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The Politics of Collective Mourning

Negotiating Power at the Intersection of Shi'ism, Gender, and Popular Culture in Iran

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

Requirement for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in Gender Studies

By

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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Doctor of Philosophy in Gender Studies

University of California, Los Angeles, 2019

Professor Sondra Hale, Co-Chair

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My dissertation, *The Politics of Collective Mourning: Negotiating Power at the Intersection of Shi'ism, Gender, and Popular Culture in Iran*, examines the social and political role of Shi'i collective mourning rituals, specifically *nohe* rituals, in the post-revolutionary Iran. These rituals commemorate the death of the Shi'i Imams and are essential to Shi'i cultural paradigms and identities. Moreover, they have played an important role in the legitimation of the Iranian state since their popularization in the sixteenth century. Although historically, women have participated in public mourning sessions in different forms, as audience and as storytellers, mourning rituals are spaces within which masculinity is defined and practiced and homosocial relationships between men are developed. Since the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran, these mourning ceremonies have gone through major semantic and performative shifts. In recent

years, the state has started the process of institutionalizing the mourning rituals and groups by creating governmental structures to organize, supervise, and surveille them. In the past decade, with the financial support of the state, mourning groups have doubled in number, making up the largest cultural and advertisement network in the Shi'i world. In reaction, a grassroot movement began that departed from the rituals' traditional manners in both content and form to serve as a public political medium and voice radical criticism of political structures and economic conditions. Despite their cultural, social, and political significance, *nohe* rituals remain understudied in the scholarly literature. Examining the radical semantic and performative changes in the practices of these rituals, my research seeks to understand how the negotiations and confrontations between the contemporary Iranian state and citizens that take place at the site of mourning rituals, are informed by gender, class, and politics.

The dissertation of Esha Momeni is approved.

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INTRODUCTION

بنال ای بلبل مستان، ازیرا ناله مستان میان صخره و خارا أثر دارد، أثر دارد

Lament, singing nightingale, because the drunkard's lament
Has some effect, some effect even on rocks and stones.

Rumi, poem 68 (p.97)[1]

Shi'i mourning rites and rituals have played an important role in the legitimation of the Iranian state since the sixteenth century. At the same time, people have used the spaces and opportunities that rituals produce to resist and revolt against the state. As political practice, mourning rituals have enormous potential to provide us with a lens for examining some of the complex negotiations that occur between the contemporary Iranian state and its purported citizenry. Since the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979, these mourning ceremonies have gone through major semantic and performative shifts, especially in big cities. Despite their cultural, social, and political significance, these domains of contestation remain understudied in the scholarly literature on Iran. Examining the radical semantic and performative changes in the practices of rituals that have occurred since the Revolution, I look at the nexus between the popular, the political, and the social to understand how political power is wielded in post-revolutionary Iran.

Shi'i mourning rituals are a productive conceptual landscape for understanding power relations between the state and the people beyond the dominant Orientalist characterization of them as traditional and backward. Concretely, rather than a solely religious practice, I conceptualize mourning rituals as a form of popular culture that enacts social and political conditions and contains rich knowledge about social, ethical, ideological, and aesthetic values.[2]

[1] Rumi, Jalal al-Din. *Mystical Poems of Rumi*. University of Chicago Press, 2010.
[2] For more, see Johnson, Richard, "What is cultural studies anyway?" *Social text* (1986): 38-80.

Stuart Hall defines the field of popular culture as a battlefield where there is continuous tension with dominant cultural forms.[3] Cultural processes, however, are intimately connected with social relations, particularly class relations and formations, sexual divisions, and ethnic structures.[4] As a site of contestation for different configurations of the social, Iranian mourning rituals make apparent the tensions between various cultural forms.

Hall identifies the 'popular' and the 'people' as mobile and ever-changing categories.[5] In the Islamic Republic, the battlefield of popular culture is complicated by Shi'ism. The incorporation of Shi'ism into popular culture, in light of the unfixed categories of the popular and the people, has laid the groundwork for the Islamic Republic to produce its own popular narratives. Thus, it is difficult to draw a line between the categories of "the state" and the "people" as there is no clear line between religion and popular culture. Popular culture is thus a space where the Islamic Republic and the people can negotiate with one another, making mourning rituals a privileged site for studying the relations of power between them.

The Islamic Republic has utilized and benefited from Shi'i mourning rituals since its inception. Simultaneously, the rituals, as independent social and cultural practices, can upset dominant hierarchies at two levels: between the grassroot cultural guilds and political institutions, and between members of society. On the one hand, the historical continuity of rituals has created a set of social relations that exceeds both the life and the power of the state, creating an autonomous sphere for political dialogue. For example, Gustav Thaiss, studying Tehran's clerics and bazaar merchants in the late 1960s, found that the rituals provided "an idiom for the communication of conflicting claims over resources and power particularly under conditions of social change."[6] On

[3] Hall, Stuart. "'Notes on Deconstructing 'the Popular'" (1981)." *Cultural Theory: An Anthology* (2010). p. 447.
[4] Johnson, Richard, "What is cultural studies anyway?" *Social text* (1986): 38-80. p.39
[5] Ibid
[6] Thaiss, Gustav Edward. "Religious Symbolism and Social Change: The Drama of Husain." (1974): p.119

the other hand, mourning collectives give their communities the opportunity to grant deserving members local power and influence. In the space of mourning rituals, class and ethnic lines can lose significance and hence their correlation with power. Traditional conceptions of status and respect that shape relations of power within mourning rituals and groups, such as age and years of community service, create opportunities for participants in mourning rituals to access power and status within the contested terrain of popular culture and from outside official structures of power. Furthermore, the social and political power of the mourning collectives give the local community visibility and political power in a broader public domain. Hence, within the battlefield of popular culture, where Hall argues there is a continuous struggle between uneven and unequal powers, mourning rituals create a sphere in which the power of "the people" can become commensurate with that of the state, temporarily shifting the power dynamic between the Iranian state and the people.[7]

In my research, I seek to understand the negotiations and confrontations between the contemporary Iranian state and citizens that take place at the site of mourning rituals. By investigating major shifts in mourning ceremonies since the 1979 Revolution, I examine the role of the Iranian state in creating particular kinds of national subjects that are marked, in turn, by gender, class, and ethnicity. In what follows, I first explain the structure and organization of the mourning rituals. I then provide a context for understanding the relations of power within them.

Structure and Organization of Mourning Rituals

The practices of Shi'i mourning rituals are as variegated as the Shi'i population. They also vary based on the occasion. Conventionally, various mourning sessions take place throughout the year, each mourning the death of a central figure in the received history of Shi'ism: the twelve

[7] Hall (1981), p.447.

Imams; the Prophet Muhammad; his daughter Fatemeh and his granddaughter Zaynab. A mourning group is called a *hey'at.* Usually, each *hey'at* is associated with a social group, traditionally formed around two categories of belonging: neighborhood and profession. However, with the constant transformation of cities and the formation of new social categories, new affiliations are continuously being formed. For example, with the increase in migration from rural areas or neighboring countries (mainly Iraq and Afghanistan) to urban centers like Tehran, minority groups have maintained their regional identities and ethnicities in their rituals, such as the *hey'at* of Azerbaijanis and the *hey'at* of Arabs.[8] Some groups are formed based on shared experience, for example, the mourning group for veterans of the Iran-Iraq War or the *Hey'at* of the Visually Impaired People of Tehran.

