



# “The Presence of the Past”: A Historical Reading of Bizhan Najdi’s “A Plant in Quarantine”

Ahad Mehrvand

Department of English Language and Literature, Azarbaijan Shahid Madani University, Iran  
E-mail: ahadmeh@yahoo.com

Amin Pourhassan (Corresponding author)

Department of English Language and Literature, Azarbaijan Shahid Madani University, Iran  
E-mail: aminpourhasan@gmail.com

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## Abstract

Using flashbacks, Bizhan Najdi’s “A Plant in Quarantine” tells the story of the central character called Taher, an Iranian boy, who has been quarantined in a hospital due to abnormal spread of skin rashes after a military service physician took off a lock from the back of his right shoulder. Immediately, Taher came down with a contagious skin disease called hereditary fear by the rural doctor. This short story brings the past and present together in a peculiar manner, providing an overview of present condition actuated by past events revolving around the Tudeh Party, an Iranian Marxist political party, and the Iran-Iraq War. The analysis of this relationship and the possibility of Taher’s hereditary fear is the main focus of the paper, which can account for the role of history in this short story. For such an end, the analysis is carried out at the two levels of writer and story. The writer’s disturbed memories, which are related to fear and violence in Iran’s contemporary history, and the conditions of their emergence are explored so that the roots of the protagonist’s inherent fear might be discernible. The findings of the paper show that the unpleasant presence of the main character’s ancestral past is the cause of his predicament, introducing past as an active agent of the present.

**Keywords:** “A Plant in Quarantine”, hereditary fear, lock, olive, “presence of the past”, history

## 1. Introduction

“History . . . is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake” (Joyce, 1993, p. 34).

The impact of one’s past and ancestors on one’s life has always been debated. Memories and past events may make one happy or haunt one’s life. The point is that no one can escape his past. Such a constant and unavoidable presence shadows the lives of individuals and makes them suffer. As a prominent theme in many stories, the constant presence of history usually disturbs the protagonist. The main character of James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922), Stephen Dedalus, for instance, suffers from the same predicament. Similarly, Bizhan Najdi creates an exceptional situation in which the protagonist is trapped, and cannot find any way to set himself free. The history is inescapable in this story.

Bizhan Najdi was born in 1941 in Khash, a county in Sistan and Baluchestan Province, Iran. His parents were from Gilan, a Province along the Caspian Sea. After his birth, his family returned to Gilan. He received his mathematics diploma from Shapoor high school in Rasht, and his M.A. in Mathematics from The University of Tehran. After doing the military service, Najdi settled in Lahijan and started to teach mathematics. He married his colleague, Parvin Mohsene’e Azad, giving birth to a girl, Natana’iel, and a boy, Yuhana (Abedi, 2002, p. 44). Beside teaching mathematics, he wrote poems and stories, but did not publish any of them during his lifetime except his most famous collection of short stories entitled *The Leopards who have Run with Me* (1994c), which won him the literary Golden Pen Award of Gardoun the same year. His other works, such as *Once Again the Same Streets* (1997a), *The Sisters of This Summer* (1997b), and *Unfinished Stories* (2001) were published posthumously by his wife. Despite his highly poetic and imaginative style, Najdi’s short stories received a very modest reception in Iran.

“A Plant in Quarantine” is the last short story of *The Leopards who have Run with Me*. It begins with an examination. A physician, who examines Taher for Military Physical Examinations, disbelievably finds a lock deeply embedded in his right shoulder. The doctor could not stop his curiosity about the lock. After this scene, the story of Taher’s disease is narrated in a flashback. A long time ago, after observing small red dots on Taher’s skin, his mother thought that he had gotten measles. Nonetheless, after examining him, the rural doctor announced that the cause of the illness was hereditary fear. Since the rural doctor could not cure Taher, his parents brought to his bed a local magician named Gaaderi, who mysteriously cured him by putting a lock at the back of his right shoulder. Since then, Taher and his family have got used to the existence of lock. But when Taher goes to his mandatory military service, the military physician does not accept the presence of a meftal lock on his shoulders, obliging him to take it off through a medical

operation because no soldier should be different from others or carry metal objects in their bodies. Despite the fact that Taher and his mother forewarn the military doctor of the possible future risks of this operation on Taher's health, the doctor undergoes the surgery. The story ends with taking out the lock. However, the seemingly contagious skin disease returns, and like a poisonous plant, Taher is put in quarantine, which signifies the title of the story.

