

NON TI PREOCCUPARE

Mahsa Mohebaghi

Analysis by Sofia Mangiaterra

Social Novel

Mahsa Mohebaghi’s *Non ti preoccupare (Don't Worry)* is a social novel published in 2008. Narrated in the colloquial language of its protagonists, it offers a portrayal of Tehran’s youth through their own eyes. The seismic event represented in the novel brings to light social disruption, class divisions, and individualism, while Mohebaghi’s figurative language transforms natural and social chaos into emotionally charged, living forces that heighten the story’s symbolic depth.

Year of Publication	2008
Publication Place	Tehran
Editor	Nashr-e Cheshmeh

GEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

Earthquake

LITERARY EVENT

Time	Unspecified
Location	Tehran Islamic Republic of Iran
Coordinates	35.647985, 51.393994
Impacted Areas	Tehran city
Emphasis Phase	Disaster (phenomenal and social dynamics)
Seismic Risk Ref.	Referenced
Anthropization Level	HousesMetropolisShops
Social Impacts	Destruction Of Goods/CommoditiesSocial DisruptionRelocation

INDIVIDUAL REACTIONS & AFFECTS

Reactions

Name	Shadi
Age	Young
Gender	Female
Nationality	Iranian
Reactions	EscapeSelf-AbsorptionPassivenessResignationSolidarityFascination

Name	Shadi's Mom
Age	Adult
Gender	Female
Nationality	Iranian
Reactions	PrayerPanicAstonishment

Name	Babak
Age	Young Adult
Gender	Male
Nationality	Iranian
Reactions	AnxietyDiscomfortSurvival Instinct

Name	Arash
Age	Young
Gender	Male
Nationality	Iranian
Reactions	Passiveness

Name	Latif
Age	Young
Gender	Male
Nationality	Iranian
Reactions	FatalismImmobility

Name	Sara
Age	Young
Gender	Female
Nationality	Iranian
Reactions	Self-AbsorptionFearNaivety

Name	Kerasus
Gender	Animal (dog)
Reactions	Fear

COLLECTIVE REACTIONS & AFFECTS

Affects/Reactions

Name	The crowd
Reactions	Fear Distress Prayer Fight For Survival Madness Irrationality

Name	Young People
Reactions	Distrust Disorder Euphoria Irony

Name	Children
Reactions	Wonder Fear

Name	Girls
Reactions	Self-Absorption Euphoria

Name	Old People
Reactions	Distress Neurosis Disorder

Name	The army
Reactions	Intervention

Group Attitudes

Name	The population
Reactions	Unawareness

LINGUISTIC & STYLISTIC ANALYSIS

Metaphors	“Con la terra che balla la danza del ventre” / “With the earth dancing the belly dance.” (Moheballi 15; my trans.)	
Similes	“Di nuovo il letto oscilla come una barca” / “Again the bed swings like a boat” (Moheballi 30; my trans.)	
Motifs, Topoi, Mythologemes	Violation Of Taboos	The Downfall Of Society
Syntax	Parataxis, Simple Sentences, Unconventional Position, High Frequency Connectives, High frequency of phenomena of the spoken language	
Punctuation	Uncummon Punctuation, Multiple Commas, Multiple Exl	
Morphology	High frequency of phenomena of the spoken language, Preference For Verbs Adverbs, Preference For Nouns Adjectives	
Phonetics/Prosody	Sound-related word choice (onomatopoeia, rhyme, alliteration), Relevance of language rhythm	

In her novel “*Non ti preoccupare*” (Don’t Worry), published in 2008, Mahsa Moheballi deliberately distances herself from conventional disaster narratives to explore a deeper, more pervasive collapse - one that is existential, social, and political. The story is set in Tehran and narrated through the fragmented perceptions of the protagonist, Shadi, who is searching for opium while an earthquake strikes the city. The earthquake, as a natural event, remains constantly in the background of the story, not as a mere disruptive force imposed on a stable order but as a visible symptom of a collapse that has already occurred. The disaster functions less as a physical event and more as a metaphorical confirmation of the disintegration of Iranian society (*OsservatorioIraq*).