The most common contemporary practices of collective mourning in Iran consists of *rawzeh khani* and *nohe khani.*[9] In both practices, a professional singer often recounts the tragic stories of Shi'i history and the Imams. While *rowzeh* is performed in a non-metric manner with the primary objective of making the audience emotional and sorrowful, *nohe* is relatively more rhythmic and interactive. *Nohe* is accompanied by the mourners' *sineh-zani* (lit. chest-beating). Usually, mourners circle around or stand in arranged lines facing each other or the singer who recites the poetry in a specific musical mode. Mourners contribute to the music by rhythmically pounding their chests (*sineh-zani*) and chanting one or two hemistiches of the *nohe* song. Because of the collective and interactive nature of *nohe* performances, throughout this dissertation, I focus my analysis on *nohe* rituals.

[8] Aghaie, Kamran Scott. *The Martyrs of Karbala:* Shi'i *Symbols and Rituals in Modern Iran*. University of Washington Press, 2004. p.69
[9] Ibid, p.13

Nohe is the recitation of rhythmic lamentation poetry that usually describes the death of Shi'i Imams and saints. Like other folklore songs, *nohe* carries a rich cultural heritage that represents diverse social conditions and historical periods over the past 400 years. Under the constant political repression of different regimes, *nohe* has become a powerful medium. *Nohe* has an invariant core story, that of the death and sufferings of prominent religious figures and their affiliates. *Nohe* usually narrates a historical event, but various narratives and concepts get added to these core stories to reflect historically and temporally specific political and social concerns. These typically convey an ideological or political message, most often of martyrdom, sacrifice, betrayal, resistance, bravery, or innocence.

The most spectacular and engaging ritual takes place during the first ten days of the month of Moharram (the first month of the Islamic calendar) in commemoration of the martyrdom of the third Shi'i Imam, the Imam Hussein (625-680) in the battle of Karbala. For ten days, every evening, mourners gather for the ritual in a *husseiniyeh* (named after Imam Hussein) or a *tekyeh*, a temporary or permanent structure specifically made for Moharram mourning rituals.[10] Mourning rituals also take place in people's houses and in mosques.

There is a conventional narrative in Iran about the events that transpired which culminated with the martyrdom of the Imam Hussein. The people of the city of Kufa invited Hussein to join and lead them in a rebellion against the Omayyad Caliph. Ḥosayn accepted their invitation, left Mecca and headed towards Kufa with his family and seventy-two armed men, sixty of whom were

[10] *Tekyeh* was primarily built and used for sufi's rituals but with the rise of Shiism and Safavid support, the structure was repurposed for Shi'i rituals. For example, Shiraz Chehel-Tanan Tekyeh was built in the second half of 18th century by the order of Karim Khan Zand (1705-1779), the founder of Zand dynasty (1751-1794) for Sufis. Similarly, Aqa Hussein Khonsari *Tekyeh* in Isfahan was built in late 17th early 18th century ordered by King Sulaiman Safavi.Afsar, Keramat-Allah, "Cehel Tanan." *Encyclopædia Iranica*, V/2, p. 117; available online at http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/cehel-tanan-the-forty-dervishes-popularly-called-celtan-a-minor-*Tekyeh*-monastery-situated-in-the-northeastern-sec (accessed online at 17 August 2016).

Shi'i Muslims from Kufa. En route, Omayyad forces that were dispatched from Kufa, under the command of Al-Hurr ibn Yazid, blocked their way.[11] The army would allow Hussein to proceed only if he signed a pledge of allegiance to the second caliph of the Omayyad Caliphate, Yazid ibn Mu'awiya, who reigned from April 680 to November 683. Hussein did not accept the offer. After consulting with his group, he changed route. On the second day of Moharram, they arrived at the plain of Karbala, where they found themselves surrounded by an army of 4,000 men. [12] The army forced Hussein's caravan to settle in Karbala. Omayyad rulers had bribed the powerful men of Kufa to send their fighters, the same people who had invited Hussein to their city. By the sixth day of Moharram, the Omayyad army had more than twenty thousand combatants. On day seven, the Omayyad ruler transferred 500 of his soldiers to block the access of Hussein's caravan to the waters of the Euphrates. After days of barren negotiations, the head of the army gave two choices to Ḥosayn and his followers: either surrender or fight.[13] On the ninth day, called Tasu'a, several important events took place that led to the battle of Karbala on the tenth day, known as Ashura. On the Day of Ashura, all of the Hussein's able male companions were slaughtered one by one, with Ḥosayn being the last one to be beheaded.[14] Hussein's body was then trampled by horses and left unburied. The survivors were taken as prisoners.

The tragedy of Karbala is, at its core, a political story. Kamran Aghaei describes it as "...a historic rebellion against what was perceived to be corrupt leadership…"[15] Hamid Enayat writes that Hussein is "the only Imam whose tragedy can serve as a positive ingredient of the mythology

[11] Al-Hurr becomes one of the heroes of the story after changing side and fighting in support of Hussein.
[12] Karbala is a city in Iraq, best known as the location of the Battle of Karbala (680) and the martyrdom of Imam Hussein ibn Ali, the third Shia Imam. The Imam Hussein Shrine is also located in this city
[13] Ayoub, M. "Asura." *Encyclopædia Iranica*, vol. II, Fasc.8, 15 Dec. 1987, pp. 874–76, http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/asura. (accessed on Jun 18, 2019)
[14] Litvak, Meir. "Karbala." *Encyclopædia Iranica*, vol. XV, Fasc. 5, pp. 550-556 http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/karbala (accessed on Jun 18, 2019)
[15] Aghaie, Kamran. "The Karbala Narrative: Shi'i Political Discourse in Modern Iran in the 1960s and 1970s." *Journal of Islamic Studies* 12.2 (2001): 151-176. p.151

of any persecuted but militant Shi'i group of the Twelver School."[16] The Karbala drama has a complex plot and at least eleven major protagonists and antagonists. Usually, each night is dedicated to one of the main protagonists. For example, the hero of the fourth night is Al-Hurr, an important leader of the Omayyad's army and an elite of Kufa. He changed sides on the Day of Ashura and was among the first to be killed defending Hussein and his family.[17] Al-Hurr is the symbol of redemption.

Moharram rituals are thus centered around a moral imperative: to stand up to tyranny against all odds. However, the diversity in character and plot over a ten-day period gives the poets and singers of *nohe* a great deal of themes and stories to work with. This allows for individuals from across gender and class lines to connect to the story and empathize with the characters. The story of Karbala connects individuals to history, but also to one another, forming a community. At times, some stories get repeated more and some characters get more attention depending on their relevance to that historical moment. Because of the significance of Moharram rituals, the ceremonies that are used in this dissertation for analysis often took place on Moharram.

