

Dialogical Intervention of Material Agency in Atiq Rahimi's Earth and Ashes

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Abstract

This paper examines how material agency embodied by the land, ruins, silence, and objects involves in a dialogical relationship with human trauma and memory in Atiq Rahimi's *Earth and Ashes*. The novella portrays Dastageer, an elderly survivor of a bombed Afghan village, journeying with his grandson Yassin through a devastated landscape. The narrative employs evocative imagery and second-person address to interweave the responses of the terrain into the emotional and psychological trajectories of the protagonists. This study relies on trauma theory and eco-critical concepts for the analysis of selected literary text. The research highlights how the environment actively speaks through Dastageer's reveries and Yassin's innocent misinterpretation of deafness believing that others have lost their voices rather than his hearing that poignantly illustrates a material voice in rupture. The land bears witness to atrocity and become a counterpart to human testimony in the novel. The novel's sparse yet charged prose transforms landscape into a co-author of memory, grief, and unspoken history.

Keywords: Dialogical relationship, Human trauma, survivor, psychological trajectories, *Earth and Ashes*

Introduction

The research suggests a narrative strategy where non-human elements intervene in the discourse of the novel in a dialogical relationship. In literary theory it evokes Bakhtin's notion of dialogism: meaning arises through the interplay of multiple voices. Here, it means that material things join the conversation. In Rahimi's novella, objects and landscapes are not silent backdrops but participate in the narrative, almost like additional narrators. One analysis note, that in *Earth and Ashes* the environment literally "speaks" through the characters, creating a

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“dialogical” exchange between people and place. In other words, the earth, ash, and ruins engage with human minds and memories as active interlocutors. This idea resonates with contemporary narrative theory: for example, Smith & Monforte argue that new materialist narratology treats story worlds as assemblages where narrative and materiality affect each other within networks of human and non-human actors. Thus, dialogical intervention implies giving voice to the material world and weaving it into the story’s dialogue.

❖ **Material Agency**

This term comes from new materialism and related theories (e.g. Jane Bennett’s *Vibrant Matter*) which ascribes a kind of agency or thing power to matter. Material agencies means that objects, land, dust, etc., can act and influence events, not merely reflect them. In *Earth and Ashes*, the ashes, dust, and ruins possess precisely such agency: critics describe them as “active agents of narrative discourse”. For instance, Rahimi treats ash not just as a byproduct of destruction but as a witness that bears witness to devastation and participates in creating memory. Material agencies thus upend anthropocentrism: humans are not the sole storytellers. Instead, the story encourages readers to reflect on how human and non-human experiences are intertwined. In practice this means settings, objects and even ambient silence carry meaning and can speak about trauma.

These concepts connect to broader theories: new materialism explicitly challenges human centered storytelling by treating matter as vibrant. Narrative theory (Bakhtin’s dialogism, narrative analysis) similarly values multiple voices including nonhuman voices in creating meaning and trauma theory (Caruth, Herman, etc.) highlights traumatic events often defy conventional language. *Earth and Ashes* bridge these strands by using material elements as co-narrators of trauma. As one study puts it, the land “becomes a counterpart to human testimony”, transforming the prose into a co-author of memory, grief, and unspoken history. By giving earth and ashes agency, Rahimi uses the material world to bear witness when human testimony alone cannot fully express war’s horrors.

❖ **Contextual Justification for *Earth and Ashes***

The title *Earth and Ashes* foreground the very materials that drive the novella’s meaning. Rahimi already makes material elements earth and ashes central, not as a

setting or metaphor^l but as active participants. This focus is apt: the story is literally about an old man and his grandson walking through scorched land after a bombing. Every step unfolds among dust, charred ruins, and memories. These elements are not passive scenery they shape the narrative's dialogue. For example, the prose repeatedly treats the earth as if it were telling its story. One passage describes how the environment "actively speaks" to the characters, giving a material voice^l to the scene. In short, the title's invocation of earth and ashes signals that the material world itself is a protagonist and witness.

Ash and Dust as Witnesses: Throughout the novel, ash and dust function like testifying agents. Early on, ash is described as holding the thing power of history: it embodies the violence of war and is even involved in process of creating meaning and memory. Dust similarly performs miracles of perception. In a key scene, Yassin's sudden deafness is portrayed through dust: he imagines that dust has silenced everyone else. In this way the dust "gives voice" to the unsayable, implying that some truths can only be conveyed through the material world. The narrative suggests that when human speech fails or is impossibly shattered by trauma, ash and dust themselves speak in its stead.

Landscapes and Ruins as Co-Authors: The ruined village and desolate countryside are depicted almost like characters or narrators. The text says the landscape is a coauthor of memory, grief, and unspoken history. Critics observe that each building wreck and broken alley has a story the ruins are narrators themselves with their own stories to tell about survival. Rahimi's sparse, second-person narration often aligns the grandfather's inner state with the environment: as he listens to silence or touches the scorched earth, it is as if the land itself is answering or questioning. In effect the land dialogues with the characters. The constant interplay (for example, characters reacting to shifting light on the ruins) implies a kind of communication that goes beyond words.

Personal Objects and Memory: Even mundane items carry agency. Clothing and personal artifacts retain traces of people. One analysis note that garments on the road act as material agents^l that bridge past and present by storing touch and emotion. Whenever a character picks up a piece of fabric or a discarded item, it evokes the vanished owner's presence. In this way objects serve as memory containers they open a dialog between the living and the dead, between present

trauma and past normalcy. The novel uses these embodied memories to extend its dialogue.

Trauma, Memory, and the Material Chorus: The combined effect of all these material agencies is to create a chorus of testimony. Scholars describe the ash, dust, ruins and things as an “interrelated chorus of witnesses” that speak together. This material chorus speaks beside and sometimes in place of human voices. In practical terms, the war’s trauma is conveyed through these interactions the landscape absorbs suffering and then testifies to it, so the narrative can preserve what might otherwise be unspeakable. One study concludes that by giving material objects a voice, Rahimi’s narrative produces a testimony that cannot be erased by violence. Thus, memory and grief are shared among humans and earth. The title emphasizes this sharing dialogue occurs not just among people, but between people and earth and ashes. In sum, the thesis title aptly captures the novella’s method: material things actively intervene in the dialogue of war and memory. Rahimi’s sparse prose makes the scorched ground and rising dust co narrators of the Afghan war’s story. By treating earth, ash, ruins, and objects as dialogic agents, Earth and Ashes reconfigures how trauma is represented: the silent materials bear witness, echoing and expanding the characters’ own testimonies. This approach aligns the novella with new materialist and trauma theoretical perspectives, showing how the non-human shares in the work of remembering and meaning making after violence.