The novel also marks a turning point in Iranian literature by offering an unfiltered portrayal of Tehran’s youth from their own perspective. For the first time, a literary work adopted the raw, colloquial language of its protagonists—a diverse group of twenty-somethings entangled in drug use and a form of rebellion that is often aimless or self-contained. Moheballi’s stylistic choice foregrounds authenticity over literary refinement, giving voice to a generation suspended between disillusionment and survival (Longhi, 2017). This aesthetic of authenticity extends beyond language to the novel’s very structure. From a narratological perspective, the novel’s structure is fragmented and resists traditional arcs of crisis and resolution (Razaei, 2021). Furthermore, the narrative eschews traditional disaster tropes to delve into a deeper, symbolic dramatisation of collapse. The story is presented through the unfiltered lens of its protagonist, Shadi, whose radical internal focalization creates a claustrophobic narrative space and intimacy with Shadi’s inner world, making her emotional and mental state the primary narrative landscape. In this way, the reader is locked inside her psyche, driven by a singular obsession—the search for opium. This obsession not only drives the plot but also operates as a symbolic key to the novel’s thematic core.

In terms of linguistic and stylistic choices, the novel’s unique rhythm mirrors the protagonist’s mental and emotional state: fast, fragmented, and breathless, especially during moments of stress, drug use, or panic. The language becomes clipped and visceral, mimicking the rush of sensations and disorientation she experiences. The punctuation style itself through dashes, ellipses, and abrupt stops echo the protagonist’s fragmented thought patterns and emotional turbulence. Rather than organizing the narrative, punctuation contributes to its instability, mirroring Shadi’s mental disarray and lack of control. This is evident in lines like, “Ne infilo solo due sotto la lingua. Chiudo gli occhi, mando giù l’amaro. Scende, la bestiolina mi sale su dai piedi e mi si tuffa in pancia.” / “I stick two only two in, lift my tongue. I close my eyes, swallow the bitter taste. It goes down, the little animal climbs up from my feet and dives into my belly.” (Moheballi 120, ; my trans.). Short, sharp sentences capture the immediacy of her actions and the intensity of her inner world, creating a style that pulls the reader directly into her altered perceptions and emotional turbulence.

The rhythm of the language also mimics spoken Persian, often dispensing with standard punctuation, creating an almost musical flow throughout the narration. While not dominant, sound plays a subtle yet important role in grounding the realism and oral quality of the text. This is not limited to the

phonetic texture of the language: sound is also thematized within the story itself. Shadi often sings to herself while wandering through the city, turning inner turmoil into melody (Moheballi 34, 57,58). At times, even the earthquake is anthropomorphized as a speaking presence—Shadi listens to it, interacts with it—blurring the line between internal voice and external sound, deepening the novel’s surreal, immersive quality (Moheballi 64).

The novel employs colloquial expressions, rich in slang, contractions, and informal verb forms. Its morphology closely mirrors spoken Persian, especially the dialect used by middle- and lower-class youth in Tehran, often rich in crude or vulgar expressions (Razaei, 2021). One of its most prominent features is the high frequency of oral linguistic phenomena. The narrative strongly reflects the informal, urban spoken Persian of Tehran’s younger generation, full of slang, interjections, fragmented syntax, and a stream-of-consciousness style. It imitates natural speech and thought patterns, anchoring the reader in the protagonist’s social context. Notably, the novel frequently includes expressions that blend Persian with foreign terms, particularly English, adding a modern, cosmopolitan, and subtly rebellious tone. For example: “Devo pensare. Devo far lavorare la materia grigia e ragionare come Poirot.” / “I must think. I must work the gray matter and reason as Poirot.” (Moheballi 54; my trans.).

The novel also relies heavily on figurative language—metaphors, similes, and personifications—that intensify its emotional atmosphere and symbolic depth. Metaphors like “con la terra che balla la danza del ventre” / “With the earth dancing the belly dance.” (Moheballi 15, my translation) and “una marea brulicante di corpi e teste”/ “a flood of bodies and heads” (Moheballi 33; my trans.) transform the earthquake and the crowd into living, chaotic forces. Personification appears strikingly when Tehran is described as actively shaking itself to expel corruption: “Tehran si sta dando una bella scrollata” / “Tehran is giving itself a good shake (Moheballi 20, my translation). Similes further convey disorientation and psychological fragmentation: “il letto oscilla come una barca” / “the bed swings like a boat” (Moheballi 30; my trans.), or “le persone mi schizzano di fianco come meteoriti” / “People shoot past me like meteors.” (Moheballi 99; my trans.) . Those examples highlight how both people and space lose stability and familiarity. These devices are not ornamental; they reinforce the novel’s central themes of collapse, detachment, and existential estrangement.