Historical Context of Shi'i Mourning Rituals in Iran

Due to a sparse archival record, it is not clear when the religious mourning rituals began to be practiced in the region as we see them today. Most scholars assess that the rituals became a popular practice during the Safavid era (1501-1722) with the institutionalization of Shi'ism as the official religion of the state. However, Touraj Daryaee and Soodabeh Malekzadeh state that they have found earlier evidence of public mourning, which occurred in 963 CE, during the Buyid Dynasty (934-1062). They draw upon an ancient epigraph to argue that despite a general belief

[16] Enayat, Hamid. *Modern Islamic political thought*. IB Tauris, 2005. p.183
[17] Calmard, Jean. & Calmard, Jacqueline. "Muharram Ceremonies Observed in Tehran by Ilya Nicolaevich Berezin (1843)." *Eternal performance: Ta'ziyeh and other Shiite rituals.* edited by Chelkowski, Peter J. London: Seagull. 2010, pp.53-73. p.61.

that the tradition of communal death commemorations was initiated by the Safavids in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the custom has had a longer history in the Iranian and neighboring world and is not limited to Shi'i history. [18] Still, it is in the Shi'i tradition that the mourning ritual became fully accepted.

The first known historical mention of a public mourning session is in Abu Bakr Muhammad bin Ja'far an-Narshaki's early tenth century history text *Tarikh-e Bukhara*. The author describes the people of Bukhara singing strange songs about the death of Siyavash, an epic character of *Shahnameh* [The Book of Kings] and the symbol of innocence in Persian literature. [19] An-Narshakhi writes that the story is more than three thousand years old and the mourning songs "are known in all the states and the minstrels call them 'Garistan-e-Mughan.'[20] The first notable report of the mourning rituals in modern times is recorded by Michelle Membre, a Venetian merchant, who observed the rituals in 1540 in the city of Tabriz in northwestern Iran. Jean Charden (1643-1713), a French Traveler who stayed in Iran from 1671 to 1677, extensively wrote about the rituals. He argued that with the support of Shah Abbas I, Moharram's mourning sessions, which up until that point were practiced in more private settings, became part of the public sphere and turned into the grand 'Carnivals.'[21]

Shi'i rituals have played an effective role in the formation of national identity and Iranian nationality in the modern era. In his explanation of the formation of Iranian nationality with respect to Shi'ism, Mehdi Najafzadeh noted that the first time a united Iran was formed, it was under the

[18] Daryaee, T. and Malekzadeh, S. *The Performance of Pain and Remembrance in Late Ancient Iran*, The Silk Road Journal 12 (2014): 57-64, p.62.
[19] ***Shahnameh*** is a lengthy epic poem written by Persian poet Ferdowsi between 977 to 1010. The book is mainly mythical partially inspired by true historical events. The work is central to modern Persian identity.
[20] Malekpour, Jamshid. *The Islamic Drama*. Routledge, 2004. p.35
[21] Chardin, John, PERS CHARDIN, and Jean Chardin. *A journey to Persia: Jean Chardin's portrait of a seventeenth-century empire*. New Age International, 1996. P.341

banner of Shi'ism at the end of the Safavid dynasty (1501- 1722).[22] He divides the development of the rituals in the Safavid era into four phases. He argues that during the first period, Shah Ismail (reigned 1501- 1524) pushed for the propagation of Shi'ism and the integration of the population into Shi'ism. Throughout the second stage, starting approximately with the coronation of Shah Abbas I in 1588, the most powerful king of the Safavid dynasty, the rituals entered popular culture. During Shah Safi's reign from 1629 to 1642, the third phase, theatrical aspects infused the events, and, finally, in the course of the fourth stage during Shah Sultan Hussain's reign from 1694 to1722, Shi'ism prevailed.[23]

The staging above is a useful heuristic for understanding transformations more relevant to the place of mourning rituals in popular culture in contemporary Iran. Jean Calmard states that it was under the rule of Shah Abbas I (reigned 1588-1629) that Moharram ceremonies which until then were "limited to their devotional and folkloric aspects, became a great festival, both civil and religious."[24] However, this dynamic changed in the late eighteenth century. Kamran Scott-Aghaei explains that since the eighteenth century the rituals "have proven to be independent from the state while Iran was going through the 'state-led' processes of modernization."[25] Instead, Aghaei identifies "changes in ethics, aesthetics, class dynamics, social institutions, grouping, and identities" as important and influential factors in the transformation of Shi'i rituals.[26]

[22] Najafzadeh, Mehdi. "Sooratbandi Mazhabi-siasi Jame' Irani dar Asr Safaviyeh", *Quarterly Journal of Political Science*, 40.1 (2010): 337- 354, p. 343
[23] Ibid. p 341.
[24] Calmard, Jean. "Shi'i Rituals and Power II. The Consolidation of Safavid Shicism: Folklore and Popular Religion." *Safavid Persia*, Edited by Cherles Melville, I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 1996, pp 139-190, p.143. One of the two known Persian historical texts that accounts for the mourning ceremonies, is authored by Eskandar Beg Torkaman Monsi (1560-1633), the royal secretary of Shah Abbas I.[24] The other one is written by Shah Abbas confidant and astrologer, Mollā Jalāl Monajjem (unknown-1620).
[25] Aghaie, 2004.p. xi
[26] Ibid,p. xxi

During the reign of the Pahlavi State (1905-1979), Reza Shah consistently opposed the rituals throughout his rule but his son who succeeded him, Muhammad Reza Shah, only opposed rituals that he perceived as hostile to his regime.[27] Reza Shah saw the mourning rituals as culturally backward and at odds with the modernization schemes he was adamant to implement in Iran. Therefore, Reza Shah often banned the practice. In his memoir, the famous *nohe* (mourning song) singer, Habib Niknam (1921-2003) wrote that mourners had an agreement with Reza Shah to keep mourning collectives out of city streets, effectively banning public mourning.[28] Niknam described how the mourners would go outside of the city or hide in someone's home to mourn. The state's prohibition of the rituals rendered them into practices of political dissent. The disparate collectivity that opposed the Pahlavi State and brought about the 1979 Iranian Revolution also benefited from the political opportunities that mourning rituals provided. In this period, Islamists and clerics benefited from the rituals by using sites of mourning for networking and mobilization. For example, during the Moharram of 1978, the processions avalanched into a protest with over a million people.[29] The Islamic Republic was and has been a Shi'i state fully supported the rituals. However, the Islamic Republic has been well-aware of the dangerous revolutionary potential of the rituals. It is not far from the truth to say that the mourning rituals and their content were the most effective ideological tool during both the revolution and during the war with Iraq.[30]

In recent years, mourning rituals have entered a new phase. The state is in the process of institutionalizing the mourning rituals by creating governmental structures to organize and supervise them. *Nohe* singers' activities are restricted by registration. If they are not registered,