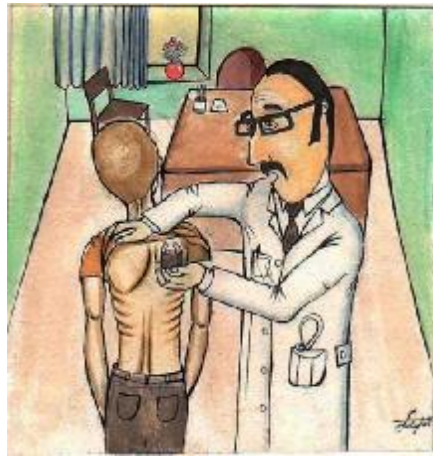


Fig. 1 Taher's Examination by the Military Physician in a 2013 Drawing by Sedigheh Naziri<sup>i</sup>

The main objective of this paper is to examine the reasons for and the causes of Taher's hereditary fear in "A Plant in Quarantine", and account for the presence of history in this short story. In 2013, the researchers of this paper published a joint paper entitled "'The Presence of the Past' in 'A Plant in Quarantine'" in a Persian journal entitled *Research in Contemporary World Literature* at The University of Tehran. The present paper relies on the aforementioned Persian paper with a difference that it aims at English speaking audience and that its analysis has been expanded. The research questions of this study are as follows: why did the author use hereditary fear in his story? Are there any historical explanations for what has made this kind of disease possible? To answer these questions, the researchers will first explore the writer's life trying to find the possible links between the main theme of the story and Najdi's own experiences. These experiences include his father's involvement with The Tudeh Party during the 1940s and his own involvement with the Iran-Iraq war. Then, the researchers will analyze the story itself to find the symbolic and unfortunate presence of history in "A Plant in Quarantine".

## 2. Theoretical Background

The significance of history and its influence on human life have been appreciated in different manners in the past two centuries. Hegel, for instance, introduces "reality and rationality" as "historically determined" phenomena (Malpas, 2006, p. 54). Human understanding and his perception of the world are adjusted by the history of his parents, society and culture, making him the inheritor of past knowledge, institutions, power networks, sciences, cultural atmosphere and experiences. Hegel states "What we are is determined by what we do; what we do is determined by what we understand ourselves to be; and what we understand ourselves to be is determined by what we have been" (Dudley, 2009, p. 1). To a large extent, what a society has been in the past regulates its present socio-political conditions of life. Thus, to understand the culture of a particular society, there is a need to explore the history of the foundations of that culture.

Carl Marx follows a similar conviction by stating that the traditions of the past generations construct the reality of the present generations. In *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*, Marx postulates, "The tradition of all past generations weighs like an alp upon the brain of the living" (2003, p. 12). Here, the cultural inheritance is focused. The traditional activities, either religious, economic, political or ceremonial, and their variations or negations make up the horizon of the present culture. In other words, the deeds of the past people are actively engaged in the lives of the present people. The weight of the past, as Marx calls it, can have totally different meanings for different individuals in terms of its economy and quality. This presence can be celebrated by prosperous societies, where their ancestors are believed to have left a great heritage for their children; while it might be deplored in the less culturally and economically affluent ones, where the ancestors are accused of leaving an unfortunate socio-political state to them.

As delineated, activities and ideas of individuals in a generation directly influence those of the next generations. Hutcheon calls such an effect "the presence of the past" (1988, p. 45), which alludes to the prolonged influence of the past activities, political movements, wars, scientific discoveries, economic conditions and cultural products, to name a few.

Though anti-Hegelian and anti-Marxist, Michel Foucault attaches the more or less similar level of impact of history on individual's present conditions (Rabinow, 1984, p. 23). Foucault does not provide a theory of history, what Hegel and Marx do, but looks for the emergence of discourses and practices in the past, which are responsible for defining a network of relations, forming the social reality of the present. As such, the possibility of emergence of a certain socio-political condition and its rules are a cornerstone in Foucault's historicizing.

In his *Madness and Civilization* (1961), Foucault explores and analyzes the history of insanity and the way some particular penal institutions housed and treated mad people, showing the development of the discourse that underlies today's practice of institutions in psychiatry and psychology. In fact, by applying the institutional analysis and development framework and the historical processes of certain discourses, he describes the present-day status of these discourses. The implication of such a method is that history and past events play a crucial role in present discourses. Thus, history never stays in the past, and is actively present both in social scale and individual's subjectivity.