❖ Background and Context

Dialogical intervention is a methodology of consulting applied by professionals to make an intervention into the organizational or social system experiencing some difficulties (Macy, 2019). It comes in handy in a situation where a group is faced with the difficulty of avoiding a costly adverse result or seizing a high-stakes opportunity. Dialogic intervention comes as an alternative to such passive observation of a possible crisis by encouraging individuals to Act in the right way.

Dialogical intervention is all about obtaining change by way of evocative interactions using dialogue (Hidayatullah, 2023). It is a matter of changing the quality of discourse and thinking about it. This is the investigation of the personnel and group assumptions and predispositions. Dialogic interventions cannot be performed without dialogue whole system participation and recognition of systemic problems are needed. Upon setting a problem in the context in which it exists and

considering fragmentation in a different light, one can start the process of the recovery and reconstruction of a broken issue into its wholeness.

There are some critical components of the dialogic practice, such as the presence of more than one therapist during team meetings, including the family and network, asking open questions, responding to the utterances of the clients, focusing on the present moment, eliciting a diverse perspective, being relationally oriented, focusing on the clients rather than problem-driven discourse, not discouraging professionals, being transparent, and living in the uncertainty (Pugh, 2019).

Dialogical practices are applied in different situations. Cognitive therapy tries to evoke change by using a dialogical method of interactions with the parts of the self and others (Cavonius Rintahaka et al., 2024). A common technique is called chair work, where clients address various features of themselves or internalized images of others. Parents in dialogue reading literacy programs are effective in enhancing early language skills and literacy. In dialogic OD intervention, interaction and discussion are emphasized so that individuals can come up with their meaning of the situation, and they are also able to structure the result.

Although the studies indicate that dialogical interventions have the potential to be effective, not all studies point towards these interventions. To illustrate, a study that showed conversation as a psychosocial wellbeing intervention after stroke failed to display significantly reduced emotional distress and anxiety. Dialogical family guidance intervention, however, caused more prosocial behavior in children with neurodevelopmental disorders.

Atiq Rahimi's *Earth and Ashes* tell an enormous story by way of a very small one. The narrative, written in the second person, describes the journey of an old man, Dastageer, with his grandson, Yassin. They are going to see the grandfather's son, the grandson's father, Murad, who works in a mine and wasn't at home when his Afghan village was destroyed by the Russians and nearly everyone was killed. The first half of the book describes Dastageer's wait with Yassin at the roadside checkpoint for a truck to take them the final leg of their weeklong journey to the mine; the second half is about Dastageer's ride to and arrival at his destination. The landscape of modern Afghan literature is a testament to decades of war, displacement, and cultural shift transformation, which have profoundly altered the material and social fabric of Afghan society. In the context of this literary tradition,

Atiq Rahimi's novella *Earth and Ashes* (2002) stand out as one of the most significant works, not only documenting the destructive effects of the Soviet Afghan War (1979-1989) but also exploring innovative narrative strategies to depict trauma, memory, and resistance. The title of the novella itself already indicates the leading role of material elements, such as earth and ashes, which are not merely a setting or a symbol but rather participants in the story's discourse. The war has had negative social, economic, political, and cultural effects on the country, its people, and the region. According to Butt, to build a world-class, sustainable industry that will guide Afghanistan into a future of peace and prosperity, the world is eager to explore, exploit, and export. Afghan regional toll is one of its most obvious effects in the country due to the war happenings such as Goodson and Herman states. The conflict has resulted in the death, injury, or displacement of millions of Afghans since 2009. The UN estimates that over 100,000 Afghan civilians have died or been injured, and more than five million have been compelled to leave their homes.

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan presented new circumstances of destruction that went well beyond human loss to include the methodical destruction of the landscapes, architecture, cultural objects, and material basis of everyday life. Such total material destruction resulted in what could be called a material crisis, which disputed the previous modes of narrative representation and cultural memory. As a response to this crisis, Afghan writers such as Rahimi have developed new literary approaches that afford agency to non-human objects, enabling material things to serve as witnesses, memory keepers, and drivers of resistance when human testimony proves insufficient or impossible. *Earth and Ashes* is a somewhat unusual instance of this literary innovation, as it brings to the fore the interrelation between human experience and the material environment in a manner that trespasses on the traditional separation between active subjects and passive objects. The narration is organized as a dialogue in which ash, dust, ruins, and other material components are involved in the process of building meaning, memory, and emotional reaction. Such dialogical practice establishes what could be conceived as a material testimony that accompanies and, at times, replaces human voices in their testimony to the trauma of war and occupation.

This narrative strategy is important not only as a literary method but also as part of a wider set of concerns relating to how postcolonial literature addresses the situation of extreme violence and cultural dislocation. The agency of material objects is as much a formal innovation as it is a cultural tactic for maintaining those

forms of knowledge and experience that would otherwise be destroyed, displaced, or silenced. Through analyzing the way material agency operates in *Earth and Ashes*, this study will contribute to the knowledge not only of the particularities of the Afghan literary response to conflict but also of the possibilities of postcolonial literature in creating alternative forms of witness and resistance.

Although the importance of Afghan literature is increasingly acknowledged in the fields of postcolonial studies and world literature, the narrative patterns that Afghan authors use to depict the destruction of material culture and environmental trauma have not been studied in detail in scholarly literature. Although some of the current criticism has touched upon the theme of war, displacement, and cultural identity in Afghan literature, the role of material objects and environmental factors as active participants, rather than passive background elements or symbols, in these stories has not received sufficient coverage.

This is a critical gap, primarily because material destruction has been so central to the Afghan experience of war and the creativity with which Afghan writers have sought to address this destruction through narrative strategy. The established ways of literary critical analysis, which primarily focus on issues of human agency and characterization, as well as symbolic representations, are insufficient for describing the complexity of the interaction between human experience and the material world, as portrayed in Afghan literature.