[27] Aghaei, p.48-54
[28] Niknam, Habib. *Nohe-Khani. Lurestan Pazhoohi, Year 1, no 1& 2, Spring and Summer 1998. Ed Seyyed Mohammad Seifzadeh (257-261). p.259*
[29] Afary, Janet. "Shi'i Narratives of Karbala and Christian Rites of Penance: Michel Foucault and the Culture of the Iranian Revolution, 1978-1979." *Radical History Review* 86.1 (2003): 7-35. P.28
[30] Hazleton, Lesley. *After the prophet: the epic story of the Shia-Sunni split in Islam*. Anchor, 2010.p.198

they cannot perform.[31] With state support and investment, mourning groups (*hey'ats*) have proliferated in number. There are no reliable statistics of the total number of *hey'at*s in the past. However, there is information about the number of *hey'ats* in specific regions. For example, in Tabriz, the number of mourning groups doubled from 1,400 to 2,800 in the space of five years from 2011 to 2016.[32] In southern Khorasan, the number of *hay'ats* increased by forty percent from 1,025 to 1,444 between the years 2013 and 2018. [33] At present, there are thirty-five *hay'ats* in each of Tehran's neighborhoods. Overall, as of 2019, the number of registered *hay'ats* in Iran has surpassed 92,000, with one *hay'at* for every 880 people. [34] There is even a *hey'at* in Tehran for English-language speakers.[35]

Literature Review

The body of academic research that studies Shi'i mourning rituals through an anthropological and sociological lens is relatively small. The earlier scholarly work mainly focused on performative aspects of *ta'ziyeh*, the passion play. The work of Shi'i clerics and scholars who perceive the rituals as purely religious is concerned with the philosophical and moral lessons of the ritual's religious stories. Some Shi'i scholars criticized the "storytelling" aspect of the rituals and insisted that the mourning narratives be true to historical facts.[36] However, there is a growing interest in the study of the rituals within different disciplines.

[31] Mir-Hadi, Khadijeh. "29,642 Hey'at Registered with TOOBA." *ido.ir*, 16 Jan. 2018, http://ido.ir/post/824951/29-هزار-و-642-هیئت-مذهبی-در-سامانه-طوبی-ثبت‌نام-کرده‌اند . accessed July 3, 2019

[32] Hamidi, Katayoun. "City of Tabriz, Mother of Hey'ats with 2800 Mourning Groups." *Fars News Agency*, 13 Oct. 2016, http://www.farsnews.com/news/13950722000277/-تبریز-شهر-ام‌الهیئات-با-200-هیأت-اهل-بیت-ع--به-اوج-رسیدن-عزاداری‌ها. accessed July 8, 2019

[33] "1,444 Active Mourning Groups in Southern Khorasan." *International Quran News Agency*, 11 Sept. 2018, https://birjand.iqna.ir/00FiSs. Accessed 10 Oct. 2018

[34] "Participation of 92,000 Mourning Groups in Moharram Rituals." *IRIB News Agency*, 9 Sept. 2018, http://www.iribnews.ir/009KGD. Accessed 9 Jul. 2019

[35] "Programs and Activities of the First Mourning Groupin Tehran for English-Language Speakers." *Shia News*, 9 Oct. 2017, https://www.shia-news.com/000d3C. 07/09/2019. Accessed 9 Jul. 2019

[36] One of the clerics who was concerned with the "actuality" of Moharram's narrative in the rituals is Al-Sayyid Muḥsin al-Amīn al-ʿĀmilī (1867-1952). He saw the fictional stories of the Moharram narrative as religiously

Despite the visibility and popularity of the rituals, Kamran Scott-Aghaei's *The Martyrs of Karbala:* Shi'i *Symbols and Rituals in Modern Iran* (2004) was the first major historical examination of them. Aghaei explores the transformation of Moharram's symbols and rituals from the second half of the 19th century to the end of the 20th century, showing how sovereigns and their political opposition groups have used the rituals for political objectives. He discusses how the scarcity of certain types of primary sources has affected historical research on Iran. He argues that this limitation in addition to the fact that elites and the state have more (accessible) records forces researchers to focus on the theme of modernization.[37] To expand his analysis beyond the state and the ruling elites, he draws upon national surveys, police reports, memoirs, newspapers, and visual materials. Focusing on Muharram rituals, Aghaei shows the development of the rituals under Qajar rule (1785-1925) and the ways in which they utilized the ceremonies and symbols to strengthen their political power in society. He traces the transformation and political role of symbols and practices of Moharram rituals throughout the Pahlavi era and 1979 Revolution. Aghaei argues that the nascent Islamic Republic used Moharram rituals as its primary avenue to promote its legitimacy, gender ideology, and war-related aims. Examining this long history, he concludes that despite the states' utilization of the rituals, they had a minor influence on their practices and symbols. In 2009, Aghaei published an anthology, mapping gender dynamics in the rituals' symbols and practices in the Shi'i world.[38] This book provides a more in-depth understanding of women's position in two areas: their representation in the historical narratives of the rituals, and their active participation in them. The volume approaches the subject matter from

deviant and superstitious, and tried to correct them by writing a historically accurate account of the tragedy of Karbala.[36] He even went a step further and announced that *ta'ziyeh* is *haram*, forbidden by god.

[37] Aghaei, p.x

[38] Aghaie, Kamran Scot, ed. *The Women of Karbala: Ritual Performance and Symbolic Discourses in Modern Shi'i Islam*. University of Texas Press, 2009.

a range of disciplines and does not limit the study to Iran. Although the book is successful in exhibiting the crucial role of women and filing a gap in the studies of the rituals in Western academia, for Shi'as who are involved in these practices, they do not offer any new perspective.

In *Performing Islam: Gender and Ritual in Iran* (2006), Azab Torab offers the first major feminist account of mourning rituals in Iran.[39] Through an ethnography of women's ritual practices in southern Tehran from 1992-93, Torab seeks to understand how gender is constructed and formed by the rituals. Torab regards the rituals as social activities and avoids using religious or secular labels as "the boundaries of secular and religious are fluid."[40] She exhibits the ways in which women use the narrative of the rituals to critique social norms and gender politics. Her work boldens the critical role of the rituals in people's daily life and the formation of gender identities.

In *Theater State and the Formation of Early Modern Public Sphere in Iran: Studies on Safavid Moharram Rituals, 1590-1641 CE* (2011), Babak Rahimi interrogates the intersection of mourning rituals, the public sphere, and state power to analyze the relationship between the state and the people in the early 17th century when the rituals were first popularized.[41] Rahimi views the early processes of state-building during the Safavid era as a theatrical process through which "power is articulated, enacted, imagined, staged, and visualized." These processes, he argues, created a new political community.[42] Rahimi challenges the Habermasian notion of deliberation that perceived the state and its powers and practices a counterpart of a public sphere. Instead, he argues that Moharram rituals can be both a public space and a space for the production of state power.