Since an individual's subjectivity is formed by a cluster of historical-cultural ideas, rules, habits, and ideologies in which he has grown up, a writer, like any other individual, cannot be separated from his cultural and historical context, and live independently. For example, by historicizing and contextualizing Othello in Elizabethan times, Stephen Greenblatt shows that Christian attitude on marriage and adultery during English Renaissance have fashioned the behavior and mindset of the characters (1994, p. 46-88). In fact, Greenblatt thinks that a writer creates his works of art in a society with its cultural and material spectrum, and hence, the works are embedded in the history. Social atmosphere in which a writer lives, forms the structure and theme of his oeuvre (Bertens, 2001, p. 185). To open up the intricate web of culture and lives of the past, this study intends to represent or reconstruct the writer's subjectivity and the signification of his works using the biographical-historical approach.

Apart from writer's subjectivity, history runs through the text too. Louis Montrose stresses that text and history are inseparable from each other. He puts emphasis on "historicity of the text and textuality of history" (Montrose, 1989, p. 23). In other words, literary texts contain the history of their writer and the society in which they have been created. To decode such a contained space, there is a need for an erudite delineation of the text concerning history. The point is that history is rather actively present in every text, including a literary one.

While a text is necessarily a product of its time without the conscious effort of its writer, sometimes a conscious attempt is made on the side of the writer to make the text socially and historically significant. The contemporary Iranian poet, Ahmad Shamlou, expresses such an aim in his poems, and makes his writings socially and historically meaningful. In his opinion, the presence of history in works of art is not only inevitable, but also necessary: "In the absence of history, / Art/ Is a pretense of leisure" (Shamlou, 2005, p. 122). So, art without a reference to the history of its creator and the society where it was created, is reduced to a form of worthless entertainment. This runs against the "art for art's sake" position. Stories contain the history and culture of a land and its inhabitants, and cannot be understood in the absence of such references. Furthermore, the very historicity of texts helps the works of art serve an end beyond what "art for art's sake" would offer. Such an understanding of the relation between art and history is a compelling issue for critics interested in social functions of literary texts.

In a nutshell, the construction of present norms, discourses and social codes by the past, dependency of the writer on the socio-historical context of his times, and the historicity of the text can be delineated in the story itself through the relation between the story and its writer. In the level of story, theme can be built on the history of the characters. In the level of writer, it is assumed that the story is the result of a cluster of events and incidents, which have happened in the writer's society and has made the emergence of such a work possible.

To analyze "A Plant in Quarantine" historically, first the data and documents concerning Najdi's life and his family will be reviewed, i.e. The Tudeh Party and The Iran-Iraq war, and then a web of cultural events of his times will be indicated to reveal the writer's historical subjectivity. Najdi's own interviews and short stories, which allude to the aforementioned incidents, serve as the link between the historical conditions and Najdi's subjectivity. As such, we will show that the hereditary fear in "A Plant in Quarantine" is relevant to Najdi's life and society. Then, the story itself will be analyzed to sketch out the kind of history it contains and presents.

### 3. Discussion

#### 3.1 History Falls on Najdi's Shoulders

I (Bizhan Najdi) was four; the dejected years of not writing. You know, you don't have to have big shoulders for the history to fall on them. (as cited in Abedi, 2002, p. 44)

After Reza Shah, Iran's self-proclaimed king from 1925 to 1941, was exiled from Iran as a result of the British-Soviet invasion of Iran during the Second World War, a group of intellectuals recently graduated from Western universities, led by Iraj Iskandari, took the opportunity of power gap in Iran to start a movement, later called The Tudeh Party of Iran as an Iranian communist party (Abrahamian, 1982, p. 107). Reza Shah had been an utter dictator who modernized Iran, but suppressed political freedom and movement. In the vacuum of such an authoritarian figure, the new generation of political activists sought to assert themselves politically in pursue of different goals, e.g. democracy, freedom of speech, even distribution of wealth, recognition of the cultural rights of ethnic minorities, etc. In a similar move, The Tudeh's aim was to "fight against dictatorship for the sake of achieving democracy, and the protection of human rights" (Blake, 2009, p. 14). Initially, this party played a significant role during Mohammad Mosaddegh's campaign to nationalize the Anglo-Persian Oil Company. They had Marxist tendencies, influenced by the northern neighbor, Russia, and inserted such notions in their agenda:

Our primary aim is to mobilize the workers, peasants, progressive intellectuals, traders, and craftsmen of Iran . . . class structure continues to create petty Reza Shahs – oligarchs in the form of feudal landlords and exploiting capitalists, who, through their ownership of the means of production, continue to control the state. (as cited in Abrahamian, 108)