Moreover, implementations of Western theoretical models in analyzing non-Western literary texts bring crucial questions of cultural specificity and discursive power that have been outside the scope of scholars of Afghan literature. The methodological challenge is to devise analysis methods that can recognize and understand the innovative narrative practices employed by Afghan authors without being insensitive to cultural specificity and without imposing unsuitable theoretical frameworks on them.

The exact issue that the present study seeks to address is how one can think through and make sense of the various forms of negotiating material agency in the narrative form of *Earth and Ashes* by Atiq Rahimi, particularly in relation to the experiences of trauma, memory, and resistance during the Soviet Afghan War. The issue demands not only close attention to the textual specifics but also theoretical ingenuity to render the sophistication of the involvement of material objects in the

narrative discourse while simultaneously navigating the culturally informed perception of the Afghan experience and literary tradition.

Review of the Literature

The literature world of the *Earth and Ashes* is concerned with the dialogical connection between human and non-human agents. As argued by scholars, including Ali (2024), the story written by Rahimi transcends the boundaries of anthropocentrism because it emphasizes the interplay between material beings and human lives. This interaction fosters a deeper understanding of the complexities of war and trauma, as the story illustrates how both human and non-human elements contribute to the creation of meaning.

According to the critic, the descriptions of scenery and materials provided in the novel reflect the broader socio-political situation in Afghanistan. The environment, with its severe conditions and the legacies of war, becomes a living participant in the characters' lives, affecting their choices and emotional background. This way, *Earth and Ashes*, in turn, become the venue for an investigation into how the concept of materiality influences human experiences and vice versa.

Afghanistan, a country rich in mineral resources beneath the soil, has been at war for more than forty years. The Soviet invasion in 1979, a Civil war, Taliban rule, and the US invasion in 2001 are some of the reasons for the war. Ewans and Farahmand state that present day Afghanistan is under the Taliban's control, who took back the country after twenty years following the withdrawal of US forces in August 2021. Since its publication, *Earth and Ashes* by Atiq Rahimi has garnered considerable scholarly interest, establishing itself as a focal point of debate on issues in Afghan literature, trauma, and the representation of war. The chapter provides an overview of the literature written about Rahimi's work, focusing on the most recurring topics, which include memory, identity, materiality, and the relationship between human and non-human actors. Placing Rahimi's story in the context of the larger literature and theory, this review will shed light on the specifics of his narration and the place of *Earth and Ashes* in modern literature.

One of the most successful themes in *Earth and Ashes* is the theme of memory and trauma, especially the Afghan experience of war. Critics like Amiri (2019) claim that Rahimi uses disjointed narratives and nonlinear timelines to indicate the

disconcerting impact of trauma. Loss and destruction are equally likely to taint the protagonist's memories, reflecting those of a nation devastated by war. Rahmani states that the narrative approach of Rahimi is effective in conveying the psychological impacts that war leaves on individuals and how individual and collective memories intersect. Despite being fiction, the characters in both novels experience both physical and mental suffering, which accurately captures life in a war zone. Every character wants to leave the conflicting situation because war makes the characters numb. All the major and supporting characters struggle with finding their identities. There is a strong feeling of psychological distress evident in the novel as the characters struggle to cope with the loss of their loved ones after their deaths. The burden of oppression by marital, social, and religious norms is very well portrayed. The characters are in search of the true home both inside and outside as they lost their lives in their homeland. Their external search is for a better place to live a typical human life on Earth that is free of war and conflict, while their internal search is for their true selves and identities. The selected novels illustrate how war causes trauma for people who are forced to flee their homes and become refugees.

Likewise, he also emphasizes the importance of storytelling as a way of managing trauma. In *Earth and Ashes*, the very process of narrating experiences is transformed into a technique of counteraction against forgetting. He assumes that the characters in Rahimi's works attempt to repossess themselves by recounting their stories, thereby turning trauma into a survivor narrative. This idea aligns with the prevailing trend in literary discussions of memory, where remembering is viewed as a crucial process of healing.

Identity is the central issue in *Earth and Ashes*. Critics such as Putra and Mustofa (2012) believe that Rahimi's work reveals the intricacies of Afghan identity within a post-colonial context. Viewing the importance of cultural specificity, Saed effectively handles the novel's aspects that explore displacement, belonging, and seeking meaning in the chaos. Essentialist ideas of Afghan identity are disproved as the characters of *Earth and Ashes* are struggling to define themselves in a violent and culturally disruptive landscape.

Additionally, the issue of both personal and collective identities is central to the story. The characters created by Rahimi are the representatives of the nation that tries to establish its identity against foreign occupation and civil war. The novel itself

attests to the strength of Afghan culture and how its people can navigate the world, all while staying close to their historical and cultural roots.

Another important feature of *Earth and Ashes* is the way Rahimi explores materiality. The objects presented in the novel ashes, dust, and ruins serve as a narrating mechanism, translating into the side meanings of remembering, losing, and resisting. Researchers such as Lisa Amiri (2023) have explored how material objects can serve as active characters in stories, drawing on new materialist theories. Wong claims that Rahimi gives agency to such objects, allowing them to determine the experience and perceptions of the characters. Such a view is similar to the ideas of Jane Bennett, who introduced the notion of vibrant matter in the sense that non-human objects possess a kind of agency that affects human actions and social organizations. This empowers material objects and disrupts the human centered approach to storytelling, as the narrative written by Rahimi encourages readers to reflect on how human and non-human experiences are intertwined.

Testimony is another outstanding topic that arises when speaking about *Earth and Ashes*. Critics such as Kamran (2015) believe that the story of Rahimi serves as a kind of witness to the horrors of war and gives voice to the voiceless. The dialogical order created in the novel can accommodate diverse views, existing in a rich fabric of experiences that mirror the intricacies of Afghan society.

According to McManus, this concept of testimony can be applied not only to personal experiences but also to broader narratives that confront history. Through amplifying the voices of ordinary Afghan people, Rahimi helps to enlarge the discussion about resistance and resilience, shedding new light on the strength of storytelling as a form of opposition to oppression.