[39] Torab, Azam. *Performing Islam: gender and ritual in Iran*. Brill, 2006.
[40] Torab, p.8
[41] Rahimi, Babak. *Theater state and the formation of early modern public sphere in Iran: Studies on Safavid Moharram rituals, 1590-1641 CE*. Vol. 5. Brill, 2011. p.16
[42] Ibid, p.14

In *Religion and Nation: Iranian Local and Transnational Networks in Britain* (2005), Kathryn Spellman conducts an ethnography of the Iranian diasporic community in London. Spellman attends to the ways in which they (re)construct their identity and express their sense of belonging and displacement through the rituals.[43] The thesis of feminist scholar and activist Firouzeh Mohajer studies the changes to Shi'i women's rituals in Tehran throughout the last century.[44] In *Shi'i Media* (2100), Mohsen Hesam Mazaheri offers a comprehensive contextualized history of the rituals.[45] Despite the significant role of the rituals in Iran's contemporary political history and their importance as social and cultural institutions, studies that engage with their discourse and meaning-making processes are insufficient. In this dissertation, I investigate conceptual shifts in public mourning rituals to assess how the narrativization of perceived Shi'i historical facts are perpetuated and contested through discourse about the rituals in the history of the Islamic Republic.

As I explained earlier, mourning rituals are performed and practiced in different manners, some of which are less visible in the scholarly work but more known to the general public. The focus of Western media has been on a minority of mourners whose practices are graphic and include bodily harm and consequently blood.[46] The imagery of this minority of mourners is often used in Western propaganda as testament to the 'violent' nature of Islam. These extreme practices and the public perception of them impacts the interpretation of the common practice of *sineh-zani*

[43] Spellman, Kathryn. *Religion and nation: Iranian local and transnational networks in Britain*. Vol. 15. Berghahn Books, 2005.
[44] Mohajer, Firouzeh. Sofreh-ha-ye Nazru-ye Zanan-e shi'e Saken-e Tehran [The Rituals of Shi'i Women in Tehran], Master's Thesis, Allameh Tabatabaei University.
[45] Mazaheri, M.H. (2011) Shi'i *Media.* Sazman-e Tablighat-e Islami. Tehra
[46] There is a lot of attention on an uncommon practice of mourning that is called *qameh-zani.* In this practice, mourners following the rhythm of *nohe,* tap the middle of their heads with the side of a sword for a long time. This tapping inflates a vein and numbs it. With a mild touch of the blade, the skin and vein open up and bleeds. Many authorities, including both the Islamic Republic's supreme leaders and the earlier monarchy's Pahlavi kings, strongly opposed the act on both legal and religious terms. But disparate political regimes have faced strong resistance from its practitioners. Due to this repression, today, this ritual is mostly held in secrecy.

(chest-beating) that accompanies *nohe.* Similar to Reza Shah and Western media, a part of Iranian society also views the public mourning rituals in a negative light and labels them as backward. Scholars often translate *sineh-zani* as self-flagellation and interpret the practice within the framework of Christian rituals. In this framework, scholars are beholden to an idea that mourners' self-flagellate in the service of freeing their soul from the prison of the body. Contrary to *sineh-zani*, scholars have tended to assess *ta'ziyeh* without emphasizing religion.

By recognizing *ta'ziyeh* as a form of art, performance studies scholars Bahram Beyzai and Peter J. Chelkowski secularized *ta'ziyeh* and reconceived the subject-position of participants of the rituals from passive mourners to active audiences. Today, *ta'ziyeh* is viewed as an indigenous form of theater rather than a Shi'i ritual. Similarly, in my study, I regard *nohe* ceremonies as artistic group performances within which participants are active agents of cultural production. Such reconfiguration of the role of mourners in the rituals opens doors for new understandings of the social and political function of the rites and their place in individuals' lives.

The focus of the scholarship on Tehran and its reliance on official archives fails to display the diverse narrative and performative variations of the rituals. This reduction affects the understanding of the rituals with respect to conceptions of the body. When looking at the ways in which the rituals are practiced in different parts of Iran, the importance of music, rhythm, and harmony become apparent, indicating that the rituals are rooted in Sufism and other branches of early Shi'ism, traditions that emphasized music and the importance of harmony, rhythm, and unity. In some central Iranian villages, mourners use two pieces of stone or wood and bang them together in a rhythm that accompanies the music [see Figure 1]. In one village in central-eastern Iran, the mourners use shovels as drums. These forms of mourning demonstrate that the emphasis of the rituals is not necessarily on the body but on rhythm and music. Instead of interpreting the rituals as spaces where the body is devalued in the service of self-transcendence, I see them as spaces of

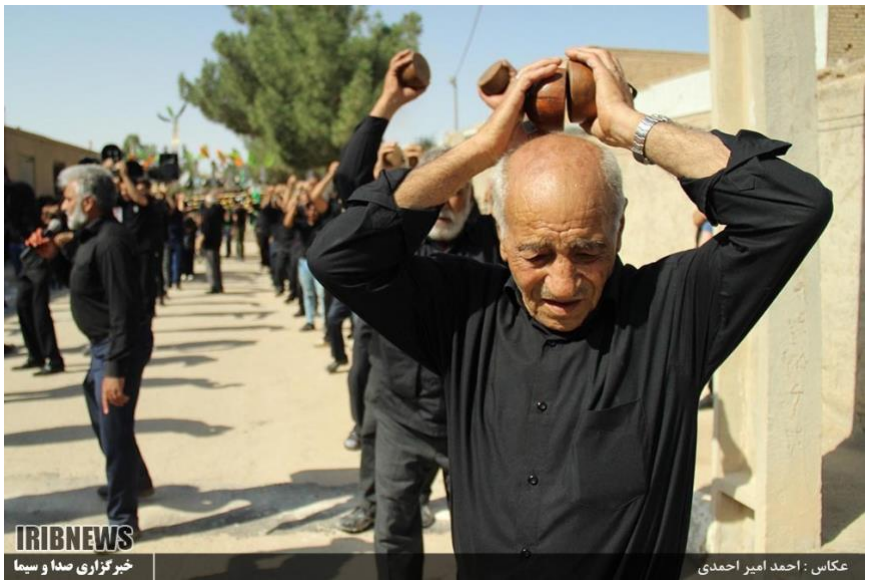


Figure 1: Ala Village in Semnan Province, Iran. Photo by Ahmad Amir-Ahmadi. IRIB News, 2018

self-production. I am not suggesting that the elements of harmony, rhythm, and unity are the sole bases of the rituals. Rather, I argue that the element of the purification of the soul through the repression of the body is not the *raison d'etre* of the rituals.

My research contributes to the literature that investigate the operation of gender in the rituals in two manners: by illuminating the importance and prominence of the mourning rituals in the construction of masculinity and male-bonding, and by furthering the understanding of women's participation in public practices where both genders are present. Rituals that take place in public spaces are often carried out by men. *Nohe* singers and poets are also primarily men. Women are excluded from ostensibly "active" participation in the performance of the ritual but are present as audience. Scholarship has taken this gendered dynamic at face-value, assuming that because women did and do not "actively" participate in the ritual, they are absent from the meaning-making processes that take place in these public events. I argue, however, that not only do women

participate in public mourning sessions in various ways, women have a significant effect on the rituals by virtue of their mere presence and by virtue of their perceptions.