It seems transparent that the fight for freedom and democracy was at the heart of The Tudeh Party, but it is somehow fused with Marxist notions so that class conflict and capitalism are taken to be the root of dictatorship, i.e. Reza Shah, who became Iran's Shah with the help of Great Britain, then the emblem of Capitalism (Gholi Majd, 2001, p. 61). Thus, there was an understanding among Iranians that Great Britain backed up a coup which resulted in Reza Shah's despotism. Although Reza Shah is still remembered as the father of modern Iran, his dictatorship and oppression is not exonerated. It is not difficult to understand The Tudeh's sentiment against Great Britain and capitalism which, wittingly or unwittingly, brought about a despot, limiting Iranians' freedom. Such was the condition in which The Tudeh party began its venture into politics.

The Tudeh was the most successful and powerful party in Iran by 1945 and 1946. According to *New York Times'* estimation, The Tudeh had 40 percent of votes in elections (Abrahamian, 1982, p. 109). It was an omnipresent force in different parts of Iran, drawing the attention common of people and intellectuals alike. As such, it can be called a national movement on which a majority of Iran's population invested intellectually and politically. Their mission was to free Iran from dictatorship, and put an end to class conflict.

Gilan, Mazandaran and Mashhad, as northern states of Iran, were much influenced by The Tudeh, and there were political leaders there engineering social uprising (Abrahamian, 1982, p. 109). It was in that period of time and in those regions that Colonels Abdolreza Azar and Ali Akbar Eskandarani, two members of The Tudeh Party, launched an armed rebellion against the regime in the summer of 1945 with the aim of changing the regime by armed forces. This uprising started in Torkaman Sahra, in Mazandaran province, and is known as the uprising of the Khorasan Officers. But after five days, the uprising was repelled by the police forces and Iranian Gendarmerie (Tafreshian, 159).

In that uprising, Lieutenant Hasan Najdi, Bizhan Najdi's father, as a proponent of The Tudeh party, set out for Torkaman Sahra. Along with other officers, he waited for a while in Gonbad-e Kāvus, but due to some suspicious activities in Gendarmerie, the officers did not stay there for long and drove away in their Jeeps. Lieutenant Najdi was in the first Jeep. Soon, Gendarmerie forces launched a surprise attack on them, stormed their cars, and killed lieutenant Najdi along with his friends (Farhangi, 2009, p. 13). Bizhan Najdi was only four in 1945, and the loss of his father in such a condition was a big catastrophe for him. Later, he said:

In the summer of 1945, some officers were killed in Gonbad-e Kāvus by the command of General Arfa'. The soldiers' storming of the officers' Jeeps was so ferocious that blood ran out of the cars and cooled on the soil. The firing was so brutal that the dead could only be identified based on their height and the stars on their shoulders. It was so horrible that nobody showed my father's grave to my mother. I was four; the dejected years of not writing. You know, you don't have to have big shoulders for the history to fall on them. (Abedi, 2002, p. 44)



Fig. 2 Lieutenant Hasan Najdi and his Officers' Massacre in a 2013 Drawing by Sedigheh Naziri

As it is evident in the speech, the incident was so painful that it had an unpleasant impact on Najdi's subjectivity. Najdi would grow up with such a memory of his father, connecting him to the collective Iranian feeling of frustration. As will be explained, the hereditary fear, which is the main problem of the story, has been directly influenced by his historical subjectivity. Najdi suffered from his past memories, changing them, in his imagination, into a heavy lock attached to his shoulders. Yet, he could not talk about them, a fictional representation of which has been turned into a mysterious lock stuck on Taher's shoulder in "A Plant in Quarantine." But, his father's incident was not the only weight on Najdi's shoulders.

A devastating war emerged between Iraq and Iran in 1980, which left a mark on all Iranians' memories, including Bizhan Najdi. In one of his interviews, Najdi remorsefully pointed out, "it is 1987, it is war, it is fume, it is pain, and people who are no more, houses which are no more and . . . after all this, you still exist. But in a different way. As if you do not exist" (as cited in Naderi Moghadam, 2006, p. 19). This excerpt is a witness to the depth of Najdi's preoccupation with the Iran-Iraq war, and it might be worthwhile to delve into the depth of this historical episode to appreciate Najdi's mental agony as represented in "A Plant in Quarantine".