Methodology

The study's theoretical foundation is the new materialist or vitalist approach to matter. In Bennett's formulation, things (from minerals to man-made objects) possess a kind of vitality or thing power are not mere passive backdrops but can act as forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own. For example, ash and earth in Rahimi's narrative do more than symbolize destruction; they impede human designs and simultaneously carry historical memory. Bennett's vibrant

matter thus provides a vocabulary for treating objects as participants in the story, not just metaphors.

oargues that entities do not preexist their relations but rather emerge through intra-actions. In other words, humans and things co-constitute with each other: one cannot talk about a character or an object in isolation, but only through their entangled relations. Barad's perspective challenges the classic subject/object divide and insists that what it means to matter is always material-discursivel For our purposes, this means that the roles of ash, dust, ruins, and other material elements in *Earth and Ashes* must be analyzed as inseparable from the human experiences and meanings they engage with.

Together, Bennett's and Barad's ideas suggest that the text's vibrant materiality forms a kind of material testimony¹ or dialogical network. As noted in Chapter 2, *Earth and Ashes* is organized as a dialogue in which ash, dust, ruins, and other material components are involved in the process of building meaning, memory, and emotional reaction. New materialist theory frames this practice as a formal innovation: material objects are active interlocutors in the narrative, carrying memory when human voices are silenced. This ontological stance justifies our focus on objects as analytical subjects.

Trauma Theory Integration

In parallel, the methodology draws on trauma theory to account for the narrative's content of war and suffering. Trauma theory (Caruth, Herman, etc.) examines how overwhelming events resist ordinary representation and how their effects permeate individual and collective memory. Cathy Caruth, for instance, emphasizes that trauma disrupts the normal flow of experience. Trauma breaks the sense of the narrative flow, she writes, leaving behind partitioned memories that recur in fragmented or nonlinear ways. In this sense, traumatic experience cannot be assimilated into a single storyline; it must be witnessed indirectly or embodied.

Judith Herman's work similarly highlights the link between memory and recovery. In *Trauma and Recovery* (1992), Herman identifies stages of healing safety, memory processing, and reconnection that shape how survivors come to articulate traumatic events. In *Earth and Ashes*, these stages are mirrored by the narrative progression and the presence of material traces (for example, ruins and remnants that anchor

memories). Recognizing this, the present study applies trauma concepts to interpret how material things in the novella function as carriers of trauma.

By combining new materialism and trauma theory, the framework posits that the environmental and material devastation of war is inherently connected to narrative forms of memory. Scholars note that the effects of trauma often tend to be material, manifesting not just in psychology but in the altered environment. In this expanded view, ash and ruins are not only symbols of violence but active participants in processing cultural and historical trauma. Thus, our methodology will trace how nonhuman elements partake in storytelling as bearers of collective memory, bridging the personal and social dimensions of suffering.

Research Paradigm

Given the focus on meaning-making in a single literary text, the research adopts a qualitative paradigm. This interpretive stance privileges depth of understanding over quantification. As one methodological source observes, qualitative analysis suits literary research because it allows the investigator to delve deeply into the complexity of texts and cultural meaning while being mindful of context. In other words, we seek to interpret Rahimi's narrative rather than measure variables. A qualitative approach also accommodates the study's emphasis on context the social, historical, and cultural milieu of Afghanistan must inform our reading of the text. Within this paradigm, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) provides a systematic method for examining how language constructs social reality. Drawing on Fairclough (2003) and (2001), CDA is used here because it is explicitly sensitive to power, ideology, and context.

One methodological description notes that CDA offers a methodical guide to analyzing how discourse creates social reality without being insensitive to power dynamics and ideological aspects of textual representation. In practice, this means we will attend to how Rahimi's language positions humans and objects in relation to each other, and how it encodes attitudes toward war, occupation, and resistance. For example, we will examine who speaks (or what speaks) at key moments, which voices are foregrounded, and how descriptions of material settings carry ideological weight.

Importantly, the CDA approach is adapted for literary analysis. Narrative and poetic conventions differ from ordinary discourse, but their ideological resonance remains. Our method therefore combines CDA with close reading (a standard literary technique) to respect genre conventions while probing sociopolitical subtext. Because *Earth and Ashes* are set in a highly charged historical moment (the Soviet Afghan War), a critical lens is essential. We assume, as Barad would remind us, that representations of war and trauma are never neutral but involve —power dynamics, cultural positioning, and ideological investments|. Thus, every interpretive claim will be situated within the larger context of Afghan society and history.

The primary data for this study is Rahimi's novella *Earth and Ashes* (2002). We use the widely available English translation (by Erdag M. Goknar) as the text of analysis, while remaining aware of translation issues (see below). No additional literary texts are needed because the research questions focus tightly on this one narrative's treatment of material agency and trauma. We do not compare multiple texts here; instead, *Earth and Ashes* are treated as a case that exemplifies broader trends in Afghan literature of conflict.

In addition to the primary text, contextual data are consulted as needed: for example, historical accounts of the Soviet Afghan War, and criticism of Rahimi's work. These secondary sources help situate the narrative without becoming objects of analysis themselves.

The emphasis is on letting the novella's language and structure speak as data, rather than quantifying occurrences.

Analytical Techniques

The analysis proceeds through iterative close readings of *Earth and Ashes*, combined with CDA informed interpretation. In practical terms, we perform multiple focused readings of the text, each with a different analytical aim:

- First reading: Catalog all occurrences of material entities. We compile an inventory of every mention of ash, dust, ruins, personal belongings, landscapes, architectural details, etc. For each, we note its descriptive features and narrative context. This exhaustive inventory establishes the scope of material presence in the text.

- Second reading: Analyze linguistic agency. For each material entity identified, we examine its grammatical and syntactic role. We ask, is the object given an active role in the sentence (e.g. as a subject or agent) or a passive one (e.g. an object or setting)? Instances where objects are subjects (or otherwise foregrounded) suggest thing power in action. For example, we will track if the text ever says Ash speaks or Ruins listen, figuratively or literally. This step follows CDA's attention to agency in discourse: by noting who (or what) does the acting, we detect how the narrative grants vitality to objects.
- Third reading: Examine relational networks. Here we look at how material objects interact with characters and with each other. We trace dialogical patterns: for instance, times when a human character addresses an object, or an object witnesses an event. We also consider affective and symbolic linkages (e.g. when dust and grief are described together). This phase is guided by new materialism's emphasis on assemblages: as Bennett suggests, things operate within networks. We ask how scenes of war are co-constructed by people and nonhumans in tandem.