The novel’s central themes—trauma, paralysis, and a profound lack of agency—are not only addressed at the level of content but are formally embodied in the text’s narrative structure and style (*OsservatorioIraq*). Most notably, the novel portrays a complete absence of collective action: where real-world disasters typically catalyze solidarity, adaptation, or resilience, here we find only apathy, irony, and individualized, often self-destructive responses. In one striking scene, even the elderly join the young in looting shattered shops, raiding grocery stores and tearing down metal shutters with inexplicable force; an old woman is seen slipping away with a sheep’s leg under her arm, while no store is spared—not even a humble dried apricot shop (Moheballi 97). This surreal and chaotic image dismantles the idea of solidarity in the face of catastrophe, portraying instead a society in moral freefall, where destruction becomes an opportunity for unrestrained individualism. This overwhelming sense of collective disorder is vividly portrayed in the scene on Shariati Avenue, where the air becomes a whirlwind of screams, curses, and insults—so dense and chaotic it feels as though the entire world’s population had converged there (Moheballi 33). Rather than solidarity, the crowd embodies fragmentation and excess, further underscoring the novel’s portrayal of emotional saturation and urban collapse. However, there are moments of solidarity, not from the crowd as a whole, but from individual characters such as Shadi. For instance, as she enters an alley, she encounters a distressed newborn ignored by its distracted mother; despite the chaos, Shadi offers a brief moment of comfort, showing individual care amid social collapse (Moheballi 43, 44).

The disaster exposes distinct reactions across gender and age groups, reflected both in behavior and language. Older women are often depicted as overwhelmed by fear or emotion, their behavior veering toward irrationality and panic. They appear disoriented and frantic, moving in an almost caricatured manner that emphasizes their helplessness in the face of catastrophe (Moheballi 38). In contrast, younger women seem to respond to the chaos with a surprising sense of agency—some even use the moment to seek male attention, carrying themselves with composed, almost performative elegance despite the surrounding disorder, as if flirting were a way to reclaim control (Moheballi 35). Adult men, while visibly affected by the fear and uncertainty, are generally shown maintaining a degree of

rationality or introspective emotion. Their vulnerability is internalized rather than externalized, manifesting in private moments of spiritual reckoning or guilt. Even when overcome with emotion, they are portrayed as processing the disaster through personal responsibility or reflection, rather than through outward panic (Mohebbali 34, 37, 38).

These differences reflect broader social and class dynamics. While the authorities struggle in vain to restore order, the city -damaged by the earthquake and looting- is left in the hands of those who know they have nothing left to lose (Mohebbali 63,64). Among them are the stoic elderly who no longer fear death, the young people thrilled by the idea of taking over the city (Mohebbali 65, 67), and those who are intimately familiar with Tehran's miserable, filthy, and corrupt side - and thus blissfully enjoy the spectacle of its downfall.

Moving through this fractured landscape of a crumbling Tehran, Shadi is not seeking to survive or rebuild, but in search of momentary escape and meaning in the ruins. There is no attempt to mitigate the risk or adapt to it—only a rejection of it. Shadi refuses to flee or protect herself; her only priority is to continue using drugs. This seemingly irrational decision acquires symbolic value. It is only in the collapse—when the city is broken, looted, emptied of structure—that Shadi is able to *feel* Tehran again. Her wandering through the ruins becomes a kind of inverted pilgrimage, an attempt to reconnect with something real in a society hollowed out by repression and disillusionment. The pleading cries of her mother and brother are a tiresome refrain she escapes without regret. Equipped only with an MP3 player, Shadi doesn't resist the earthquake; on the contrary, she surrenders to it completely, as if only through this collapse she could see Tehran from a different, more authentic perspective and reconnect with it. Lying on the grass, she lets the tremors pass through her body, wishing they would never stop. In that suspended moment, she finds a kind of intimacy with the earth itself: she longs to remain there indefinitely, to feel the dew on her lips, and to sense every vibration echo through her body—each tremor awakening a deeper awareness of herself and the place she inhabits (Mohebbali 37).

The city is at the center of the story: is not something to be saved or repaired, but rather a space to drift through in a state of semi-consciousness. At one point, Tehran appears utterly lifeless—death seems to linger in the air above streets and squares, and an uncanny stillness envelops the scene. Shops stand abandoned, even the most ordinary ones like the taftun bread seller, emphasizing a sense of total desolation (Mohebbali 104). This ghostlike atmosphere (Mohebbali 109) underscores the emotional and existential void that defines the novel's urban landscape. The city of Tehran as described by Mohebbali, knows no form of collective response: it is an emotionally and morally collapsed city where the earthquake does not disrupt an order, because collapse had already occurred within the characters. This internal and external disintegration is powerfully visualized in a scene where the avenue resembles a dining table from which the cloth has been violently yanked away—people crash into each other, piling up chaotically, as if stripped of all coordination or structure (Mohebbali 38). Here, the earthquake simply makes visible a disarray that was already embedded in the social fabric.

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