his past, however broken. In one poignant scene, as Dastaguir contemplates how to break the news to Murad, he reflects on the inevitability of hardship, "These hardships are everyone's fate, war has no mercy ..." (Rahimi 24).

This reflection not only highlights the collective suffering experienced by all the characters in the novel, according to Bénédicte Monfort, but also underscores the universal nature of resilience — everyone must endure, even when there is no escape from the relentless cruelty of war (Monfort 65-66).

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Rahimi through the words "You don't want to dream. But the heaviness of your eyes has crushed your will..." (Rahimi 27) enforces this by deploying the second-person narration feature, pulling the readers into Dastaguir's world, allowing them to feel a sense of his helplessness. It acts as a force that maximizes shared resilience since the reader has been put in a position where he shares emotionally in what Dastaguir is going through: feeling the depth of despair, yet knowing he needs to go on.

Even when Dastaguir questions his faith and wonders about the futility of his actions, on the journey, a resilient voyage in the very core of the human spirit, despite overwhelming odds (Hiddleston 10).

2. II. The Second-Person Narrative Technique

2.1 II.I Literary Definition and Purpose

The narration in the second person is a literary technique that involves the narrator addressing the reader as 'you' directly and putting him in the place of the protagonist or the central figure of the happening. It is far from the usual first- and third-person perspectives, wherein the latter is inclusive of the reader into the events of the story, making him feel that he is active in participating in it. This narrative method attempts to break down the distance between the character and the audience, creating a sense of immediacy and proximity (Fludernik 152).

Historically, second-person narration has been rare throughout the literature for a very long time, while its application has been various: to provide readers with special narrative experiences. Early examples include *Bright Lights, Big City* by Jay McInerney (1984), Lorrie Moore's *Self-Help* (1985) and Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* (1979) in which the second-person voice captures alienation and disorientation in modern life. More recently, writers have adopted this perspective, through which the readers' feelings are contested in terms of identity and agency, especially in tales of trauma or moral condensation. In modern usage, the second-person narrative has become an account that heightens the inner emotional quotient of the characters, drawing the readers into their minds (Richardson 20).

2.2 II.I Rahimi's Application in *Earth and Ashes*

The second-person narration in *Earth and Ashes* by Atiq Rahimi is one of the most conscious and potent stylistic decisions. Thus, by addressing Dastaguir as "you," the narration immediately addresses itself to the reader, making what could be a second-hand tale of violence personal and immediate (Karmakar and Khan 12-15). This is especially effective in the context of Dastaguir's journey, as he travels to inform his son of the destruction of their village and the deaths of their family. The use of the second-person perspective reflects the protagonist's disorientation and psychic fragmentation; it weighs on the reader with his trauma.

The adoption of this perspective by Rahimi in *Earth and Ashes* raises the emotional impact one sees in the novella. The second-person voice permits Rahimi to convey the reader into Dastaguir's internal world as reflected in the words, "Why have you come, Father? Is everything all right?" he asks. For more than a week now, this face with this question has haunted" (Rahimi 12). The reader is placed in the position of Dastaguir, feeling the pain, confusion, and responsibility that he carries (Ullah 5). The second-person perspective allows Rahimi to convey not just the external events of war but the internal devastation it wreaks on individuals, making the story both personal and universal. (Lohani and Lohani 3-5)) (Sapkota)

2.3 II.II Reader Identification and Immersion

The most striking effect of the second-person point of view in *Earth and Ashes* is how the lines between the reader and the protagonist get blurred. With the "you" addressed to the reader, Rahimi annihilates the distance between the audience and the character and creates a sense of identification that would be impossible in any first- or third-person narrative (Herman 5). The reader ceases to be an on-looker but is thrown into the narrative to experience the agony and desperation of the protagonist-Dastaguir firsthand.

This narrative technique fosters empathy, as the reader is forced to confront Dastaguir's suffering in a deeply personal way. The second-person perspective brings the reader closer to the character's emotional struggles, as they are directly addressed and implicated in his experiences. For instance, when Rahimi writes, "You have no choice but to carry this burden," the reader is invited to share in the protagonist's sense of helplessness and grief. By positioning the reader as both an observer and a participant, Rahimi heightens the emotional stakes of the story, ensuring that the reader cannot escape the weight of Dastaguir's tragedy.

This narrative technique makes the reader empathize, for one is forced to confront Dastaguir's suffering in a deeply personal way. In the second-person point of view, the reader is included in the character's emotional struggle as he is literally addressed and implicated in his experiences. For example, whenever Rahimi writes, "The truth is, your heart is burdened. It's been a long time since a friend or even a stranger listened to you. A long time since a friend or stranger warmed your heart with their words," (Rahimi, 10) the reader is allowed to accompany the protagonist in his helplessness and grief (Singh 12). As an insider, who has been placed by the author as a witness, Rahimi increases the drama of the novel and seals off all avenues for the reader to avoid carrying the burden of Dastaguir's tragedy.