Throughout these readings, all observations are interpreted through dual lenses. If, say, ruins are repeatedly described in the present tense and become recipients of speech or memory, this will be noted as evidence of dialogical agency. CDA prompts us to question what such choices mean in context (for example, whether an object's agency subverts dominant narratives of victimhood). In short, the methods ensure a systematic examination of the text, grounded in empirical detail (textual quotations and grammatical analysis) and informed by theory.

Discussion and Analysis

In the title of his novella, Rahimi already makes material elements earth and ashes as central characters, not mere a setting or metaphor. These materials serve as the active agents of the narrative discourse, acting as witnesses to the destruction while simultaneously forming new significances through their physical presence and transformative qualities.

❖ **Ash as Historic Witness**

As the story progresses, ash serves as a material bearer of witness to the violence of war and what Bennett (2010) refers to as the thing-power of objects is the ability of objects to have their trajectories, propensities, or tendencies. In *Earth and Ashes*, the role of ash is not just one of destruction, but it is also involved in the process of creating meaning and memory (Rahimi, 2002 p. 8).

What can be perceived as material testimony is exhibited by the ash in the story by Rahimi. Because it is material, not human, evidence, the presence of ashes bears witness to devastation in an unmediated way that human testimony can be silenced or distorted (Rahimi, 2002, p. 12). This material witnesses dialogically engages with human experience, producing layers of meaning that are not confined to linguistic expression.

The dialogue of this relationship is evident in the example of analyzing the protagonist's emotional state and the landscape covered with ash. The material agency of ash is revealed through its capacity to generate memory, evoke emotional effects, and establish spatial relations that become the guidelines for the narrative structure.

❖ **Dust as Agent of Change**

Throughout the story, dust acts as an agent of transformation, erasing the distinctions between life and death, presence and absence. The material agency is manifested in the ability to modify the perception and provide the atmospheric conditions that shape the process of character development and the reader experience. Yassin and his mother, or fire and ash, or shouts and wails and you wake up again. Your eyes burn. They burn with sleeplessness. Your eyes do not see anymore. They are exhausted out of exhaustion and sleeplessness, you keep falling into a half-sleep a half sleep filled with visions (Rahimi, 2002, p. 12). This magic of dust works by a process which may be called a metamorphosis of materials, the power of non-human agents to effect a change in human knowledge and experience. This has been especially relevant regarding trauma, whereby the conventional forms of narrative might not be sufficient in conveying the totality of loss and upheaval.

The dialogical correlation of human consciousness and dust reveals the limitations of anthropocentric ways of understanding the influence of war. In giving voice to dust, the story written by Rahimi implies that the entire account of the Afghan experience of suffering in the wake of the Soviet invasion cannot be conveyed through the voices of human witnesses but must be determined by allowing material witnesses to testify.

❖ **Ruins and Landscapes: Memory Spatial Agencies**

The landscapes are devastated, and the ruins present in both Earth and Ashes become the spatial agents that actively participate in the process of memory creation and maintenance. Material things possess what can be termed the architectural agency, or the ability to organize human experience and sense formation by their material existence and form.

❖ **Ruins as Narrators**

Not just a setting, the ruins that populate the landscape of the narration are narrators themselves, each with their own stories to tell about devastation and survival. Their agency as material objects are displayed through the power to bring specific memories and emotional states to the characters and, thus, the readers.

These ruins exemplify what Bennett (2010) describes as the political ecology of things, wherein material objects are involved in political processes through their ability to influence and be influenced by other actors in the network (Rahimi, 2002, p. 21). Within the framework of the Soviet Afghan War, ruins are introduced as political actors and witnesses to the invasion's violence. At the same time, they are the ruins that the invasion cannot destroy due to their presence.

The dialogical correlation of characters and ruins introduces the functioning of material agency through spatial arrangement. The ruins do not merely occupy space; they form space, establishing relations and conveying meaning that guides the narrative unfolding of trauma and resistance.

❖ **Landscapes as Feelings Agents**

The wider scenery in *Earth and Ashes* serves as an emotional agent that dynamically engages with the emotional aspect of the story. The agency of mountains, valleys, and devastated fields lies in their ability to produce and regulate affective reactions, forming what can be called material empathy (Rahimi, 2002, p. 9). Material empathy operates along the lines of sensual involvement, whereby the physical qualities of the landscape its textures, colors, and atmospheric conditions have a direct effect on human emotional and psychic states. Landscape agency is, therefore, material-affective, demonstrating the entanglement of physical and emotional experiences. What is specifically dialogical about this relationship is especially apparent in instances when characters are shown reacting to changes in the landscape, implying the existence of a form of communication that operates beneath the levels of conscious perception yet still affects behavior and comprehension.

❖ **Personal Objects and Memory Construction**

The role of the material agent of memory in *Earth and Ashes* is played by personal objects that could store, carry, and modify memories over time and space. Such objects illustrate what can be denoted as the "memorial agency," the capacity to become active contributors to the process of constructing and preservation of individual and collective memory.

❖ **Things as Memory Containers**

Personal objects act as carriers of memory throughout the narrative, and they can hold and release experiences that are otherwise. Such memorial agencies operate based on what Bennett (2010) refers to as material vitality, or the ability of objects to be influenced and to influence the networks to which they belong (Rahimi, 2002, p. 20).

The agency of these objects can be observed through the influence they exert in causing involuntary memories and emotional reactions, which portray their active role in psychological processes. These objects, in contrast to passive storage devices, contribute to the construction of meaning by their material presence and historical associations.

The dialogical interrelation between characters and personal objects reveals the functioning of material agency as a temporal connection between past and present experiences based on physical continuity.

❖ **Dress and Body Extensions**

The other bodily extensions, in the form of clothing and so on, in the story act as material agents through which mediation occurs between the interior and exterior experiences. Such objects are endowed with the power to retain some human presence while also safeguarding and hiding the body (Rahimi, 2002, p. 41). The material agency of clothing operates through what we call a haptic memory the ability of material objects to store and convey embodied experiences through mechanisms such as physical contact and sensory interaction. This agency is notable, especially within the framework of trauma, where the body's memory can be more accurate than the conscious memory. The conversation between the body and the clothing is a dialogical relationship in which the material agency can be traced outside of the human body, creating networks of meanings that help open individual experiences to the larger scale of history and culture.

