

THE EARTH SHOOK. A PERSIAN TALE

Donna Jo Napoli

Analysis by Sofia Mangiaterra

Fairy Tale

Donna Jo Napoli's *The Earth Shook. A Persian Tale* is a contemporary fairy tale published in 2009. By focusing on an orphaned child, the story offers a symbolic exploration of the devastating aftermath of the earthquake in Bam (Iran) on December 26, 2003. The use of animals as allegorical figures, alongside the rhythmic structure of Persian folk narratives and the familiar cadences of children's storytelling, mediates the tragedy in a way that is accessible and poignant.

Year of Publication	2009
Publication Place	New York
Editor	Disney-Hyperion Books
Entity	2003 Bam's Earthquake

GEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

Earthquake 2003 Bam's Earthquake

REAL EVENT

Time	26 December 2003 at 05:26 local time (01:56 GMT)
Location	Kerman Province Islamic Republic of Iran
Coordinates	29.105527, 58.356300
Impacted Areas	Approximately 20 km, South-West of Bam City in Kerman province, South-East Iran: including the cities of Bam and Baravat (Jafari 212-217)
Seismic Fault	Nayband, Gowk and Shahdad faults system
Magnitude	6.6 Richter magnitude (Jafari 212)
Typology	Tectonic Earthquake

"The Bam fault, a 50km long right-lateral strike slip fault with North-South trend, is the main tectonic feature of the area" (Fielding 121)

Anthropization Level

Facilities

"Some figures even suggest that the fatalities reach some 43,000" (On the occasion of 2003 Bam earthquake - Tehran Times)

Cultural Heritage Sites

"The 2,500 year-old historic citadel of Bam (Arg-e-Bam), an internationally known heritage site, was almost completely destroyed." (United Nations 4)

Hospitals

"The two existing hospitals in Bam were destroyed. Water supply network, electricity and telephone lines are cut off." (Iran - Earthquake OCHA Situation Report No. 4 | OCHA)

Cities

"Nearly 90% of the buildings in Bam suffered 60-100% destruction, and the remaining 10% suffered 40-60% damage. The extent of destruction in some quarters of the city reached 100%. Almost 95% of the buildings in the city of Bam (approximately 25,000 buildings), the town of Baravāt (4000 buildings), and in a large percentage of the villages (24,000 buildings) within 10 km of the city were devastated or severely damaged. The highest intensity of ground shaking caused by the earthquake was observed in the city of Bam itself, which was built on top of an earthquake fault line, and where approximately 12 million metric tons of collapsed building debris were piled up." (BAM EARTHQUAKE - Encyclopaedia Iranica <https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/bam-earthquake-2003/>)

Facilities

"There were several breaks in the water distribution systems and minor damage to deep wells. The elevated water tank in the old section of the city was severely damaged." (BAM EARTHQUAKE - Encyclopaedia Iranica <https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/bam-earthquake-2003/>)

Ecological Impacts

Soil Changes

"The subsoil condition in Bam is hard and the Eocene volcanic bedrock lies only about 25 m below the ground surface." (BAM EARTHQUAKE - Encyclopaedia Iranica <https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/bam-earthquake-2003/>)

Destruction Of Plants

"Almost 30 qanāt irrigation systems (out of 64) collapsed due to strong ground motion in Bam, Baravāt, and the nearby villages. The qanāt failure caused severe damage to the underground water supply network of the Bam sub-province for drinking water as well as for the irrigation of the date palm and orange groves". (BAM EARTHQUAKE - Encyclopaedia Iranica <https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/bam-earthquake-2003/>)

Pollution

"The exact extent of leakage from petroleum storage tanks and barrels, causing soil pollution and underground water contamination, has not been investigated." (BAM EARTHQUAKE - Encyclopaedia Iranica <https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/bam-earthquake-2003/>)

Social Impacts

Deaths

"Approximately 31,824 to 43,000 people lost their lives in the Bam sub-province (out of a total population of 142,376), between 17,500 to 20,000 people suffered injuries in the city of Bam (of which 9,500 were seriously injured) requiring hospitalization, yet all the functioning three hospitals (with 240 beds) and 122 health centers in the area were completely destroyed or badly damaged" (Encyclopaedia Iranica)

Destruction Of Dwellings

"The intense shaking in the city caused the complete collapse of nearly every building in the central parts of the city including many of the newer buildings (...)." (Fielding et al. 1)

Destruction Of Facilities

"Lack of water supply, electricity, and other urban infrastructures, caused most survivors and their families to leave Bam, seeking facilities for life in safer and suitable places". (Asadi 629, 630).

