

Hydrological Epistemicide and Epistemic Disobedience in Dowlatabadi's *Missing Soluch*

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Abstract

Mahmoud Dowlatabadi's *Missing Soluch* narrates the slow dissolution of a village during Iran's 1963 White Revolution, as extractive modernity severs communal ties to subsurface water flows by replacing millennia-old qanats with mechanized deep wells. This article argues that the novel encodes the destruction of the indigenous qanat system as hydrological epistemicide, and that Mergan's embodied water memory constitutes an act of epistemic disobedience against the coloniality of modern water management. While the previous critical literature on the novel has treated drought as a sociological backdrop, this study demonstrates, through a combined lens of Yi-Fu Tuan's topophilia and Walter Mignolo's border thinking, that the loss of an indigenous hydrological epistemology governs the narrative's deepest logic. The analysis is done in three steps. First, it reveals how the maintenance of qanat and communal water distribution creates a topophilic moral economy, that is, a sacred geography of shared ritual and non-commodified obligation. Second, it traces the landscape of fear produced by epistemicide to show that *Soluch's* disappearance erases qanat knowledge, that the dried well becomes a death trap, and that Hajer's forced marriage exposes the connection between water extractivism and patriarchal violence. Finally, it reads Mergan's bodily defiance, including her refusal to sell land, her endurance in fetching water, and her corporeal inscription of drought, as Mignolo's epistemic disobedience, which transforms her body into a living archive of indigenous hydrological memory. By situating *Missing Soluch* within Global South ecocritical debates, the paper reframes modern Persian fiction as a significant but often overlooked source of water knowledge that preserves what developmentalist modernity erases.

Keywords: Missing Soluch, Hydrological Epistemicide, Topophilia, Border Thinking, Qanat, Indigenous Hydrological Memory, Epistemic Disobedience

Introduction

The White Revolution, the Second Pahlavi's modernization program in 1963, planned to restructure the agrarian economy through the redistribution of land. The program included the nationalization of forests and water as well. It was an aggressive drive for water development that promoted drilling mechanized deep wells and using diesel pumps on farms. Khorasan, as Iran's largest province, was impacted by this program due to the replacement of millen-

nia-old qanats. The maintenance of qanats depended upon communal labor and a precise distribution of water, both of which contributed a lot to the identity of villages and their ecologies. It was a carbon-free, Indigenous, and sustainable water management system, which was overlooked and disrupted by wounding the earth with the drilling of new mechanized deep wells. Mahmoud Dowlatabadi's *Missing Soluch* (1979) stages the impact of this aggressive state intervention on a village. The disappearance of the father of the family, Soluch, driven by econom-

ic dislocation in the face of the state-run extractive modernity, occurs as the wells dry and the seasonal rhythms become unpredictable, leading to the erasure of knowledge of water. The story, in practice, narrates the slow dissolution of rural life: it is a precise record of what is lost when an extractive modernity severs people from the subsurface flows in qanats.

The novel has attracted great critical attention. The early scholarship identifies *Missing Soluch* as a landmark of Iranian social realism and reads it as a sociological record of the White Revolution's calamitous effects on rural communities. Taheri (2011) extends this reading and locates the ideological traces in the work, while Taslimi and Shajari (2022) employ Van Dijk's CDA to expose the oppositional stance of the novel toward the ruling classes. Also, Allami and Azimirad (2017) employ Bakhtin's polyphony to argue that Dowlatabadi included several social voices without authorial dominance. Similarly, but with a different approach, Masteali Parsa, Allahdadi Dastjerdi, and Dolatabadi (2011) catalog Sabzevari dialectal verbs in the story. A Feminist reading by Ghamsari et al. (2020) highlights the violence against women shown in the novel. Sahba and Gharbi (2018), by using Halliday's functional grammar, demonstrate how gender shapes the verbal processes. Ganjkanloo (2019) examines the capacity of the novel to produce self-knowledge through narrative empathy; also, Mazidi et al. (2024) analyze the emotional patterns in the story. Interestingly, these approaches treat ecological dimensions, i.e., drought and water scarcity, as the backdrop, but not the narrative epistemology. Salehi (2016) studies the narrative's temporal dynamics against Genette's framework. Poloei's symbolic reading (2020) as well as Khodayar and Mazdarani's (2023) Jungian analysis of the orphan archetype develop such formalist narratological studies. However, these readings seldom connect stylistics to the ecological content.

Comparative studies have positioned the novel alongside Palestinian, American, and Chinese literatures; for example, Sham'i and Bitrafan (2010) seek parallels to Pearl Buck's *The Mother*, or Vafa (2016), in a geocritical framework, reads Mergan as the 'defiant subject', who is a counterpart to Melville's Fedallah, situating the novel within a transcontinental line of resistance. Although Vafa's comparative work offers a countermeasure to the paradigms of Eurocentric World Literature, its focus stops at political defiance and narrative worldliness, so water is an absent element in the study. In another postcolonial study, Razi and Hajati (2015) treat environmental

degradation as a consequence of economic exploitation rather than as a distinct form of epistemological violence. Despite the extensive critical literature on the *Missing Soluch*, there is no study examining water's definitive role in the logic of the novel's narrative.