3. III. Narrative as Testimony

3.1 III.I Testimony and Trauma

In war literature, narrative as testimony plays a very important role as a record and, simultaneously, reflection on the trauma of war. Testimony in a context of war transcends the individual sense to instead become a collective memory. In testimonial literature often authors try to remember collective suffering through narration of personal experiences where commemorations of atrocities committed during the war and losses during it do not fade away from memory but are also not ignored. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub posits that, testimony is "a mode of bearing witness that does not simply report what can be known but also what can never be fully understood or put into words. It operates at the place of memory and trauma." (Felman and Laub 5).

Thus, narrative testimony is quite pivotal in war literature since it speaks out for those who, in the last resort, have had to put up with something so unbearable. These testimonies are always an attempt to capture the incompleteness of such experiences since trauma is very inexpressible and cannot be expressed in words. The act of narrating trauma is an attempt to take the chaos of war when words can never fully encapsulate emotional and psychological devastating possibilities for those who have lived through such experiences.

3.2 III.II *Earth and Ashes* as Testimonial Literature

Atiq Rahimi's *Earth and Ashes* can be read as a work of testimonial literature, offering a poignant and intimate portrayal of Afghanistan's war-torn history. Set against the backdrop of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the novella centres on Dastaguir, an elderly man who embarks on a journey to deliver devastating news to his son: their village has been destroyed, and most of their family members have been killed. And finally, at the core of this personal loss stands a reflection of the greater annihilation that Afghanistan has had to suffer through at the hands of a war- spanning years, casting Dastaguir as a representative observer to the greater national tragedy (Adelkhah 142), (Kingsbury 641).

The story of Dastaguir thus tends to be both physical and emotional and psychological as he tries to come to grips with the extent of his loss and burden of responsibility. A weight of death, along with its silence afterward, is carried around by him. Atiq Rahimi touchingly captures the weight of loss, writing, "You carry with you the burden of death, and the silence that follows it" (Rahimi 53). In this context, the weight has become a metaphor of the shared trauma which a nation ultimately had to suffer through at the hands of war. While looking through Dastaguir's eyes, the barren wastelands and societies of Afghanistan are visible; in the current context, his private grief becomes a symbol of the

collective of the nation.

Earth and Ashes is structured by Rahimi as a testimony, challenging readers to bear witness to Afghan history through the perspective of one such broken individual. In this way, Dastaguir's personal narrative grows into a symbol of collective trauma of Afghanistan.

3.3 III.III Second-Person Narrative as Testimonial Voice

In *Earth and Ashes*, second-person narration functions as bearing witness. In this narrative choice, the author puts the reader in the shoes of Dastaguir and positions the audience as active participants rather than a passive witness of his life. The second-person voice summons the reader to assume Dastaguir's role, to carry his burden of grief and loss. For instance, the narrative often begins sentences with "You," as in "You watch the dust rise over the ruins," forcing the reader to confront the destruction firsthand. By using the second-person perspective, Rahimi underscores the ethical responsibility of the reader to engage with the protagonist's trauma. The reader is no longer distant from the story but is drawn into the emotional core of the narrative, bearing witness to Dastaguir's suffering in a direct and personal manner. As critic Michael Rothberg notes in his analysis of trauma narratives, "The act of reading becomes a process of witnessing, implicating the reader in the ethical demand to acknowledge the suffering of others" (Rothberg 28).

Earth and Ashes forces the reader to confront the trauma suffered by Dastaguir, denying him catharsis, and, in extension, turning him into the equal victim of destruction of war and loss. This narrative decision makes the novella testamentary literature that memorializes Afghanistan's pain while ensuring that the story of the war victims would not be forgotten and devalued. The second-person voice of this narration will conscript the reader as a witness in this depository history, and through that act, it will create a dramatic ethical relationship between the narration and its public.