❖ **Dialogical Networks: Agencies of Material Syntheses**

The many types of material agency distinguished in the foregoing sections do not act singly but constitute intricate dialogical networks that all play a part in the story of war, trauma, and resistance that the narrative investigates. Such networks exemplify what Bennett (2010) refers to as politico-assemblages - arrangements of humans and nonhumans that produce an effect by interacting (Rahimi, 2002, p. 23).

❖ **Interlinked Testimonial Material**

The ash, dust, ruins, and personal objects in *Earth and Ash* serve as interrelated material witnesses that testify together about the impact of war on society. Their agency works through the power of so-called distributed testimony, which enables various material actors to bear collective witness to experiences that are beyond the capacity of any single human being to express.

This disseminated testimony forms what may be conceived as a material chorus that speaks beside and sometimes in place of human voices. The logical connection

between these material witnesses and human characters forms a polyphonic narrative structure that mirrors the multiplicity of the war's effects on both human and non-human beings (Rahimi, 2002, p. 44). The agency of this material chorus is apparent in the ability to maintain and pass on experiences that would otherwise have been subsumed by silence, trauma, or death. Giving material objects a voice, the narrative by Rahimi constructs a kind of testimony that cannot be destroyed or silenced by human power alone.

❖ **Opposition by Material Presence**

The material agencies located during *Earth and Ashes* are all involved in types of resistance that work through presence rather than action. This resistance by existing objects shows how material objects can be involved in political processes by persisting in their current state and testifying to the destruction. This type of resistance is especially relevant in the context of the Soviet Afghan War, where traditional methods of political protest were frequently impractical or unfeasible. The material objects offer a testified resistance and opposition that occurs beyond human politics and nonetheless adds to the overall struggle for meaning and subsistence (Rahimi, 2002, p. 39).

Dialogical material persistence, human resistance, and individual agency uncovers agency across the human/non-human boundary and forms networks of solidarity that bridge non traditional political categories.

❖ **Trauma and the Material Agency**

The correspondences between trauma and material agency in *Earth and Ashes* help to see the participation of non-human entities in the traumatic event experience and processing. The material objects in the story exemplify what could be termed traumatic agency the ability to absorb, retain, and transfer traumatic experiences across time and space.

❖ **Material Assimilation of Trauma**

In the story, material things show their ability to absorb and retain traumatic events and act as trauma reservoirs that transcend beyond the human psyche. Such material absorption precedes the generalization of what may be conceived as

traumatic landscapes, in which the physical landscape itself serves as a carrier of traumatic memory. The traumatic absorption agency works, according to Bennett (2010), through what is known as affective materiality, or the ability of material objects to participate in emotional and psychological processes by leveraging their physical qualities and relational possibilities (Rahimi, 2002, p. 15). This type of agency is especially noticeable in scenes when characters are introduced to material remains of traumatic experiences. The dialogical interrelation between human trauma and material absorption demonstrates the functioning of trauma as a distributed phenomenon that involves whole networks of human and non-human actors and not separate individuals.

❖ **Material Healing and Change**

Although material objects on Earth and Ashes are involve in maintaining and passing on trauma, they can also reveal the ability to heal and transform. Such a therapeutic agency works through the material ability to enable new kinds of meaning-making and relating that can exceed traumatic experiences (p. 30).

The concept of therapeutic agency of material objects can be traced to their ability to offer continuity and stability in the face of disruption and loss. Objects preserve their presence and material properties, therefore forming anchors of meaning that can aid human beings in the process of recovery and reconstruction. The dialogical interaction between material healing and human recovery unravels the working process of agency performed by networks of mutual aid, which reaches beyond the human/non-human dichotomy.

Material Witness of War

A particular situation from the Soviet Afghan War offers an important grid for considering the functioning of material agency in Earth and Ashes. War creates circumstances in which conventional modes of witness and testimony are insufficient or even impossible, and material evidence becomes the necessary means of sustaining and conveying the whole record of the conflict's effects.

❖ **Material Documentation of Violence**

The physical evidence on *Earth and Ashes* is an intensive form of documentation that documents the cases of violence in a manner that can be both tangible and add to human evidence. The point of this is to underscore the role of material things as silent witnesses to historical events, whether they are historical relics, artifacts of war, or even the landscape itself. These become survivors of acts of violence and retain events and stories that would otherwise have disappeared into history. These objects, by their capture, can hold the essence of violence, and they can bring an actual touch to the past, which tends to be more lasting than the memories shared by people.

There is a particular agency within material documentation; that documentation contains a kind of evidence that would otherwise have been lost, destroyed, or suppressed deliberately. For example, a fragment of a broken vase on a battlefield or a rock scar may contain accounts of war that people who have seen them might have been repressed many times or have been physically forced to deny. Unlimited witnesses can be silenced or intimidated; material witnesses cannot be suppressed and provide some testimony that is independent of the power of political manipulation. This inherent trustworthiness brings significant value to the pursuit of truth in historical narratives.

Additionally, the interconnection between material documentation and human testimony provides a more detailed and complex understanding of what happened. When the two types of witnessing occur together, they become mutually enhanced, resulting in a more comprehensive and reliable history. Humanities can provide explanations, emotions, and personal experiences, whereas material documentation offers objective evidence that can be proven or refuted. This dialogic relationship enables events to be viewed from multiple perspectives, further contributing to the construction of a narrative that is both individual and universal.

In this manner, a combination of material evidence and human testimony creates evidence that not only spans a broad scope but is also more believable. When historians and researchers examine these documentation sources closely, they can compare and support each other, ultimately building a stronger picture of violence in the past. This interaction between the physical and the person explains how memory and history are complex, thereby stressing that neither form of testimony

should be viewed in isolation. Instead, they collaborate to produce a more nuanced view of humanity, particularly in the context of trauma and conflict.