Moreover, a postcolonial review of the literature on the novel shows that the ecocritical approaches deployed to read the work largely follow Western frameworks and do not engage with decolonial theories, especially decolonial water theories. The review has shown that the qanat, as an ancient irrigation system in Khorasan, has been overlooked as an epistemological system. Critics have not examined how this novel shows that replacing qanat governance with mechanized wells constitutes the erasure of Indigenous water epistemology and hydrological memories, i.e., epistemicide. Furthermore, none of the critical works on the novel have focused on the topophilic aspect of the characters, their bonds with place, to explore how the story conveys water memory as resistance or epistemic disobedience. In a broader view, a Global South ecocritical paradigm has shifted many literary environmental studies towards addressing such issues beyond Western wilderness aesthetics, underlining the capacity of literature to vitalize and memorialize what Western-prescribed style of development erases.

This paper reads *Missing Soluch* through a combined lens of Tuan's topophilia and Mignolo's border thinking and demonstrates that this novel constitutes a rich, yet critically underrecognized, archive of Global South water knowledge. The hypothesis that guides this study is: *Missing Soluch* encodes the destruction of the qanat system as a hydrological epistemicide; it, through its prevalent idea of absence and Mergon's bodily resistance, expresses a resilient Indigenous hydrological memory; and this expression of memory constitutes an act of epistemic disobedience against the coloniality of modern water management.

Topophilia and Border Thinking

A Global South ecocritical lens must read *Missing Soluch*, obviously not as a marginal case, but it must be considered as a central site where the contradictions of extractive modernization and the resilience of Indigenous knowledge are articulated. Such an alternative framework insists that "uneven patterns of neoliberal development in the Global South threaten the millions who depend upon access to natural resources for their survival" (Slovic et al. 2015, 3), and that ecological disruption is "the radical reorganiza-

tion of nature in order to eliminate the possibility of life... through the annihilation of the interdependent relations with extra-human nature that sustain human life" (Deckard 2015, 36). One of the best remedies is Indigenous culture and literature, as this framework "posits culture and place as co-constitutive of Indigenous identity, and suggests that the environmental integrity of a specific place is foundational to the cultural identity and survival of the Indigenous peoples of that place" (El Dessouky 2015, 111). The Global South ecocritical lens in this paper relies on two foundational concepts, including topophilia and border thinking.

Topophilia, along with border thinking, is one of the most foundational concepts that constitute the spatial and ecological dimensions of the theoretical framework. Yi-Fu Tuan defines topophilia as "the affective bond between people and place or setting" (1974, 4). This bond is not simply limited to a mere cognitive recognition of location. It is a deeply embodied attachment that gets cultivated through intimate and habitual interactions with the material environment. Tuan emphasizes that intimate experiences are profoundly felt: "A mere smile or touch may signal our consciousness of an important occasion" (1977, 137), which are rooted in the daily engagement of the body with its surroundings. For Tuan, "the real... involves our whole being, all our senses" (1977, 146); place, while an abstract coordinate, is a center of meaning, which is constructed through lived experience. "To live in a place," he notes, "is to experience it, to be aware of it in the bones as well as with the head" (1975, 165). Thus, topophilia is an active, relational process, not a passive sentiment. Central to Tuan's framework is the concept of the "lived place," that is, a phenomenologically rich, experience-grounded space. It holds memory and sustains belonging. Any pause creates a place, and consequently the accumulation of intimate knowledge. Place is, in fact, a space transformed into a site of personal and collective significance. Then, it is a construct of experience, and experience takes time. In other words, the lived place is not merely a setting for action, but it is a participant in the formation of identity and memory. It is too simplistic to think that Tuan's framework is totally land-centric and humanistic, or oriented toward fixed terrain. Topophilia, as Robert Tally suggests, is a form of "place-mindedness" (Tally 2019, 29) characterized by a "profound sense of unease, anxiety, or discontent" (Tally 2019, 30). As a result, topophilia centers on water as well; it is a hydrological affection, in which the bond is formed through shared water practices, such as cleaning qanats, distributing flow, or phenomenolog-

ical relationships with subsurface flow.

The second foundational concept in this study's theoretical framework is border thinking. Central to Walter D. Mignolo's decolonial thought is the concept of the "colonial matrix of power," which he describes as "a complex conceptual structure" (2011b, 142). This matrix operates through "heterogeneous historico-structural nodes" (Mignolo 2011b, 84) across four interrelated spheres, as mentioned above: control of the economy, authority, gender and sexuality, and knowledge and subjectivity (Mignolo 2011b, 142). As Alcoff observes, Mignolo's analytics reveal how "the epistemic effects of colonialism are among its most damaging, far-reaching, and least understood" (2007, 80). Therefore, the colonial matrix configures epistemic hierarchies that understand non-Western knowledge systems reductively as objects of study, while they are valid forms of knowing. It produces what Quijano terms "the hegemony of Eurocentrism as epistemological perspective" (Mignolo 2000, 54). This hegemony operates through the subalternization of knowledge, a process that Mignolo traces to the sixteenth century when "Christian epistemic principles" began to delegitimize alternative ways of knowing (Mignolo 1999, 238). This delegitimization leads to the erasure of an alternative epistemology, or epistemicide. For Mignolo, epistemicide is the active erasure of "knowledges subalternized during a long process of colonization" (Quijano 1997, 117; Mignolo 2000, 54).