Relocation

"(...) more than 29 camps were established to accommodate thousands of the earthquake survivors. This large amount of camp capacities attracted poor as well as unemployed people to get shelter and food there." (Asadi 631).

Poverty

"The result was that the area became empty from native and wealthy people and full of poor people and lay workers seeking help and job opportunities. Increasing of crime rate was the immediate result and decreasing security was obvious in Bam after the disaster." (Asadi 631).

Injuries

"In total, about 30,000 people were injured in the Bam sub-province, 400 became permanently disabled, 75,000 were left homeless, 550 were unaccounted for, 5,054 children were put on the register as orphans, more than 230,000 people were affected in the region, and the psychological impact was severe in the entire area." (BAM EARTHQUAKE - Encyclopaedia Iranica: <https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/bam-earthquake-2003/>)

Repopulation

"Gradually, when it became clear that many people were dead, and many properties turned to be ownerless, many of the newcomers claimed ownership in Bam, and tried to stay there, abusing the chaotic situations of severe damage and documents lost. These newcomers who claimed ownership caused severe problems during the reconstruction time." (Asadi 629,630)

Earthquake

LITERARY EVENT

Time	Unspecified
Emphasis Phase	Post-disaster (consequences)
Seismic Risk Ref.	Without reference
Anthropization Level	Houses Towns
Social Impacts	Deaths Social Disruption

INDIVIDUAL REACTIONS & AFFECTS

Reactions

Name	Parisa
Age	Child
Gender	Female
Nationality	Iranian

COLLECTIVE REACTIONS & AFFECTS

Affects/Reactions

Name	Animals
Reactions	<input type="button" value="Distrust"/> <input type="button" value="Scepticism"/> <input type="button" value="Cooperation"/> <input type="button" value="Trust"/>
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LINGUISTIC & STYLISTIC ANALYSIS

Motifs, Topoi, Mythologemes	<input type="button" value="Locus Horridus"/> <input type="button" value="Apocalypse"/> <input type="button" value="The Downfall Of Society"/>
Syntax	Parataxis, Complex Noun Phrases, High Frequency Connectives, High frequency of phenomena of the spoken language
Punctuation	Multiple Stops, Multiple Commas, Hypens
Morphology	Preference For Nouns Adjectives, High frequency of abstracts, neutral, indefinite forms, High frequency of phenomena of the spoken language
Phonetics/Prosody	Relevance of language rhythm
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"The Earth Shook: A Persian Tale" by Donna Jo Napoli is a fairy tale which offers a symbolic exploration of the devastating 2003 Bam earthquake in Iran. On December 26, 2003, at 05:26 local time (01:56 GMT), a powerful earthquake measuring 6.6 on the Richter scale struck the Kerman Province in Southeastern Iran (Fielding 121). The epicenter was located at approximately 29.00°N 58.34°E, about 20 km southwest of Bam City, affecting the cities of Bam and Baravat (Jafari 212-217).

The earthquake caused widespread destruction across the region, particularly in the cities of Bam and Baravat, resulting in the collapse of thousands of buildings such as houses, public and religious structures, cultural heritage sites, and tourist landmarks (Jafari 2012). This catastrophic event claimed more than 30,000 lives and left tens of thousands injured and homeless. In total, about 30,000 people were injured in the Bam sub-province, 400 became permanently disabled, 75,000 were left homeless, 550 were unaccounted for, 5,054 children were put on the register as orphans, more than 230,000 people were affected in the region, and the psychological impact was severe in the entire area (BAM EARTHQUAKE - Encyclopaedia Iranica). Approximately 85% of houses, commercial units, health facilities, and administrative buildings in Bam and the surrounding villages were severely damaged or destroyed. Nearly 90% of the buildings in Bam suffered 60–100% destruction, and the remaining 10% suffered 40–60% damage, with some quarters of the city experiencing total (100%) devastation (OCHA Report). One of the most tragic losses was the near-complete destruction of the 2,500-year-old historic citadel of Bam (Arg-e-Bam), an internationally renowned heritage site (United Nations 4). The ecological impact was significant: the physical landscape changed drastically, with widespread destruction of plants, soil alteration, and pollution. The subsoil in Bam is hard, with Eocene volcanic bedrock located only about 25 meters below the surface. This geological condition contributed to the