Finally, the research on material and human testimonies enables the broadening of perspectives concerning the aftermath of violence, the essence of memory, and the significance of artifacts and life experiences to be passed on to future generations. They join hands and make a more complete tapestry of history that respects the depth of human experiences as well as the frequency of violence in our world.

❖ **Physical Barrier to Erasure**

The durability of material objects against systematic annihilation reveals a different beast in the way of resistance, which can be read as an expression of their persistence and meaning despite attempts to obliterate them. Material resilience, as Bennett (2010) termed it, refers to the ability of objects to remain intact and continue to function even when subjected to forces of violence. The material objects (remnants of conflict, artifacts, or ordinary objects), or anything, are carriers of the histories that deny society an attempt to efface them. The presence of the very being is a testament to the power of survival and struggle, contrasting completely with the impermanence of human memory.

This endurance is a form of political intervention in the context of war. The capability of material objects to endure and convey a message is part of larger patterns of resistance and survival in societies that face violence and oppression. They adopt the character of symbolic survival, and communities are reminded of their past and the hardships they endured. The stories embedded within each object cannot be erased, and everyone creates a shared memory that can inspire future generations.

This dynamic is also increased by dialogical play between material resistance and human resistance. Human interaction with the said objects reinvigorates their narratives and purpose, creating a system of solidarity where both types of agencies are enhanced. This interdependence enables communities and individuals to work around their deficiencies, given that they find inspiration in the fact that the material world around them persists (Rahimi, 2002, p. 65).

The relationship between material and human resistance exemplifies the use of objects as part of the formidable forces against erasure and forgetting. Such a connection helps to underscore the need to consider the agency of non-human actors in historical discourse and how this material resilience is highly relevant to the construction of collective memory and identity in the face of adversity.

Time issue of Material Agency

Temporalities of the material agency in *Earth and Ashes* unveil the act of non-human things in constructing a historical mind and ordering the temporalities of the past, present, and future. The objects of the narrative reveal something that may be called temporal agency the power to act between different time spaces and to create continuities that human time limits are unable to break.

❖ Material Objects of Temporal Bridges.

The material objects play a crucial temporal role throughout the story, serving as a vital link between different points in time and creating continuities in a disjunctive chronology. Such a time-bridging activity can be explained by using the concept of material chronology, i.e., the capacity of objects to maintain temporal associations through their endurance and metamorphosis. These materials are allowed to endure, thereby lending a voice to history that they can help people tap into, allowing them to recall memories and experiences that would have otherwise remained buried or obscured.

This time travel bridge is quite evident in the scenes where the characters play with objects that represent memories from their life before the war. These instances can be referred to as temporal displacement, which involves the coexistence of the past and the present at the exact location (Rahimi, 2002, p. 32). For example, a character can touch something, such as an item that belongs to a family or something used as furniture in childhood and have an avalanche of memories that transport them back 20 years. This exchange illustrates how material objects can exert significant agency, triggering emotions and memories that shape the characters' current realities.

Besides, this deracination emphasizes the multiplicity of time in objects, which accrues what we can call a plurality of time thicknesses. Every object becomes a container of memory, and different historical stories are woven into it, echoing

personal experiences. As repositories of these layers of meaning, the objects offer a more profound explanation of how people are connected to their past, even amid active conflict.

❖ Ruins as Pasts within the Present

The ruins that fill the space of Earth and Ashes serve as time palimpsests, being the material texts that allow one to feel the presence of several layers of historical inscription. Such traces of the past not only capture the stories of the past but are also subject to future writings and thus are critical components of the historical dialogue. This palimpsestic agency is described with the help of what can be called material historicity in Bennett (2010), the ability of objects to enter historical processes using physical change and sustainability).

The palimpsestic value of such ruination illustrates the temporal and agentive character of materiality, which works through temporally accretive means. Every historical period leaves its mark, interacting with subsequent events and forming complex temporal sequences. This path demonstrates that material things are not only passive carriers of historical knowledge; on the contrary, they make a significant contribution to the formation of historical consciousness. Due to the new events unfolding, the layers of past inscriptions make us aware and shape our present, allowing for a more profound experience of the past (Rahimi, 2002, pp. 22-23).

This stockpile of significance precedes the dynamic forces that materiality can have in constructing collective memory. Those ruins offer a contemplative space to reflect on their weathered surfaces and silhouettes, which allow people to explore the narratives that lie within. Every crack, every failed wall, can remind us of the lives we lived and the things that happened there, showing us, what people can endure and the problems they face in their complicated lives. The dynamism of devastated materiality, combined with historical consciousness, also reveals the processes of temporal agency. The activity here is based on so-called archaeological discussion, which explores the ability of stratifications from the past to carry the dialogue across the horizontal lines of time and develop new forms of historical consciousness. When they see these ruins, people engage in a time travel dialogue through which the past echoes in the present. Finally, the ruins in Earth and Ashes represent the idea that the historical flow is not a simple chronicle, but a complex web woven from

the threads of millions of experiences. They prompt us to examine how the past continues to shape our perspective on the present and how the material world can influence our understanding of history. By doing so, the palimpsest quality of ruins transcends into an effective record of the profound interaction between the material and memory, revealing several facets through which people interact with their historic landscape.

Sensory Materiality and Embodied Agency

The sensory aspects of material agency in *Earth and Ashes* reveal the role of non-human objects in embodied experience and the development of somatic knowledge. The material items within the story exhibit what is known as sensory agency, or the ability to produce and control sensory perceptions that have a direct impact on human thought and emotional reaction.

❖ Touch Material Communications

The tactile qualities of physical things in the story can be understood as a form of communication that lies below the level of linguistic expression but bears important meaning. This sensory correspondence demonstrates what can be termed the "haptic agency," (Rahimi, 2002, p. 91) the ability of material objects to convey information and influence using bodily contact and sensation. The tactile communication agency is especially evident in scenes where characters react to the texture of a material object, its temperature, or its weight, indicating the types of knowledge transmission that are based on embodied cognition rather than cognitive processes. This haptic learning discloses how material agency can extend beyond symbolic presentation to include direct somatic effects (p. 29). Dialogical materiality and embodied consciousness illustrate how agency is mediated through sensory networks that establish reciprocal relationships of affection and reaction between human and non-human entities.