After World War 1, the Ottoman Empire was dissolved due to its support of Germany, and the winning powers of the Word War 1 divided its territory between the different Balkan states. Iraq was formed in that occasion, and Britain was its guardian to help it become an independent and industrialized state. Since Iraq had no access to the Persian Gulf,

being sandwiched between Iran and Kuwait, Britain decided to hand the Shat al-Arab, formerly shared with Iran, to Iraq as a vessel to the Persian Gulf (Pelletiere, 1992, p. 4). It revived an old dispute between Iranians and Arabs over the Shat al-Arab. Being overwhelmed by British power, Mohammad Reza Shah yielded to the treaty. However, during the 1960s, when Britain pulled out of the Persian Gulf because of its lack of resources to act as a policeman in this region, a power vacuum emerged which was not filled by the United States due to its internal issues. Gradually, Shah tried to act as the policeman of the Persian Gulf and to dominate the region. In such a condition, in 1968, Shah literally abrogated the Shat al-Arab treaty in the absence of British power, and claimed to have a shared sovereignty with Iraq over the Shat al-Arab (Donovan, 2011, p. 46-48). This time, Iraq could not take any action, and Shah became successful in his attempt to dominate the region. Finally, after some clashes, Saddam and Shah made a treaty in 1975 to share the Shat al-Arab again. This happened partly due to a change of their priority from conflict to cooperation to sell their oil, whose price was soaring at the time (Pelletiere, 1992, p. 9-10).

Saddam did not interfere in Iran's 1979 Revolution in fear of escalating the conflicts, but after the overthrow of Shah, he offered Iran's now powerful clergy to negotiate about the Shat al-Arab and the Persian Gulf islands. However, Iran declined the negotiations, but again there was no reaction by Saddam. The fortunes turned for the worse when a group of radical students in Iran surprisingly seized the United States' Embassy, holding the U.S. diplomats hostages. Due to the conditions of the Islamic Revolution, Iran decided not to return the diplomats, and called U.S. the archenemy of the Islamic Revolution. On the other hand, The United States could not take a military action to invade Iran due to the Anglo-Soviet-Iranian Treaty of 1942, which demanded Great Britain and The Soviet Union to support Iran in case of war. Also, in the Cold War, the Soviet Union could not tolerate the U.S.'s direct presence in their neighborhood, so a clash between the two superpowers could be catastrophic. The U.S. decided not to attack Iran. Saddam was observing the events silently, and at this point thought about two issues: first, Iran had alienated the U.S., so it could not sustain its weapons supplies; second, the new forces in The Islamic Republic of Iran were purging the army because of its loyalty to Shah, thus its army was in a weak position. In this condition, Saddam inferred that Iran has rendered itself completely defenseless, and it was time for him to claim the Shat al-Arab and other regions (Pelletiere, 1992, p. 16-18). Thus, the eight-year war, which had no winner at the end, was launched.

As a frontline volunteer being accompanied by other Gilani teachers, Bizhan Najdi went to Sanandaj Qods Division during the eight year Iran-Iraq war. Then, he was sent to Soleymanieh and later to the front line of war (Farhangi, 2009, p. 18). Najdi was a witness to the persistent fear, chronic anxiety and horrors of war, and saw the killings on the front line. He lived in a time when horror and war was the everyday experience of Iranians. Such an experience is evident in his other short stories like "My Button Eyes" and "Time, not in Clock".

"My Button Eyes" is a short story from the collection of *The Leopards who have Run with Me*. Its story is narrated by a doll which introduces itself as Faati, an abbreviation for Fatemeh, who recites its memories. It says that there was a horrible explosion throwing Faati's mother out of the window into the street, resulting in the mother's death. Through its button eyes, the doll witnesses the agony of war: "people were running around me. Fume was coming out of the house doors. The smell of burnt sugar ran into the pavements. Behind the fumes, a palm was on fire. There were people who had shouldered the dead and passed me by while saying prayers" (Najdi, 1994a, p. 48). It can be understood that it was the description of a war stricken city from a doll's point of view. Alluding to a palm tree in the street, Najdi signifies that it was a city in the south of Iran where a disastrous clash occurred between Iran and Iraq. The detailed descriptions of a bombarded city filled with injured and dead people telltale of Najdi's preoccupation with the Iran-Iraq war. In a similar move, in "Time, not in Clock" from *Once Again the Same Streets*, Najdi narrates the story of a three-year-old boy named Majid who has similarly witnessed the horrors and slaughters of war (1997c).