intensity of the shaking. Approximately 30 qanāt irrigation systems (out of 64) collapsed in Bam, Baravat, and nearby villages due to the strong ground motion, severely damaging the underground water supply used for drinking and irrigation of date palm and orange groves. Moreover, petroleum storage tanks leaked, causing soil pollution and underground water contamination, though the full extent has not been thoroughly investigated (BAM EARTHQUAKE - Encyclopaedia Iranica).

The disaster also had major social consequences. More than 29 camps were established to accommodate thousands of survivors. These camps attracted not only disaster victims but also poor and unemployed people seeking shelter and food. Some arrivals had drug and other social disorder problems, adding to the complexity of post-disaster challenges. In the aftermath, the area became depopulated of native and wealthy residents and increasingly populated by poor and labor workers seeking aid and employment. This demographic shift resulted in a sharp rise in crime rates and an obvious decline in security in Bam following the disaster (Asadi and Motawef 631).

Against this backdrop of social upheaval, “The Earth Shook: A Persian Tale” emerges as a children’s folktale, designed to convey profound truths through a simple narrative framework accessible to young readers. The story centers on Parisa, a young girl who is left alone in Bam’s earthquake in Iran. The story stands out for its realistic setting interwoven with a cast of fictional, personified animals, and for its courageous young protagonist, Parisa. Left alone in the aftermath of the Bam earthquake, Parisa does not succumb to despair; instead, she becomes a source of inspiration for the surrounding animals through the strength of her human spirit. This fusion of realism and fantasy enables young readers to engage with a traumatic historical event through a symbolic and emotionally resonant narrative, reinforcing themes of hope, resilience, and collective healing (Tavallai 77).

By focusing on an orphaned child, the tale reflects the heartbreakingly reality faced by many survivors, while also offering a narrative of hope and renewal through the dramatisation of Parisa’s courage.

The narrative employs a storytelling style deeply rooted in oral tradition, characterized by simple, evocative language and parataxis—short, declarative sentences linked by frequent conjunctions—that foster immediacy and emotional intimacy. This style mirrors the rhythm of Persian folk narratives and the cadences of children’s storytelling, making the tragedy accessible and poignant. For example, the line “No one was left within the town walls except Parisa. She slipped outside like a frightened whisper” (Napoli 3) evokes solitude and vulnerability through metaphor and brevity, establishing a tone of fragile hope in a context of destruction. The frequent use of repeated conjunctions and natural pauses creates a rhythm that reflects everyday speech, coherently with the folktale’s narrative style and its sense of timelessness, as illustrated by Parisa’s self-directed speech: “Well, then, I’ll just be with myself. And do what humans do” (Napoli 19, 20).

In this story, set in the aftermath of disaster, the environment plays a pivotal role in supporting Parisa’s endeavours. The natural elements are not merely backdrops but sources of courage and renewal. Parisa draws strength from these elements, signaling a profound connection between humanity and nature that transcends devastation: “But she took courage from the air, from the sand, from the water, from the sun” (Napoli 33). This relationship contrasts with the hostile, threatening forces unleashed by the earthquake, encapsulated in the fearful reactions of the animals who initially distrust Parisa but gradually join her in cooperation. For example, the Boar threatens her with his tusks: “Hands like grasping vines, you remind me of a hunter who threw spears at me. See these tusks? Run, or I’ll gore a hole through you” (Napoli 5), while the Snapping Turtle responds with wary aggression: “Pincer hands, you remind me of a scorpion who tried to sting me to death. Run, or I’ll drown you in the river” (Napoli 7).