From this analysis, Mignolo develops "border thinking" as "the moments in which the imaginary of the modern world system cracks" (Mignolo 2000, 23). He once defines it simply but radically "of the essence as we switch from imperial and territorial epistemology (e.g., global linear thinking) to an epistemology emerging from the places and bodies left out of the line e (e.g., the anthropos, the Orientals, the Third World, etc.)" (Mignolo 2011b, 91-2). It emerges from the "exteriority" of the modern/colonial system, dwelling "in the borders of local histories confronting global designs" (Mignolo 2011a, 277). It is not merely a hybrid enunciation but "a fractured enunciation in dialogic situations" that responds "to hegemonic discourse" from a subaltern perspective (Mignolo 2000, xxvi). Alcoff clarifies that border thinking entails "an effort to topple the cultural hierarchy that colonialism enforced" (Alcoff 2007, 82-83). It actually recognizes that subaltern knowledges occupy a "dichotomous locus of enunciation" (Mignolo 2000, 85) that enables critique of both Western and non-Western fundamentalisms. Border thinking activates what Mignolo terms epis-

temic disobedience. This form of disobedience is the refusal to accept the terms of knowledge that are imposed by coloniality, which “implies to delink from the illusion of the zero point epistemology” (Mignolo 2011b, 119). Through epistemic disobedience, silenced knowledges emerge again and constitute themselves as “a road to re-existence delinking from the beliefs that modernity and development are the only way to the future” (Mignolo 2011b, 64). This decolonial praxis, as Mignolo argues, requires “epistemic and aesthetic reconstitution” (Mignolo 2020, 5) that restores dignity to what coloniality has made invisible.

Tuan’s concept of topophilia provides the phenomenological texture of lived place. It highlights an affective bond, the phenomenological experience (Tuan 1974, 64) formed through our sensory experiences (Tuan 1974, 95-98), bodily rituals (Tuan 1974, 99-100), and shared memories (Tuan 1974, 99-100), making each place feel uniquely both personal and communal, as well as meaningful. This is the primary, unmediated experience of landscape as home. Tuan emphasizes that “familiarity breeds affection” (Tuan 1974, 101) and, as mentioned above, that attachment to place is rooted in the “intimate experience of place” (Tuan 1974, 101). The farmer’s relationship to land, he notes, is “compounded of physical intimacy, of material dependence and the fact that the land is a repository of memory and sustains hope” (Tuan 1974, 97). Nevertheless, he also reminds us that security is not absolute since “horror is the sudden awareness of betrayal and death in the inner sanctum of our refuge” (Tuan 1979, 207). Accordingly, there exist landscapes of fear that lurk beneath surfaces of calmness, and the destruction of homeplace constitutes a fundamental betrayal. Meanwhile, it can be concluded that Mignolo’s framework of coloniality interestingly reveals that topophilic bonds, with all their multifaceted nature, are never politically neutral. Coloniality of power operates through the subalternization of knowledges (Mignolo 2000, 13), and it systematically devalues vernacular ways of relating to land and water. For Mignolo, the darker side of modernity is coloniality: the “Bolivian colonial remora” that continues through successive global designs (Mignolo 2000, 50). His biological metaphor refers to a small fish that attaches itself to larger marine animals as a parasite. To him, colonial remora is coloniality, that is, the colonial matrix of power that never accepts leaving. The only way to get rid of it is delinking, or more precisely, epistemic disobedience. Like a remora, extractive modernization intentionally breaks topophilic bonds, viewing them not as accidental but as a deliberate act of violence. It follows a

logic of dispossession that considers local hydrological knowledge as an obstacle to development. Drawing on Nixon, this kind of violence, which engages in gradual losses, functions via “physical displacement” as well as “imaginative displacement,” transforming communities “unimagined” within developmental narratives (Nixon 2011, 150), as the direct consequences of such an aggressive regime of power. A significant point to make here is that in a decolonizing process, “Once the colonial matrix of power is no longer managed and controlled by the so-called West,” Mignolo and Walsh state, “it impinges on and transforms all aspects of life, particularly with regard to two interrelated spheres” (Mignolo and Walsh 2018, 10). Apart from the coloniality of hard power that manifests in the relations between states, Mignolo and Walsh identify “the coloniality of the three pillars of being in the world: racism, sexism, and the naturalization of life and the permanent regeneration of the living (e.g., the invention of the concept of *nature*)” (Mignolo and Walsh 2018, 10). That nature is one of the three pillars of the colonial matrix of power means that the subjugation of the natural world is an ontological and epistemic act. Thus, it can be argued that topophilia, emerging through the intimate, bodily, and affective bond with the land and water, is the exact phenomenological site in which coloniality of nature is felt and where decolonial resistance must be carried out. It is, therefore, no coincidence that the destruction of the qanat could trigger the collapse of the other two pillars, in a broad sense, including the patriarchal violence against women as well as the racial or class othering of the peasantry. This study adopts a decolonial close reading method that integrates literary textual analysis with the theoretical framework that is developed above. The paper, by decolonial method, means that the Western research paradigm of studying marginalized peoples as objects is not simply cast off, but transformed into actively thinking with and from their epistemic positions to create or identify novel possibilities (Smith 2012, x, 204). This assumes that this strategic move has the potential to decolonize the Western colonial approach. Moreover, the decolonial method treats language and narrative as a site of anti-colonial struggle and epistemic disobedience (wa Thiong’o 2005, 16). Thus, the decolonial close reading, in this context, is not merely a formalist but also a politically and epistemologically conscious practice, focusing on how narrative structures reflect and challenge the coloniality of water. The editors of *Postcolonial Ecologies* (2011), DeLoughrey and Handley, explaining the framework of their scholarship, argue that a postcolonial ecocriticism must engage nonhuman without reducing it to human terms, stating, “the