In "A Plant in Quarantine", Najdi depicts the experience of war, its carnage and conflict as the cause of Taher's hereditary fear. The rural physician who attempts to explain Psoriasis for Taher's father, describes "a hill of skulls and bones, people's limbs in the alley" as the cause of his fear and its transformation into a contagious skin disease. It is discernable that human slaughter and a hill of bones and skulls alludes to war and conflict. On the other hand, Najdi's symbolic use of the olive tree reinforces this idea. From ancient times olive symbolically stands for peace, probably due to the long lifespan of the olive trees and its ever green condition. The persistent presence of olive trees in the story of Taher's life, which will be discussed in the following section, reminds Taher of cozy and familiar setting which is put against the war, conflict, slaughter and fear. When Taher is examined by the man in white, he looks down the road leading to his house and olive trees (Najdi, 1994b, p. 80). Therefore, we suggest that the soothing feelings associated with the olive trees stands in stark contrast to fear and war throughout the story.

A glance at Najdi's life and childhood obviates that fear and horror were always a part of his life and conscience. Najdi's memories included the experience of losing his father in a historical event in 1945 when he was four, and his deployment to the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988) when he was an adult. As such, his other writings are also preoccupied with such memories. As discussed above, since a writer cannot be separated from his cultural context, the hereditary fear in "A Plant in Quarantine" can be Najdi's reaction to the incidents happening around him. Also, the presence of lock in the story as an agent of hiding Taher's hereditary disease can arguably be the lock on Najdi's mouth, resulting in his silence towards social conditions. Taher tries to keep the lock intact, but when it is removed under the pressure of the military physician, psoriasis, or the hereditary fear as it is called in the story, strikes back.

### 3.2 History in the Text of the Story

Taher is diagnosed with psoriasis. According to the rural physician, its reason is a hereditary fear, transferred from one generation to the next, and now appearing in Taher. Psoriasis is a common skin ailment, showing itself with red spots

along with dry, cracked skin. This disease is related to the immune system of the body and is untreatable. So far, a known or definite reason for psoriasis has not been discovered, but among the possible causes of this disease delineated by researchers and physicians, one can allude to high stress and its transference from parents to children (Winget, 1994, p. 559).

The description of Taher's skin disorder presented by Najdi, matches the main symptoms of psoriasis: "red spots as small as millets had covered his son's face" (Najdi, 1994b, p. 80). That psoriasis can cause anxiety in the patient is acceptable, but what the rural physician explains about the cause of the disease, which says hereditary fear can cause psoriasis, is not compatible with the results of medical research, which may indicate lack of knowledge on the physician's part. Anyhow, the rural physician correctly points out to a blending of the two factors of heredity and fear (instead of stress): a hereditary fear. Also, its untreatable nature is duly noted. It is the most important issue for Najdi to employ psoriasis in order for him to make possible a narrative of the presence of the past and its fears.

To explain the disease and its causes, the rural physician tells Taher's father:

Imagine the father of the father of your grandfather gets out of his house one morning and witnesses a hill of skulls and bones in his alley's turn... What do you think he does? Screams and asks why? Kills himself? No, he becomes pale, or maybe goes to a corner, grabs his guts and pukes, his eyes are filled with tear, but he has no idea whether it is because of crying or puking... Then when his baby is born, it is not just his beauty transferred to his baby, but also his fear, yes... transference, inheritance, from this baby to that baby, from this generation to the next generation... so that suddenly a boy like Taher is found who falls on the ground, scratching his injuries... injuries caused by fear... (Najdi, 1994b, p. 82)

The horror induced by "a hill of skulls" can be related to numerous violent events. Najdi had heard and read about the political events before 1945, and had witnessed the events after it up to 1997, i.e. uprisings, coups, severe oppression of people, revolution, the Iran-Iraq war in the turbulent contemporary history of Iran (Rostami & Keshavarzi, 2010, p. 121).

Such events justify the presence of fear as an inheritance in this story. Despite the fact that Najdi suffered from both his father's brutal death and the Iran-Iraq war, in which he had participated, "A Plant in Quarantine" cannot be taken as a mere note on writer's memory, or the unconscious effect of memory on the writer's oeuvre. The presentation of these issues along with various symbols and images, such as the olive tree and the projection of fear on Taher's disease, show that Najdi was well aware of his countrymen's condition, and had tried to represent the fear caused by horrible events in Iran's contemporary history in the subjectivity of the present-day Iranian individual. In other words, here, Taher is representative of an individual who has hereditary fear. The story conveys that human being is "an amalgam of individual and collective characteristics, along with everything remaining in him of the previous generations" (Rostami, 2011, p. 199). Such a reminder or the presence of the past, interferes with Taher and his family's life, and appears as psoriasis or what is referred to as hereditary fear.