This active involvement of animals as speaking, reacting characters is significant also from a linguistic perspective. Indeed, personification plays a central role in the story. The author frequently attributes human qualities, emotions, and speech to non-human characters, particularly animals. This literary device serves not only to enrich the narrative with a folkloric and mythical tone but also to deepen the emotional and symbolic layers of the story. Several animals — such as the boar, turtle, bear, owl, snake, wolf and lion — are depicted as capable of speaking, remembering past traumas, and expressing feelings such as fear, anger, and eventually trust. For example, the boar accuses Parisa of resembling a hunter, and the turtle compares her hands to a scorpion’s sting, both drawing on past experiences to justify their initial hostility. For instance, the Snake threatens Parisa: “Eyes like milk

bowls, you remind me of a shepherd's son who cut my tail? Run, or I'll sink my venom into you" (Napoli 13), while the Bear responds with wary aggression: "Legs like spinning windmills, you remind me of a shah who chased me down and tied me up. See these claws? Run, or I'll slash you to pieces" (Napoli 9). These reactions reflect the animals' emotional depth, which mirrors human responses to trauma, distrust, and survival.

As the story progresses, these same animals begin to engage in cooperative, human-like behaviors—digging pools, dancing, and making music—symbolizing a broader and collective process of healing and renewal fostered by Parisa's kindness and courage. Personification is used also to represent Parisa's emotional tie with nature: she worries about the flowers being forgotten, as if they were living beings with needs and feelings. Such moments reinforce her deep empathy and highlight a key message of the story: restoring humanity through compassion and shared care for all forms of life.

Ultimately, personification in the story is not only a stylistic choice but a narrative strategy that emphasizes moral and emotional growth, blurring the boundary between human and non-human, and expressing the possibility of harmony after destruction.

Beyond its narrative and stylistic qualities, the tale holds strong allegorical and symbolic significance. The animals featured are not random but culturally resonant figures from Persian folklore, familiar to Iranian children and readers. These animals function as archetypal familiars, embodying complex human emotions and societal roles, while anchoring the story within a distinctly Persian mythopoetic context.

Additionally, Parisa's dialogue often evokes the mode of the rich Persian poetic tradition, especially the mystical insights of Rumi, enriching the text's spiritual and cultural depth. This interweaving of folklore, poetry, and myth situates the story within a broader Iranian cultural memory, linking contemporary disaster to timeless human themes of loss, courage, and renewal. Her emphasis on sharing, compassion, and unity echoes the spiritual themes of love, interconnectedness, and transformation prevalent in Rumi's verses, enriching the tale's spiritual and philosophical depth.

In a tragic scenario dominated by physical destruction and social disruption, Parisa's actions create an ideal community – marked by sharing, cooperation, and renewal – offering a hopeful vision of life after catastrophe. Her courage, expressed through breaking taboos such as venturing alone outside the town walls, symbolizes the potential for bravery and transformation in the face of despair. This is beautifully illustrated when Parisa prepares food and shares it with all the creatures, even the Lion, saying "Everyone eats" and "Because human beings share" (Napoli 32-34). This act of communal sharing contrasts with initial animal distrust and fosters solidarity.

Morphologically, the text balances evocative nouns and adjectives with action-driven verbs, combining sensory richness with narrative dynamism. Phrases - such as "*frightened whisper*", "*hands like grasping vines*" and "*thirsty flowers*" - create vivid imagery loaded with symbolic significance, while verbs like "dig", "dance", "boil", and "share" highlight human agency and the rebuilding of social bonds. For instance, Parisa's actions—boiling rice with nuts and cranberries, digging pools, and dancing with the animals—bring life and rhythm back to the devastated environment (Napoli 25, 32-34).

From a linguistic standpoint, the tale's frequent use of spoken language features – sentence fragments, ellipses, and self-directed speech – contributes to its intimate voice, fostering closeness between reader and protagonist. The text's punctuation style supports a tone of calm resilience, even amid moments of fear and uncertainty.

Through the figure of Parisa, the author offers an imaginative and symbolic response to the 2003 Bam earthquake, weaving individual resilience with cultural memory. The story balances historical reality with mythic resonance, using fiction not as an escape but as a powerful space for emotional processing and cultural continuity.

The narrative skillfully intertwines individual grief with collective cultural memory, allowing readers to process trauma through the lens of folktale and allegory. Rather than serving as a mere escape from historical reality, the story transforms fiction into a meaningful space for emotional healing, ethical

reflection, and cultural continuity. Ultimately, the tale becomes a space of resistance and healing, where human gestures of care take on poetic and ethical significance.

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