landscape (and seascape) as a participant in this historical process rather than a bystander to human experience" (4). It means that an environment-oriented reading requires scrutiny of the text as a negotiation in which nonhuman elements, in this paper, water, function as an active agent. Hence, the analysis of *Missing Soluch* proceeds by examining specific narrative elements, such as character actions, spatial descriptions, temporal structures, and symbolic motifs in light of the (dis)appearance of water and through the combined lens of topophilia and border thinking. Overall, the analysis is structured around three main themes from the framework: 1) traditions of topophilic water practice, by examining how the maintenance of qanats and communal water-sharing constituted hydrological affection; 2) the landscapes of fear produced by hydrological epistemicide, by tracing how the dried well and water scarcity generate Tuan's landscapes of fear, 6); and 3) the gendered embodiment of hydrological memory, by analyzing how Mergon's female body becomes the primary site of resistance against the erasure of water knowledge.

Hydrological Topophilia in *Missing Soluch*

The story of *Missing Soluch* opens upon a world where the texture of life is inseparable from the circulation of water. The village of Zaminej, as the main setting of the story, is a lived place, a center of meaning forged through the intimate, sensory, habitual interactions that Yi-Fu Tuan identifies as the foundation of topophilic attachment (Tuan 1977, 35-37). The narrative enacts the intimacy by depicting the bodily rhythms of labor, poverty, and cold. Mergon's realization of Soluch's absence is immediately set against hunger and material struggle. Poverty is embedded in the body, as the narrator explains that Soluch's "tiny body" folds "like a fetus" beneath the oven, his hands "hardly more than two bones," wrapped in the skin of "the same donkey that got sick and died the last spring" (Dowlatabadi 2007, 6). This donkey-skin blanket is the remnant of the human and animal interdependence, which has been broken by labor, hunger, and cold. The hide shows that topophilia in this story is not merely a fondness for the beauty of the village. It is, on the contrary, a survival strategy formed in necessity, and the intimacy is condensed into the touch of donkey skin on bone. The winter is so cold "even a stray dog wouldn't linger," but Soluch departs barefoot; his absence leaves Mergon feeling "naked inside, naked and lying on ice" (Dowlatabadi 2007, 8). The place's coldness makes it intimate and relatable, transforming it into a topophilic relation. This topophilic relation is thematic,

and beyond that, it is enacted through the eco-poetics of Dowlatabadi's prose. Zaminej is not a dead, fixed, static backdrop in the narrative. It is an organic being, which breathes and suffers alongside its inhabitants. Dowlatabadi artistically portrays how the village's "boundless, insistent cold would fill the empty and winding alleys" (Dowlatabadi 2007, 6), and how the wind "scraped its rough body against the walls and doorways" (Dowlatabadi 2007, 11). Dowlatabadi creates the personification of the wind, at this point, as an entity with a rough body that actively scrapes against the architecture of the village, blurring the boundary between animate and inanimate, in order to suggest that the place itself is a living organism, the skin of which is being scraped by the extractive forces that erode the qanats. This eco-poetic style surpasses the illustration of the drought by enacting a phenomenological intersubjectivity, that is, co-suffering between the landscape and the people, and making Zaminej a protagonist in its own position.

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The depiction of qanat maintenance reveals water as a communal possession requiring collective care. Soluch's work as a dredger and well-digger positions him in a visceral relation with subsurface flow, creating a water-oriented topophilia. Abbas recalls assisting his father: "Soluch would position Abbas at the top of the well and would descend to the pit of the well himself. Abbas would send down the tools Soluch needed in a bucket. He'd also send down the tallow-burning lantern, the water jug, and bread" (Dowlatabadi 2007, 57). The bucket's descent, the lantern's light, the rising dirt can constitute what