In traditional settings, women are the main audience. Historically, they have also been major financial sponsors of the rituals.[47] The venues for mourning rituals are often two stories, with the second story a space designated for women who are typically the primary audience. Though there is scant information about social and political life of ordinary people, in general, and for women in particular, from prior to the Qajar Dynasty there are visual and textual materials from the Qajar era that shed light upon venues for mourning and the role that women played in the rituals. For example, the art historian Yahya Zoka argued that Tekyeh Dowlat [the Royal Amphitheater of Tehran] that Naser al-Din Shah Qajar (1831-1896) built in Tehran in 1868 for public mourning processions was constructed partly as a response to the need for a space large enough to accommodate the large number of women spectators [Figure 2].[48]

In his memoir, the first American envoy to Persian Samuel Benjamin described a mourning session in Tekyeh Dowlat in 1883:

> The entire arena with the exception of a narrow passage around the stage was absolutely packed with women, thousands on thousands. At a rough estimate it seemed to me that quite four thousand women were seated there cross-legged on the earthen floor, which was made slightly sloping in order to enable those in the rear to see over the heads of those before them.[49]

[47]Elham Malekzade & Marziyeh Afrafar (2017) Women Endowments of the Constitutional Functions until the End of the First Pahlavi, Case Study: Female Benefactor of Tehran, Journal of Historical Researchers, Vol 9, No 35, Autumn 2017

[48] Zoka, Yahya. "Tarikhchah-i sakhtamanha-yi arg-i saltanatT-yi Tihran va rahnama-yi Kakh-i Gulistan." (1970). Page number not available.

[49] Benjamin, Samuel Greene Wheeler. *Persia and the Persians*. Ticknor, 1887. p. 386. According to Yahya Zoka, the capacity of the *tekyeh* was five thousand, which means a majority of the participants were women.

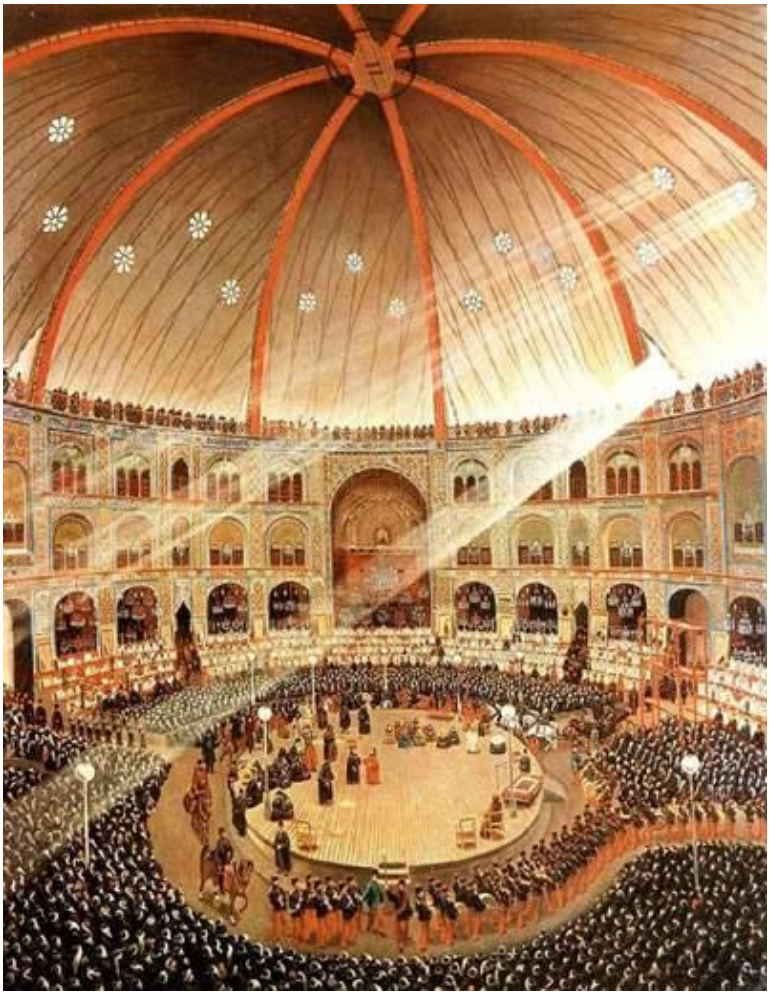


Figure 1- Tekyeh Dowlat by Kamal-ol-molk, 1892

In addition to the fact that women have been the primary audience of mourning rituals, the majority of *nohe* stories depict the martyrdom of the Imam Hussein from the point-of-view of a woman: Zaynab, the Imam Hussein's sister. After the death of Imam Hussein and all other adult men, Zaynab became the prominent political figure opposing the Umayyad's rule. She turned into an important figure in *Shi'a* history because she witnessed the Battle of Karbala and testified against the tyranny of the Umayyads. Zaynab's condemnation and criticism of Yazid and his

followers in public has been emphasized in most of the Karbala narratives and *nohes*.[50] In Shi'i thought, had it not been for Zaynab's bravery, the mission of Imam Hussein– to "defend the values of true Islam" – would not have been accomplished. In fact, the Imam Hussein's heroism and martyrdom is only validated through Zaynab since she witnessed and remembered. In *Shi'a* doctrine, the responsibility of an Imam is to walk the path of the Prophet Mohammad and to keep his message alive. Thus, Zaynab is conditionally designated a role that historically is reserved only for male descendants.

I suggest that in serving as spectators of the mourning rituals, women are, in part, fulfilling the historical role that Zaynab and other survivors played in the Battle of Karbala, by witnessing and remembering the tragedy. That is to say, if men play the part of the Imam Hussein and his army in Moharram rituals, women are playing the part of Zaynab and other survivors. Considering the importance of witnessing in *Shi'a* thought, women are not excluded from the rituals. Rather, they are assigned the crucial role of being witness to them.

The women who participate in mourning rituals by playing the part of the witness invert the male gaze by occupying the position of power afforded to the spectator for whom the spectacle, in this case, the male performer, is an object. The majority of mourning stories narrate the events of the battle through conventional feminine expressions and interpretations, leading to the feminization of mourning. However, these feminized narratives are mostly created and told by men. The imitation of feminine expressions and interpretations of historical events by men and the performance of women as their witnesses creates particular gendered subjects that are rendered invisible when placed within a traditional gender binary.

[50] Mohammad Mohammadi Eshtehardi, Sugnameh-e al-e Mohammad (Qom, Iran: Entesharat-e Naser-e Qom, 1997), p.66. as cited in Aghaie (2009). p.10.

Gendered social relations also shift during Moharram rituals. Rituals usually end at midnight. During Moharram nights, many social norms are suspended for a few days. In the more traditional neighborhoods, girls are permitted to stay out until midnight. They follow the performance groups throughout the neighborhood, check out young men, exchange glances, or get a chance to connect. Equally, young men get the opportunity to perform an idealized conception of masculinity: demonstrating vigor and hardiness, salience and devotion. Moreover, though appearing shirtless in public is usually not regarded as appropriate for men, Moharram nights give an opportunity for young men to exhibit bodies that they had worked to build for the rituals. Therefore, the rituals have a sexual undertone within which men, and not women, are the object of desire.

Although women have participated in public mourning sessions in different forms, as audience, as participants (witnessing), and as storytellers, Moharram rituals are spaces within which masculinity is defined and practiced and homosocial bonds are developed between men. Through a gender analysis of *nohe* lyrics and concepts, in this dissertation, I present an opening towards understanding the gendered practices of the rituals and subsequently of masculinity in Iran.