4. IV. Themes of Resilience and Retribution

4.1 IV.I Resilience as a Central Theme

In *Earth and Ashes*, Atiq Rahimi chisels Dastaguir as a living embodiment of resilience as the primary theme, in that he endures great personal loss but yet somehow conquers it with his sense of duty. Despite the destruction of his village and the slaying of all those connected to him, Dastaguir proceeds on a journey to inform his son of this tragic thing. His journey goes to prove the resilience of his emotions to continue living with such deep grief. This kind of survival instance speaks of the strength one needs to have and must be strong enough to fight every adversity he comes across, which is Dastaguir, navigating into life in an active way, as

Rahimi writes,

What is this, Dastaguir? Moments ago your heart was heavy. You wanted to talk to anyone about anything. Now, here is someone who'll listen to what lies in your heart, whose look alone is a comfort. Say something! Without taking your eyes off the hut, you answer, "Yes, brother. I was there. I saw everything. I saw my own death ..." You fall silent. If you get involved in a conversation, you might forget about the vehicle. (Rahimi 16)

Through the second-person narration Rahimi pours more focus into survival feelings, giving the reader intimate and visceral sensation about Dastaguir's struggles. The reason why second-person perspective makes this difference for the audience who has to take up Dastaguir's emotional burden: "No, brother, it's that I bear great sorrow and sorrow sometimes turns into a sword" (Rahimi 31). This sort of narration keeps throwing light on how relentless Dastaguir can get while the reader drifts into experiencing hardship.

Dastaguir's resilience is also presented in how he deals with the trauma of loss. Overwhelmed by the degree of grief, Dastaguir never goes under despair. Instead, his journey to find his son assumes the character of hope for the survival of at least some part of the family. As a scholar on trauma studies, Martine Veillet elaborates: "Rahimi's characters often reflect resilience through their capacity to act in the face of trauma, demonstrating that endurance is as much a psychological act as a physical one." Dastaguir's resilience is, therefore, both an emotional and physical act of survival (Veillet 34).

4.2 IV.II Retribution and Revenge

Beneath Dastaguir's resilience, lies the quiet, subtle undercurrents of revenge. In *Earth and Ashes*, the

protagonist sifts through his revenge against those who ruined his family and village. Though seemingly a communication journey, in that he only wants to inform his son of the tragedy, anger and desire for revenge is flowing as the undertow.

Rahimi catches this tension by juxtaposing Dastaguir's endurance with moments of inner wrath. He thinks his useless suffering when he asks, "Don't ask, brother. They didn't spare a single life ... I don't understand why God saw fit to punish us ... The village was reduced to dust." (Rahimi 21) Desire for revenge is never really spoken of; it only lingers as an undertone throughout much of the story, a tension between endurance and revenge. The second-person perspective further heightens this internal conflict, as the reader is made to experience Dastaguir's shifting emotions: "The death of his own mother, wife and brother won't go unanswered. He'll seek vengeance. He has to take revenge ..." (Rahimi 36).

The interplay between resilience and revenge is central to Rahimi's portrayal of Dastaguir's emotional landscape. He does not act on his desire for retribution, yet the desire exists as a psychological struggle, reflective of the trauma inflicted by war. In this way, Rahimi complicates the image of the resilient survivor, showing how endurance and rage coexist within the same psyche.

4.3 IV.III The Role of Memory and Guilt

Rahimi also explores the complexities of memory and guilt in relation to retribution.

Dastaguir's journey is marked by painful memories of his lost family and the guilt he feels for being unable to protect them. These memories torment him throughout the novella, as he recalls his grandson Yassin's innocent face, unaware of the destruction around him. In one remarkably emotional moment, Rahimi scripts, "To whom are you speaking? To Yassin? He can't even hear the sound of stones, let alone your feeble voice. Yassin's world is now another world, one of silence. He wasn't deaf. He became deaf. He doesn't realize this. He's surprised that nothing makes a sound anymore. Until a few days ago it wasn't this way" (Rahimi 11).

Memory, as portrayed in *Earth and Ashes*, is not just recollection of the past but a burden serving to create the present. Unresolved grief and guilt of Dastaguir fuels inner conflict and makes him believe he would have done much better. Rahimi illustrates that relationship between memory and retribution in internal monologues that indicate how trauma often leads to an unfulfilled desire for justice. In war narratives, desire for retribution is often tied up with unresolved issues of trauma and guilt, making it a kind of complex emotional terrain through which the past can hardly be reconciled.

Ultimately, *Earth and Ashes* speaks of resilience and retribution as interwoven ways of responding emotionally to trauma. Through the second-person narrative, Rahimi involves the reader within the complicated emotional geography in which Dastaguir manoeuvres his endurance and his desire for vengeance. In doing so, Rahimi weaves a story about human endurance toward unimaginable loss of lives, pride and hope while also unmasks the darker impulses emerging from such devastation.