Tuan terms bodily engagement, or an intimate experience, which involves “our whole being, all our senses” (Tuan 1977, 146). Soluch lives qanats. He can read the moisture of the earth through the texture of the soil; he can interpret flow rhythms and maintain the subterranean veins. While being illiterate, he is able to apply intricate geometry to navigate underground and ensure the proper slope for water flow. Qanat masters back then were so, as the authors of the book *Qanat Knowledge* narrate: soon after they met a qanat master, they found out that he “knew of ... mathematical equations but he talked about them in a different language... we were amazed at the fact that an illiterate traditional qanat master was using Pythagorean theorem in practice” (Yazdi and Khaneiki 2017, 65). Likewise, Soluch is known in the village and in the vicinity as “someone with a different skill in each finger of his hand: Soluch the clay-oven maker, Soluch the pit digger, Soluch the dredger, Soluch the reaper, Soluch the room plasterer, Soluch the porter, Soluch the blacksmith” (Dowlatabadi 2007, 10). This list vividly shows an intimate knowledge of materials, like mud, water, and clay. The narrator laments the loss: “may those fingers be adorned with flowers” and mourns and simultaneously underlines the embodied knowledge that is inseparable from the water system.

Water distribution operates alternatively through a moral economy that resists commodification. Karbalai Doshanbeh laments the decline of the qanat system: “Some things just stick you in the eye like a thorn. ... I say this canal system is on its last legs. ... We need to think of something before we’re left helpless when the water dries up” (Dowlatabadi 2007, 17). The qanat is actually a concrete example here of such a moral-economic water distribution system, which is now under threat. This concern reflects topophilic traditions, i.e., the practices that blend ecological knowledge and cultural identity within place. Thus, the concern about the qanat can be interpreted as a loss of topophilic, place-based culture. In practice, the irrigation cycle and many other agricultural tasks of the village were traditionally organized through collective work teams such as boneh (Ajami 1973, 139-140) and were historically dependent on the meticulous oversight of the mirab (water distributor) to ensure fairness. In general, the whole social and economic structures of the villages and consequently towns and cities in Iran were shaken and became chaotic during and after the land reform (Craig 1978, 153). So, Karbalai Doshanbeh’s concern is consequently about the decline of moral economy as it works through collective labor and non-commodified rights in the qanat system.

The moral economy of water is contested in a concrete land conflict in the story. In the conflict over God’s Land, Mergan insists, “What about all the work we’ve done to pull out the thorny weeds one by one, and to smooth the land so it’s like the palm of my hand? I have to feed my children during the summer from the fruits of this land” (Dowlatabadi 2007, 125). This quote shows that labor, in Mergan’s view, is not the basis of formal ownership, but entitlement. Her stance is tied to the hydrological commons in that qanat flow is the only thing that can make the land fertile. Furthermore, the phrase “God’s Land” signals a sacred geography that is contingent upon equitable access to water and resistant to private appropriation. Mirza Hassan’s dismissive remark, “Your land? Ha! What land? God’s Land! That’s land that belongs to God!” (Dowlatabadi 2007, 167) reveals his extractivist epistemology that treats water as a resource to be captured, because he implies that water or land is a resource to be captured, not a common managed by a moral economy. Or consider this: when he asserts, “land that has no legal deed is the property of whoever makes it bloom” (Dowlatabadi 2007, 164). Violating the moral economy, Mirza Hassan commits an epistemic violence of colonial modernity here, since he has reduced the sacred geography to an interchangeable territory.

The moral economy, governed by mutual obligation and not by market prices or private property, is embedded in material culture, too. The examples from the story are the copper work Mergan hides, the water jug she carries, and the borrowed embers. The crucial point is that they are all sustained by water, as is the whole network of reciprocal obligations. Mergan’s hiding of copper work suggests she intends to protect it from being seized as a commodity. On the contrary, when Salar Abdullah later claims it as wheat repayment (Dowlatabadi 2007, 24), he treats it as a simple equivalent of a debt. There happens a shift from an object held in trust to a commodity, which marks the breakdown of the moral economy, ultimately the dissolution of the hydrological commons. More obviously, the water jug is the most direct link to the qanat. It embodies access to water and the labor of fetching it, so making it a symbol of belonging to a community that shares water. Moreover, borrowing embers is an ordinary reciprocal act among neighbors. It is never a commercial transaction. The fact that the exchange of embers is possible depends on the stability of the village, which in turn depends on the water, the qanat’s flow, that keeps people living there. Thus, water is the underlying condition that makes the whole web of mutual obligations possible.