Economics Aspects of Material Agency

The economic features of material agency in *Earth and Ashes* reveal the involvement of non-human actors in the regimes of value, exchange, and resource allocation that cannot be reduced to monetary calculation. Objects of material nature in the story

exhibit what is called economic agency, the ability to be part of and affect economic relations and resource transfers.

❖ **Tangible Items as Value Representatives**

The material objects that appear throughout the story as vehicles of value are impossible to condense into market value or currency exchange. This capacity to carry value provides an example of what we could term an affective economy the systems of value that work not by financial but by emotional, cultural, and relational measures. The agency of the carrying value is especially noticeable in scenes where characters attach importance to objects that do not seem to have any practical use or exchange value, revealing how economic thinking extends beyond familiar economic rationality (Rahimi, 2002, p. 16). This prioritization indicates how the material agency is involved in creating alternative systems of value that can be opposed to the dominant economic systems.

The dialogical interaction between material value and human valuation demonstrates the workings of economic agency as it operates through the network of meaning that intertwines individual choice and the larger structures of culture and the political system yet still leaves room for resistance and alternative valuation.

❖ **Scarcity and Physical Allocation**

The circumstances of scarcity created by war help illustrate how material objects are involved in distribution and allocation systems that are beyond human determination or design. The work of this distributive agency is often referred to as the logistics of matter, which involves the ability of objects to mediate their circulation and accessibility through their physical properties and relational capabilities.

The material distribution agency can be observed in instances where the availability or lack of certain items influences how human beings make decisions and interact with one another, illustrating how material things are in the creation of social orders and resource distribution systems (Rahimi, 2002, p. 21). The dialogic interaction between material distribution and human need reveals the economic agency to act through a set of interdependent networks that relate the survival of human beings

to the availability of material conditions while still leaving the possibility of cooperation and mutual support.

Linguistic and Material Interface

The association of linguistics with material in *Earth and Ashes* reveals the role of non- humans in the process of meaning-making, which is not limited to human language yet significantly influences linguistic articulation and communication. Such interface reveals the so-called semiotic agency, or the ability of material objects to intervene in sign systems and meaning making.

❖ Material Metaphors and Symbolic Resonance

The figurative aspects of physical things in the story world reveal the active involvement of non-human entities in the process of creating symbolic meaning rather than being mere conduits of human metaphorical expression (Rahimi, 2002, p. 9). This allegorical involvement illustrates what can be referred to as material semiotics, the ability of things to produce and adjust meaning through their material qualities and their potential to form relationships.

The agency of symbolic resonance can be traced in instances where material objects give rise to multiple layers of meaning that cannot be condensed into single metaphorical equations, manifesting itself in forms of semiotic sophistication produced through the interplay between material qualities and cultural circumstances (Rahimi, 2002, p. 36). The dialogical interaction between material symbolism and human interpretation reveals how the agency of semiotics operates within the networks of meaning that shape individual interpretations, leading to larger cultural patterns while simultaneously remaining open to new possibilities of interpretation.

❖ Silence and Material Expression

The correlation between silence and material expression in *Earth and Ashes* demonstrates how non-human entities can convey meaning in situations where linguistic expression is inadequate or fails. In this non-linguistic communication, we observe what could be called the agency of silence, the ability of material objects to convey meaning not by speaking but through presence, absence, and change

(Rahimi, 2002, p. 23). This is especially true about the phenomenon of trauma, in which the ordinary linguistic expression can be shown to be insufficient in expressing the entire range of experience and loss. Material objects serve as alternative modes of expression that may either complement or substitute for linguistic communication yet still engage in sense-making practices (Rahimi, 2002, p. 16).

Dialogical material silence human speechlessness relations, shows the working mode of agency through the networks of expression that cross-linguistic borders but at the same time are involved in the communicative process and meaning-making.

Cultural Specificity and Material Agency

The material agency dimensions in *Earth and Ashes* show the involvement of non-human entities in the precise Afghan ways of meaning and culture. Such a cultural particularity exemplifies the so-called ethnographic agency, i.e., the ability of material things to enact and convey cultural knowledge and practices in a manner contingent upon cultural conditions.

❖ Conventional material practices

The material practices evoked in the tale signify the role of non-human actors in the preservation and transmission of Afghan culture and identity. This cultural involvement illustrates so-called material tradition, the ability of the object to represent and carry cultural practice across time and space boundaries.

The agency of material tradition is evident in scenes where characters utilize objects or practices that remind them of their pre-war cultural identity, illustrating how material objects and practices are active contributors to the process of cultural continuity and resistance to cultural destruction (Rahimi, 2002, p. 28). The dialogical relationship between material tradition and cultural identity illustrates how ethnographic agency is enacted through practice networks, which connect individual experiences to broader cultural patterns while also facilitating adaptation and innovation.

The aspects of material culture in *The Earth and Ashes* are Islamic, demonstrating how religious objects and practices are incorporated into the narrative construction

of meaning and identity. This religious engagement exemplifies what can be called a sacred agency, the ability of material things to consist of and convey religious meaning and practice. The agency of sacred materiality is evident in situations where religious objects or practices have brought solace, direction, or meaning in times of acute loss and upheaval, demonstrating how material things can be involved in spiritual dynamics and religious sense-making (Rahimi, 2002, p. 34). The dialogical interrelation between sacred materiality and religious consciousness reflects how the spiritual agency operates within networks of belief and practice that bind individual faith to larger religious traditions without, however, precluding personal interpretation and experience.

Conclusion

To sum up, *Earth and Ashes* by Atiq Rahimi is a must-read that challenges the traditional discourse on war and trauma by focusing on the role of material objects as active agents. This study demonstrates the role of such entities as ash, dust, ruins, and personal belongings in the process of constructing meaning, identity, and resistance through a complex evaluation of these objects. Dialogical contact between human and non-human agents expands the context of literary discourse and presents new opportunities to explore the entanglements of Afghan literature.

Going forward, the discussion on how materiality and narrative connect in Afghan literature and elsewhere must continue. In this way, we may discover the countless forms in which stories are determined by the situations out of which they grow, and thus, we may come to a fuller, more comprehensive view of the literary traditions of the world. This journey into the idea of material agency can not only make us admire particular texts more but also encourage us to interact with the world we live in with a kinder and more considerate attitude.

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