The active symbols of the story map out the binary oppositions of peace and war, horror and tranquility, which locate Taher in it. In the story, Taher contemplates "darkness of thick fog" which has "grabbed" Taher's village "in its fist". The "darkness" and "thick fog" grabbing the village "in its fist" tells the tale of a dire condition surrounding the village, which is clouding its people's mentality. Grabbing the village "in the fist" presents a clear image of control and imprisonment. This image connects the reader to an atmosphere shared by most of Najdi's stories where there is an entrapment anxiety induced by society's impositions. It can be taken as paranoia in which the narrator, as an individual, worries about the imminent harm the society will cause (Rostami & Keshavarzi, 2010, p. 129). The failure of different ideologies in Iran has caused individuals to expect a catastrophe at any moment, providing the ground for a constant fear. Here, Taher suffers from hereditary fear which explains his perception of the village being "grabbed" in the fist of darkness. As such, the darkness and the fear that have emerged as a disease in Taher share the same root. Still, the olive trees, symbols of peace, abound in the village, are so much that Taher himself is likened to an olive tree. At the end of the story, when the lock is taken off Taher's shoulder, the narrator says that only a leaf was plucked from an olive tree, i.e. Taher (Najdi, 1994b, p. 85).

Some of the previous studies on "A Plant in Quarantine" have identified the importance of the olive symbol and put forward some questions: "why does the writer put emphasis on olive tree? Why is the olive tree chosen among all other trees? How is it possible for the olive tree to be related to Taher?" (Sedighi, 2009, p.153) By considering the signification of olive as a symbol of peace, making a contrast between the darkness and the thick fog in the village and the olive tree, and taking into account the hereditary fear caused by past conflicts and war which was discussed, it can be safely discerned that the olive tree stands for the essence of peace in Taher, disturbed by the history of his ancestors. Based on the olive symbolism, it is implied that Taher's village as a part of Iran, is an abode of peace and beauty, at least it is what the village people think of their habitat. Taking Taher as an olive tree alludes to a similar meaning: an individual who is of peaceful nature gets into trouble and calamities due to his country's horrible past. Also the name Taher in Persian is significant because it means clean and chaste from any stains or sins. Thus, Taher is innocent of any crimes, but since as a modernist writer Najdi draws upon anti-poetic justice, Taher's goodness, innocence and virtue are not rewarded in this story.

At first, it seems that Taher's disease is treated with traditional magic, but this method could not completely destroy the disease. After Gaaderi's putting a lock on Taher's shoulder, which seems to have a limited psychological effect on



Taher, who may find his disease though contained in the lock, socially restricted, he “never took out his clothes for a river”, and “did not engage in playing with other kids” (Najdi, 1994b, p. 84). It is obvious that the presence of the lock has prevented Taher from taking part in the common activities and games for children. The lock was never an effective cure for the disease.

Regarding the idea that in “A Plant in Quarantine”, history emerges as psoriasis in Taher’s body, what Gaaderi did is nothing but merely hiding the historical wound by using a lock. The lock is an agent of hiding and silence. In other words, “Taher is now impregnated with a secret which is locked away. Taher is a safe, bearing the secrets of past generations” (Jahandideh, 2012, p.147). But this secret is revealed when the military physician insists on removing the lock. By taking out the lock from Taher’s right shoulder, the man in the white bares the bones of this historical pain and fear. Because Taher was not happy when the lock was on his shoulder, the lock cannot be taken as a treatment, and it was only a cover or a painkiller for the past. On the other hand, nobody could treat Taher, a fact that bears witness to their impotence in their turn.

On the bed, waiting to be operated, Taher hysterically implores the doctors, “by God, don’t open it, I can go to the military service with it [lock]” (Najdi, 1994b, p. 85). Unlike Joseph in Saul Bellow’s 1944 novel entitled *Dangling Man*, after the operation Taher cannot hope to be drafted. He has satisfied himself merely with hiding the hereditary fear and the past, being terribly afraid of revealing it. After he was locked by Gaaderi’s lock, Taher accepted the failure in the face of the present situation with the lock on his painful shoulder, and submitted to live a life of fear and shame. His shyness is shown at the beginning of the story when the man in white wants to see the back of his feet. Taher “took out his shoes and socks with a girlish coyness” (Najdi, 1994b, p. 79). It might be the case that from Najdi’s point of view, the contemporary Iranian individual who suffers from his past, hides it and in absence of knowledge about it, hopelessly accepts the unpleasant event in his life.