The Landscape of fear and hydrological epistemicide

Abbas's descent into the old salt-water well depicts how the dried qanat stands as the central point of tragedy in the story. It dramatizes how the ruined qanat consumes human vitality and transforms a source of life into a site of death. The structure that once powered the village mill (Dowlatabadi 2007, 191) becomes the site of Abbas's physical and psychological collapse. At this point in the narrative, the novel's sharp lens on non-human animals enhances Dowlatabadi's eco-poetic style. The camel that drives Abbas into the well is described as "showing signs of the drunkenness of spring fever" (Dowlatabadi 2007, 199). This feverishness mirrors the disruption of the hydrological rhythm. The author does not put this accidentally. A biological chaos that, interestingly, parallels the ecological chaos. The madness of the animal is a symptom of the same fever that afflicts the land. It is a fever induced by the violence of extractive modernity. It can be argued that Dowlatabadi refuses to reduce the crisis to a merely human tragedy. Instead, he insists that the ecological violence of the qanat's destruction and the disappearance of water are felt across the entire web of life. His attention to animal life creates an eco-poetic ethics in which the non-human is an active agent whose suffering testifies to epistemicide. Running away from a camel that has gone wild with spring fever, "just before it reached him, Abbas threw his body into the dry well" (Dowlatabadi 2007, 198). The well is his only escape, his last hope, so "he dragged his body toward it. Exhausted, spent, and in pain, helpless and hopeless, he had one thought in his mind: in only a moment he could well be dead" (Dowlatabadi 2007, 198). These words capture his extreme desperation. While the well is supposed to be a site of last resort, it immediately subverts any hope of safety, and the descent provides no refuge. "With a flutter of birds escaping as he fell, Abbas felt something hit his head, and he was unconscious" (Dowlatabadi 2007, 198). He plunges into a world of absolute darkness, into a psychological tomb, where an "old man's voice" and "a blanket of fear" settle over him (Dowlatabadi 2007, 200). Inside the well, he confronts the toxic remnants of the village's hydrological past, that is, the snakes coiled in the depths. They are the poisoned residue of a dying water system. Abbas emerges from this encounter as an old man and is ridiculed with the name "shaggy" (Dowlatabadi 2007, 269). His white hair and bent back mark him as a spectral husk of youth. His transformation is the concretization of the power of the well to consume life. In other words, the loss of water, the decay of the qanat system, not only removes a resource, but it also actively destroys human

beings and turns a communal sustenance system into a grave. Abbas, in this scene, functions as a synecdoche for the village body, as his prematurely aged body is the physical inscription of the drying qanat. Also, the well's darkness is the epistemological void that is left when indigenous water knowledge disappears. The fear and snake imagery also foreshadow the later landscape of fear and, most likely, the toxic patriarchal forces that will enclose the female body, weaving this personal collapse into the novel's entire symbolic structure. Abbas's physical ruin is quickly reframed as a symptom of the state-engineered eradication of the communal and ritualistic water knowledge that once defined the village's existence. In other words, the horrible disintegration immediately expands into a metaphor for the systematic erasure of an entire indigenous knowledge system, a broad condition of hydrological epistemicide. For generations, the qanat system had represented a communal, ritualistic, and reciprocal mode of knowing. By contrast, the newly installed water pump and tractor impose an extractivist regime that rests on the annihilation of a relational ontology. The installation of the pump parallels the historical land reforms of the 1960s (the White Revolution), which replaced the traditional power of the landed aristocracy with state-sponsored mechanization, thereby severing the peasantry from the hydrological commons (Abrahamian 2018, 195-196; Katouzian 1974, 229-230). The epistemic violence, experienced as raw total dispossession and enacted through such water projects, creates "onto-epistemological violence" that persists in the landscape itself (Rabbey 2024, 8). The abandonment of the well in the novel signifies this epistemicide. When the water disappears, so does the knowledge of how to live with it. The state intervention has delinked the villagers from their hydrological heritage. As Campbell and Paye observe, the "enclosure of water" functions through "neocolonial discourses of privatization," which naturalizes the treatment of water as a resource to be extracted (2020, 3). In Zaminej, this enclosure has been brutal and absolute. In fact, the physical dryness of the well and the discursive enclosure of water have inflicted a double violence.

The dissolution gets incarnated in the figure of Soluch, whose disappearance results in the vanishing of the qanat and the loss of water knowledge, making the crisis a visceral, familial absence. In the storyworld, he is able to understand the intimate rhythm of the qanats. Yet, right in the very beginning of the story, Mergan "raised her head from the pillow. Soluch was gone" (Dowlatabadi 2007, 6). His disappearance is stark and irreversible, mirror-

ing the abruptness with which extractive modernity erases Indigenous life. Like the water, he has been consumed by the forces of modernization and economic dislocation. This rupture is illuminated by what Mignolo terms the “colonial matrix of power” (Mignolo 2000, xxii), which controls knowledge and subjectivity and actively delegitimizes vernacular ways of relating to the environment. Soluch’s knowledge is subalternized by the new technological order and a developmentalist discourse that denigrated the qanat as backward. The empty place by the bread oven, which Soluch used to inhabit, becomes a metonym for the choked qanats. The dread triggered by these losses expands the entire village into what Tuan terms a landscape of fear. Tuan argues that intimate topophilic bonds require a stable environment, but when stability collapses, the familiar becomes a source of anxiety. In Zaminej, the landscape no longer sustains attachment. Instead, it actively menaces its inhabitants: “The boundless, insistent cold would fill the empty and winding alleys of Zaminej,” and the wind “scraped its rough body against the walls and doorways” (Dowlatabadi 2007, 11). Also, the terror of thirst pervades every decision. Characters constantly debate migration, fearing that “once the pump is set up, we’ll have to pack up our things and leave the village” (Dowlatabadi 2007, 193). The uncertainty of water displaces the villagers’ ability to dwell. This landscape is not a passive stage; it is an active agent of misery. Thus, as the Indigenous father’s knowledge is subalternized and the environment turns predatory, the entire village is recast as a landscape of fear.