5. V. Psychological and Emotional Impact on the Reader

5.1 V.I Reader's Emotional Investment

Atiq Rahimi's *Earth and Ashes* employs a second-person narrative technique that profoundly heightens the reader's emotional engagement with the text. By addressing the reader directly as "you," Rahimi transforms the act of reading into an immersive experience, compelling the audience to navigate Dastaguir's psychological landscape. Such direct involvement also enables the reader to experience Dastaguir's trauma, making the dramatic contours of the narrative feel viscerally intense.

This approach has a strong psychological effect. The narration puts the reader in Dastaguir's shoes and shares his sorrows and sense of loss in minute detail. The reader's transformation into Dastaguir provides a depth of feeling that cannot be achieved with the traditional voice of the narrative. A simple example is when Dastaguir recalls his family's destruction-the audience is compelled to bear the burden of his sorrows. This method not only draws readers into the emotional core of the narrative but also elicits a visceral response to Dastaguir's plight. The use of the second-person perspective engages the reader as an active participant in the trauma, enhancing emotional investment in the character's fate (Mbonyingingo et al. 89-119).

5.2 V.II Exploring Empathy and Moral Responsibility

In addition, the second-person narration employed by Rahimi helps in the emotional elicitation and adds a moral responsibility to the reader to interact with the reader, to work out what would be the moral implications for Dastaguir in that aspect. Once dragged into this narration, readers must accept the horror of war and the destruction it causes to the individuals and communities as such. This helps immerse the reader from an observer to participant in Dastaguir's world, carrying with it an implicit obligation toward paying reflection on the wider implications of his trauma.

The moral responsibility is also very vividly apparent when Dastaguir's internal struggles surface, and it makes readers view themselves in the face of such suffering. Rahimi writes,

"You are a Rostam. You'll go and drive the dagger of grief into your son's heart" (Rahimi 32). This direct address compels readers to confront their own emotions and beliefs about suffering, responsibility, and the human capacity for empathy. By making the reader a part of Dastaguir's journey, Rahimi intensifies their understanding of the trauma of war, transforming abstract concepts of grief and loss into immediate, personal experiences.

Besides, the second-person narrative It also opens room for unpalatable truths concerning war and its havoc on mankind. Readers can't also hide from the atrocities presented in the text; they are faced with their own anguish like that of Dastaguir as he is described. Further, in the use of second person narration, there is an active onlooker in trauma, and thus investment in emotions in the fate of the character ('Richardson 281-301).

In so doing, the effective use of the narrative by Rahimi requires that readers relate with a dimension of collective humanity in the tapestry of human suffering they themselves become part of. Through Dastaguir's experiences, readers are forced to confront the relationship between their morality and the victimization of war, making this text even more emotionally impactful.

Earth and Ashes presents an extremely deep psychological and emotional impact for the reader of the novel. Second-person narration makes the reader emotionally involved and inclined towards a sense of morality, which helps them be inevitably drawn into the world of Dastaguir's trauma yet pushes them through some of the most complex ethical terrains of war and suffering. Through this innovative narrative technique, Rahimi enriches the reading experience, transforming it into a powerful exploration of resilience, grief, and the human condition.

6. Conclusion

Atiq Rahimi's *Earth and Ashes* employs the second-person narrative technique to enrich the themes of resilience and retribution, allowing readers to experience Dastaguir's emotional journey firsthand. This subtle insight gives a deepened exploration of Dastaguir's resilience in loss while also underlining the subtleties of his thirst for revenge. In an open address to the reader, Rahimi opens a private connection with the protagonist's trauma and makes the story a powerful testimony of survival. This selection speaks to the complexity of common, shared suffering and private pain; it underscores holding on, against the genocidal crimes of war.

Rahimi masterfully employs the use of a second-person narrative to portray the psychological and emotional experiences of his characters, dwelling on the challenges they face in terms of memory, guilt, and longing for retribution. The technique evokes great familiarity, and the readers are motivated to feel the plight of the protagonist as well as pain and suffering as their own. Thus, the work of Rahimi manifests itself as a very significant contribution to the war literature genre in the context of war literature, illuminating the deep impacts of a conflict situation and the sensitive nature of human emotions during a time of crises.

Implications of Rahimi's narrative technique speak far beyond *Earth and Ashes*, creating a fantastic basis for further examination within the field of literature of war. An investigation into which manner the second-person perception is represented in most texts shall attempt to address ways in which this approach makes the depiction of trauma and survival more complex and works to deepen the reader's understanding of the intricate dynamics at work. Regarding the wider implications of the second-person narration for testimonial literature, it can impact the sorts of production and reception relating to trauma narratives. In this respect, this novel presents psychologists and ethicists with an opportunity to explore psychological and moral interpretations of suffering. Also, Rahimi's technique may further raise awareness of the form affect dynamics in conflict-central, resilience-related stories

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