It seems that Najdi considers this condition and “the presence of the past” as inevitable, and shows the inability of different methods to improve his character’s condition. In the last image, Taher as peaceful as the olive tree is locked away in quarantine, bidding adieu to the peace in his life. The lock functions as Achilles’ heel. Taher’s weak point was his past and history, fastened to his right shoulder, targeting of which by sharp medical knives and scissors through surgery ended him up not with his death as it occurred to Achilles, but with a perpetual life of isolation in quarantine. The implications of the titles of Najdi’s stories are revealed after reading the texts, and they contribute to the overall meaning of the stories (Sedighi, 2009, p.145). Based on the above discussion, it is now meaningful to suggest that the title of “A Plant in Quarantine” pictures Taher in a dire situation, caused by the inconvenient “presence of the past”.

In sum, Taher’s view of his past does not guarantee a pleasant outlook. His past is replete with traumatic incidents about war, bloodshed, disease, death, destruction, dislocation, doomed future and disintegration of families. Similarly, the theme of haunting past is developed in other stories of Najdi’s collection. Thus, we encounter the feeling of hopelessness in all stories of *The Leopards who have Run with Me*. We may wonder what he titular Leopards stand for. Does it mean that Taher represents Iranian leopards? The answer is affirmative because as Najdi’s forthcoming comment on the title of this book shows, he compared this animal with great romantics who were threatened by the harsh realities of life. Similar to Taher’s alienation and spiritual death away from home in the hospital, leopards in Iran suffer from a scary future. They may eventually contract a disease and die out themselves, or be killed by illegal hunters, or be captured and sold to foreigners, or if they are lucky, they would be listed as an endangered species living in restricted areas which may remind us of Taher’s ultimate restriction in quarantine. Najdi states,

Leopards are among the animals on the verge of extinction. They are also among the most ambitious and fastest animals. But this ambition is so beautiful in leopards... On the other hand, along the history, sometimes humans find themselves in such a condition; it means that a generation has a goal, a dream, and to realize it, which I call aesthetic ambition, it follows the footsteps of leopards, and history has proved that these people never succeed, and practically, Iran and world history showed that these great idealists, world’s leopards, have been always under attack, and practically, we see that they’re on the verge of extinction. This is the simile I have in mind, any idealist in the history who has run for the sake of humanity. (as cited in Naderi Moghadam, 2006, p. 19)

As such, the title of the book is dedicated to the idealists in the history whose dreams have not come true. Bizhan Najdi was always mindful of the past events of his country and the world, which did not turn out in accordance with an idealist’s dream.

#### 4. Conclusion

“A Plant in Quarantine” as the last short story in *The Leopards who have Run with Me* is bound to Bizhan Najdi’s life and Iran’s history, and the disturbed, stressful and horrific atmosphere in the short story has emerged out of the historical consciousness of the writer with regards to the two modern events of Iran – the Tudeh Party and the Iran-Iraq war. In this collection, Najdi pictures characters that have no route to happiness and bliss, much like Sadeq Hedayat’s oeuvre. Hedayat is another famous Iranian writer who adopted literary modernism in his works. It can be said that as suggested by the title of the story, the simile made between Taher and the olive trees, and Taher’s final entrapment in quarantine, Najdi’s contemporary Iranian individual as the olive tree symbolizes peace, yet is entrapped in a life of isolation in quarantine due to his country’s past which has formed its present condition as a heavy load on the fictional character’s shoulder. Fiction writers are master key holders of their own countries’ imaginary locks, who can open any lock in any story. Najdi did not provide his story with a master key to open the lock on Taher’s right shoulder. Surgery

could apparently guarantee Taher to be physically the same as other military soldiers who carried no metal objects in their bodies. However, it proved that not all locks should be opened unless somebody like a fiction writer told us of its repercussions or what was really inside the locked object. In this paper, we tried to account for the lock's mystery and the writer's mindset about it.

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## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> Sedighe Naziri is an M.A. graduate of English Language and Literature from the Azarbaijan Shahid Madani University. After reading Najdi's short story and our published Persian paper, she kindly drew two sketches.