This systemic precarity accelerates the commodification of the female bodies in the village. The logic of extraction that emptied the well and disappeared the father finds its most brutal expression in the commodification of Hajer, whose body becomes the final asset liquidated through her forced marriage with the much older Ali Genav, in a drought-ravaged economy. It is obvious here that Hajer is a hedge against poverty induced by drought. Ali Genav renders the marriage as a calculated transaction, as he says, “your family needs someone to look over them. I’ll give your sons jobs... Your life will improve” (Dowlatabadi 2007, 123). Similarly, Mergan rationalizes the marriage with a brutal economic logic and reproaches Hajer, “how am I supposed to feed you until then?” (Dowlatabadi 2007, 151). Hajer’s protests are silenced, and on the wedding night, the violence is absolute. The best example is the scene in which Ali Genav “covered the girl’s mouth with the palm of one broad, rough hand” (Dowlatabadi 2007, 221), which illustrates the direct translation of drought

economics into physical violation. In times of water scarcity, female bodies are reduced to exchangeable commodities. The extractivist logic of the water pumps, viewing the earth solely as a profit source, reflects the patriarchal logic of marriage, where Hajer is viewed as property to be controlled and consumed. According to Nixon, the argument about the displacement created by slow violence and his notion of developmental narratives’ unimagined communities (Nixon 2011, 152), Hajer is unimagined as a girl with rights and reimagined as a survival mechanism for her family. The emptiness of the well, the father’s absence, and the daughter’s violated agency denote the same ontological and epistemic rupture. The vivid embodiment of this rupture is the dry well. The dry well is a scar in the earth and a wound in the collective memory, where the land, memory, and agency are swallowed whole.

Embodied Memory of Water and Epistemic Resistance

Mergan’s daily struggle for water fuses bodily tasks, memory, and geography into a deep corporeal archive that is practically an embodied epistemology that resists abstraction. Her relationship with water is an active, embodied practice of knowing. For instance, she performs the daily task of fetching water from the village cistern with frozen fingers and aching joints. This ritual constitutes a form of situated topophilic knowledge tied tightly to the rhythms of her body. The cold wind “licked at her, winding its way around her body through the holes in her dress,” but her grip on the water jug remains tenacious, forcing her body to submit to the necessities of survival (Dowlatabadi 2007, 14). Her body’s endurance encodes the rhythms of the land, as painful physical labor serves as a ritual that regulates her sense of self in relation to the land’s capacity to sustain life. She recalls the fertile spring of her youth through the embodied experience of joy, showing that it is not an abstract memory: “she felt it in her laughter, her jokes, her dancing and drumming, her idleness, her bread-making, and her ginning” (Dowlatabadi 2007, 76-77). The memory of the land’s richness is encoded in the very muscle memory of her body, forming an archive of what Tuan calls the “intimate experiences” of place that are profoundly felt but “hard to express” (Tuan 1977, 137). In this sense, Mergan’s body becomes the primary site where the place’s history of abundance and scarcity is recorded and recalled. The flow of Mergan’s vitality and the flow of water, i.e., body and landscape, are fused into a single ontological continuity, which makes her body an archive of

hydrological knowledge. Such a profoundly somatic understanding of knowledge explains why Mergan's later defiance of Mirza Hassan is a meaningful epistemic stance.

The deeply embodied water knowledge described above transforms Mergan's resistance into a deliberate (political-)epistemic disobedience that defends an indigenous ecological rationality against colonizing modernity. Her defiance is an enactment of what Mignolo identifies as epistemic disobedience. The refusal can be defined as a defense against what Radaei et al. term "ecological wisdom," i.e., an indigenous knowledge system that integrates cultural values with hydrological processes and is distinct from the commodifying logic of state modernization (2022, 6-7). Confronted by Mirza Hassan's plan to purchase and mechanize God's Land, she lashes out, "I'm saying that in a few months when you've harvested the land, are you planning on sharing the profits with me? Of course not!" (Dowlatabadi 2007, 167). Her resistance is the defense mechanism of a "hedgehog that as soon as it senses an attack turns into a ball made up entirely of sharp needles" (Dowlatabadi 2007, 156). It is a form of delinking from the colonality of the extractive present. The new water pump and tractor, in Mergan's refusal of techno-fetishism, are not technological marvels to her. The apparatuses of the extractive regime are, in practice, agents of the epistemic rupture that disrupts the ancestral relationship of the community with the land. By refusing to capitulate to Mirza Hassan, Mergan performs a radical act of re-existence. She refuses to treat the land as dead matter or the water as a mere commodity, instead insisting on the ontological priority of the communal knowledge that her female body has held for generations. Mergan's defensive body politics, however, comes at a high cost, as the drought and extractive order impose consequences for her defiance.