Significance, Method, and Methodology

I became interested in researching Iranian mourning rituals for a few reasons. Firstly, because of my own personal experience with Iranian civil society as a women's rights activist and the challenges of doing collective work. We regarded the general lack of social experience in organizing a defining factor in the issues that we ran into in our group projects. In the past centuries, mourning rituals have consistently been the main and often the only grassroots collective action and public spectacle that brought together the members of community to organize for a common interest. The historical continuity of the rituals makes them a significant resource for

research. Therefore, studying the rituals can provide us with information about the history of collective work in Iran.

Secondly, with the waves of migration of villagers to the city, especially in the second half of the 20th century, mourning rituals became a social space that transcended ethnic differences within diverse communities that were bounded by economic class. In light of studies of Iranian society that focus on elites, in part due to a lack of data, *nohe* provide a window to study otherwise marginalized populations. *Nohe* is the poetry of the disadvantaged that gets to be vocalized and receives limited publicity. The poet Nakhoda Abbas (1876-1954) and the singer Bakhshou (1936-1977) of Bushehr city are amongst performers who owe their national and international popularity to *nohe*.[51] *Nohe* and *nohe* poets are usually not included in studies of Iranian literature because *nohe* is regarded as low culture. Due to the limited resources for researching the disadvantaged, who are the majority of the population, studying *nohe* is crucial.

Lastly, mourning rituals embody Iranian Shi'i identity. The Shi'ism of common Iranians is shaped by the stories that are told in these rituals, not the historical facts nor the words of clerics, but the mythical stories that are shared by the members of their community. Thus, the hybrid nature of the rituals generates a conceptual terrain for understanding collective identities.

The interdisciplinary nature of gender studies, media studies, and cultural studies allowed me to build on existing studies and move a step further by engaging with the content of mourning rituals. After finishing this dissertation, it became apparent to me that reductive categorizations of the rituals reduce their significance. Only an interdisciplinary and intersectional approach can

[51] Nakhoda Abbas was a captain of Iran's navy in Qajar era. He is mainly famous for his *nohe* poems and *nohe* singing style that is still practiced in the south of Iran. Jahanbakhsh Kordi Zadeh was an internationally renowned *nohe* singer from the city of Bushehr with an extraordinary voice.

adequately address their complexities. The rituals are as secular as they are religious; as cultural as they are political; and are as histrionic as they are historical.

The primary foci of this study are: *nohe* lyrics, *nohe* singers, *nohe* related institutions, the mourners, and the performances. My access to the mourning performances and their content comes from online archives, videos of the ceremonies, music videos, audio files of *nohe*, and textual materials such as *nohe* poetry books, weblogs, mourning group websites and social media channels. Additionally, I draw from select documentaries and memoirs that are centered on *nohe* and mourning rituals. In 2016, I personally conducted extensive interviews with a *hey'at* manager, a *nohe* poet, a *nohe* singer, and a *nohe* researcher in Tehran and Isfahan. While the interviews expanded my understanding of the logistics of the rituals, in this research, I draw more upon my interview with the *hey'at* manager. Because of the variation in media, I use visual, audio, and textual analysis. Further down, in chapters summary, I will present a more detailed account of my sources.

I use conduct cultural analysis to trace the social and political power relations that are exercised through mourning rituals. My study is mainly focused on the processes of meaning-making, investigating the ways in which individual identities are formed and consequently affect the society. In addition to analyzing the lyrics, I situate the lyrics in larger sociohistorical contexts. I look at the political and discursive shifts that the songs contain and enact and study contexts of their production, performance, and reception. In the post-revolutionary era, I identified three major trends of the rituals: the Iran-Iraq War *nohe*, Enthusiastic Maddahi, and the Yazd protest *nohe*. In Chapter One I study the Iran-Iraq War *nohe* which are centered around martyrdom. In this chapter, I examine the formation of the rhetoric of martyrdom presented in war *nohe*. In Chapter Two, because of the characteristic of Enthusiastic Maddahi, I put performance at the center of the study.

In Chapter Three, I focus on the concept of freedom as it is central to the Yazd *nohe*. All translations are mine, unless otherwise noted.

Chapters Summary

In Chapter One, *Mourning, Martyrdom and Shame,* I examine the ways in which the Islamic Republic utilized and benefited from mourning rituals as a key component of wartime propaganda during the Iran-Iraq War. During the war, *nohe* became the dominant form of mourning because of its fast rhythm and interactive performance which fit the sentiments of war.[52] *Nohe* also played a crucial role in disseminating the idealization of martyrdom. Martyrdom discourse generated new social categories that affected the society at large. Investigating the role of the body and death in the state discourse of martyrdom, I argue that the state changed the meaning of death by altering the definition of martyrdom. This alteration provided tools by which the state was able to shame the surviving and wounded veterans and eventually to generate their seclusion.

I used content and discourse analysis to examine the representation of martyr and martyrdom in the cultural productions of the war era and how they are informed by gender, class, and ethnicity. I collected data from three sources: the most important state-supported television production of the Iran-Iraq war era, [53] *Ravayat-e Fath* [The Narrative of Triumph],[54] created by the celebrated war ideologue and filmmaker of the time Morteza Avini (1926-1993); the original scripts of the series penned by Avini;[55] and the lyrics of war mourning songs performed by Haj Sadegh Ahangaran, the most famous and influential singer of *nohe* during the war. *Ravayat-e Fath*

[52] Mazaheri p.216
[53] Mazyar Lotfalian (2009) Islamic Revolution and the Circulation of Visual Culture, *Radical History Review,* 105, pp. 163-167, p. 166.
[54]Also translated as The Chronicle of Victory and Witness to Glory.
[55] Available at Avini.com (http:/www.aviny.com/Article/Aviny/Chapters/matnefilm) The date of Access and download 2 Sep. 2014.

was composed of five seasons and 70 episodes, produced at different intervals between 1984 to 1987.[56] Almost every episode was a combination of Avini's narration, random interviews with soldiers, interviews with martyrs' families, short interviews with participants of one of the state-organized rallies, and mourning songs.

Ahangaran published his memoir in 2012. The book included the lyrics of close to 500 songs that were performed during the war and Ahangaran had a record of them. Therefore, there are missing pieces and the actual number of mourning songs, only performed by Ahangaran, is higher than 500. When I started my research in 2013, I read and coded over 100 of these songs but due to the volume and diversity of the songs, I ended up focusing on the most famous ones and the ones that were included in *Ravayat-e Fath* series. Nonetheless, studying Ahangaran's lyrics helped me to identify the main themes, patterns, and keywords of the war discourse which informed my methodology and interpretation of Ravayat-e Fath. Moreover, I used the study to evaluate my findings.

I conducted discourse analysis of Avini's scripts to learn how he characterized martyr and martyrdom, veterans, the war and its objectives, nation, and people. In my analysis of the series, in addition to identifying a main theme for each episode, I asked: who is interviewed (in respect to their gender, ethnicity, and occupation), what is asked from the interviewees, and what are their answers. In analyzing the visuals of *Ravayat-e Fath*, I specifically looked for the representation of underaged soldiers, wounded or dead bodies, and women. Building upon important studies on the topic, in this chapter I try to shed light on the ways in which life was influenced by the Iran-Iraq War in post-revolutionary Iran.