The consequences of Mergan's refusal are inscribed somatically on her flesh. Tuan's concept of the lived place finds its ultimate expression in the novel as the landscape of Mergan's exhausted body. In other words, the devastating physical impact of the drought is literally reflected on her; when she witnesses the collapse of her son Abbas, her eyes are described as "the outlines of two dry wells," and she imagines that "in the depths of her eyes, two old vipers are coiled" (Dowlatabadi 2007, 204). The images of drying out and poison transform her physical features into a geography of loss. She no longer inhabits a place of water because the place has collapsed into her. This fusion of body and arid

landscape reveals the profound violence that is, with some modifications, close to hydrotrauma, i.e., "neglecting indigenous practices, rights, and traditionally accustomed relationship with the most vulnerable and catastrophe prone hydrological terrain" (Rabbey 2024, 3). Mergan's body becomes its living echo of the dried salt-water well, as a landscape of fear, which is an abyss populated by snakes that "have sensed a new prey, inside their lair" (Dowlatabadi 2007, 201). The terror of the well in the collapse of body and place, as well as Mergan's wounded flesh, becomes interchangeable symptoms of the same ontological catastrophe and epistemicide, as embedded in the very structure and rhythm of the narrative.

The narrative form of the novel mirrors the ontological crisis, which is caused by the hydrological epistemicide. *Missing Soluch* does not move toward a swift climax. In contrast, its structure is defined by the cyclical, grinding temporality of drought itself. The narrative frequently loops back to the same elemental struggle, like lighting a fire with wet kindling, shivering through the endless night, or waiting for the snow to melt. The narrative creates a sense of stretched time through sensory moments; for example, Abrau's sweat "dripping from the tip of his nose" and his body collapsing beside the stove (Dowlatabadi 2007, 41) portray the slow erosion of vitality that defines life without water. The text's obsessive attention to sensory details, for instance the "dry, cold sound" of a door opening or the smoke that "drew tears to Hajer's eyes," forces the reader into the phenomenological experience of scarcity (Dowlatabadi 2007, 83). There is no linear progress in the storyworld. There is only the constant tightening of the season's grip and the endurance required to push through it. The temporality of drought is replicated by the narrative space in view of the fact that time, in the storyworld, stretches out under the cruel sun, and memory becomes the only currency that does not depreciate. Within this world being dried out, the village of Zaminej operates as a contact zone where competing water ontologies clash with brutal force. The tractor, "with an increasing roar," and the camels "bucking with fear" (Dowlatabadi 2007, 188) signify the violence of a globalized extractivist logic on an Indigenous hydrological culture. The villagers are forced to confront the dissolution of their communal laws and their intimate knowledge of the underground flow. Yet, at the center of this chaos stands Mergan. Her simple, firm insistence, "I won't sell!" (Dowlatabadi 2007, 217) functions as a radical ontological claim. By holding her ground against the partnership, she holds a space where the communal memory of the qanat's logic persists and resists epis-

temicide. Her alertness and act of walking to God's Land and drawing a line in the earth to mark her claim are a living testimony to an epistemology of water that has been systematically impaired in the state's modernization process. That is to say, Mergan's body becomes the living archive of the disappeared water; her body, her memory, and her repeated claim to the land thus fuse into the novel's final testament to what hydrological epistemicide tries to silence but fails to do.

Conclusion

This paper has established that Mahmoud Dowlatabadi's *Missing Soluch* encodes the destruction of Iran's qanat system as hydrological epistemicide, and that Mergan's embodied water memory constitutes a deliberate act of epistemic disobedience against the extractive modernity of the White Revolution. Previous critical readings of the novel consistently treated drought and water scarcity as backdrop, overlooking the qanat as an epistemological system and failing to examine how the novel narrates the replacement of communal wells with mechanized pumps as the violent erasure of Indigenous hydrological memory. This paper has attempted to close that gap by demonstrating, through the combined lens of Tuan's topophilia and Mignolo's border thinking, that the narrative's deepest logic is governed by the loss of a hydrological epistemology, from Soluch's disappearance to Mergan's bodily defiance. It has reframed the novel as a literary archive depicting what developmentalist modernity has systematically subalternized by positioning Persian fiction within Global South ecocritical debates on epistemic violence. While this paper has focused solely on *Missing Soluch*, future studies could expand this decolonial water framework or develop similar ones across Persian literature in order to uncover further archives of Global South water knowledge. It is significant to note that the implications of this study and similar ones extend beyond the fictional village of Zaminej. Dowlatabadi's novel has been a warning: Iran has been confronting the ecological consequences of extractivism, especially those concerning water. Drying Lake Urmia and land subsidence in the central regions of the country are two examples of the problem. Technological improvement with extractivist (colonial) logic has compounded the problem of ecological degradation as well as epistemic rupture. This study invites broader and more urgent inquiries into Persian literature as an archive of water knowledge. Classical Persian literature abounds with the symbolism of water as life and blessing: hydrological imagery, mystical rivers, Persian gardens with fountains, rains of blessing, etc., in Ferdowsi, Rumi, Hafez, and Saadi's works.

Modern Persian literature has this engagement with water with a sharper ecological and political mindset. The presence of British soldiers in Fars, which is a province rich in water, in Daneshvar's *Savush-un* (1969) is not the sole example. Reading Persian literature through a decolonial water lens can help uncover a rich archive that is able to challenge Western-centric narratives of environmental crisis and provide alternative understanding and Indigenous solutions that are rooted in the lived experiences of the Global South.

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