[56] Lotfalian. p. 166.

In Chapter Two, *The Messianic Generation*, I investigate the institutionalization of mourning rituals and the rise of a new genre of *maddahi* called Enthusiastic Maddahi, which appeared around 2005, at the end of the reform era and the beginning of the presidency of Mahmood Ahmadinejad.[57] Given the contemporary nature of this research topic and the attendant dearth of analytical studies about it, to answer my research questions, I have relied mainly on primary sources including newspapers, television broadcasts, audio and video recordings, oral histories, weblogs and their comment sections, and governmental reports. I have researched the background of all the major *nohe* singers of the genre, including how they became involved in the first place. I have confirmed the information that I speak to in this chapter by drawing upon multiple sources. Notwithstanding, the research in this chapter is subject to two major limitations. First, as noted, the dearth of previous research limited the breadth and scope of my analysis. In order to lay a foundation for my arguments, I had to engage in exploratory research which was time consuming. Second, as noted as well, I had limited access to information about these contemporary rituals. Specifically, the research question of this chapter calls for ethnographic work. In 2016, I traveled to Iran to do fieldwork. However, due to the politically sensitive nature of the topic and the attendant risks of conducting research about it in the Islamic Republic today, I was compelled to avoid drawing attention to myself. Many researchers have been arrested and imprisoned in the past decade, including myself. I thus ended up interviewing select individuals in private spaces.

In this chapter, I argue that with extensive financial investment, the state produced a new generation – one might even say a cult – of *maddahan* who have pledged their loyalty to the Supreme Leader and work as an unofficial branch of the state's ideological apparatus. They infused

[57] Fayyaz, Ebrahim, and Rahmani, Jabbar. "Mourning Rituals and Discourse of Karbala among Urban Low-Income Populations." *The Journal of Cultural and Communication Studies*, vol. 2, no. 6, Fall 2006, pp. 57–79. p.67

nohe with the doctrine of *Intizar* [waiting] for the Imam Mahdi's reappearance. In Twelver Shi'i belief, the Mahdi, the Twelfth Shi'i Imam and the last direct descendant of Prophet Mohammad, went into occultation almost 240 years after the Prophet's death and will one day return to establish a global egalitarian society.[58] However, a pre-requisite to his reappearance is the increase of tyranny and oppression in the world.[59] Therefore, the economic condition in Iran created by sanctions, corruption in politics, and other social, political, and economic hardships are only signs of his imminent reappearance.

Furthermore, the new wave of state-supported *maddahan* created a new style of mourning that diverged from the traditional forms. With the objective of attracting the male youth and guiding them, Enthusiastic Maddahi have completely erased women from the rituals and heavily rely on homoeroticism. Enthusiastic Maddahi empties the rituals of their political content by refashioning and altering the content of the *nohe* and replacing the political stories of Karbala with vulgar praises of the bodies of the Imams, simultaneously expressing love and affection for them.

The Third Chapter, *The Death of the Savior*, is about the *nohe* of resistance. In this chapter, I explore an independent, newly emergent mode of practicing mourning rituals in the city of Yazd. The movement began almost a decade ago and has departed from the rituals' traditional manners in both content and form to serve as a public political medium. Yazd *nohe* voices radical criticism of political structures and economic conditions, condemns corrupt clerics, and encourages people to rise up against tyranny and oppression. In every aspect, Yazd *nohe* is in opposition to the

[58] Abdulaziz Sachedina noted, "In the history of the Shi'ite sects in Islam, one finds that a belief in the future coming of an Imam, from among the descendants of the Prophet, termed the Mahdi (rightly guided one), is a salient feature. Al-MahdI, in general Islamic tradition, is a title reserved for a messianic restorer of the faith [....] The Imamites maintain that their twelfth Imam, Muhammad b. al-IHasan al-'Askari, who disappeared (or, as they would phrase it technically, 'went into occultation') around 256 /873-874, is the promised Mahdi, who will appear before the day of Judgement, to restore justice and equity on earth."(Sachedina, 1978)

[59] al-Qummi, Ibn Bäbuya. "1395 Kamal al-din wa tamam al-ni'ma fi ithbit al-ghayba wa kashf al-hayra." *A.-A. Ghaffari, ed., Tehran: dar al-Kutub al-Islãmiyya* (1975). Vol 1. p.287.

Enthusiastic Maddahi. Here, I engage in a cultural analysis of Yazd *nohe* to explore how *nohe* narratives are changed or retained to fit a political agenda. Moreover, I demonstrate how they provide us with a lens to understand the social and political changes in Iran in current times. I transcribed and studied twenty-two mourning performances that took place in 2018 on the ninth and tenth of Moharram (September 19 and 20, 2018) in the well-known Yazd Hazireh Mosque. The 2018 rituals were broadcast live from the mosque's social media accounts,[60] and later archived on the website of Shahid Sadoughi.[61] Moreover, throughout the past decade some of the Yazd performances have received extensive attention on social media. In addition to the 2018 Moharram ceremonies in Hazireh Mosque, I analyzed these popular performances.

In this third chapter, I also argue that the Yazd movement as a secular movement could only emerge and persist under the protection of the mourning rituals. Yazd *nohe* distances itself from Islamic ideology and the doctrine of *Intizar* for the Imam Mahdi's reappearance in both content and performance. Instead of turning to the future, Yazd *nohe* provides a link to the past and connects it to Iran's modern political history. Moreover, it emphasizes Iranian identity by making references to Persian classical literature, employing Persian classical music, and emphasizing the quality of their lyrics. In performance, the Yazd movement places emphasis on the communal rather than the individual, the democratic over the hierarchal, and secular over Islamic. In doing so, Yazd *nohe* modernizes the rituals by emphasizing a secular, non-nationalist Iranian-Islamic identity.

Studying Iranian Shi'i mourning rituals closely reveals their unfixed and complex nature. Yazd *nohe* and Enthusiastic Maddahi have grown simultaneously in two opposite directions. One

[60] *Sadoughi Cultural Center Instagram Account*. https://www.instagram.com/sadoughi.ir/. accessed June 2019.
[61] *Yazd Hey'ats' 2018 Nohe on Ta'sua and Ashura*. http://www.sadoughi.ir/SC.php?type=component_sections&id=26&sid=147. (accessed frequently February-March 2019)

fits the description of non-modern, and one is a form of collective art, attracting many tourists every year. However, Yazd *nohe* rebuts the viewpoint that interpret the mourning rituals as non-modern and not fitting the descriptions of civil society, and, instead, demonstrates the social and political power of these old cultural entities and their potential.

CHAPTER ONE: MOURNING, MARTYRDOM AND SHAME[1]

Intrinsic to all modern wars is propaganda. World War I demonstrated that modern propaganda techniques could be used effectively to assemble massive armies and to maintain civilian morale over lengthy periods of time.[2] Similarly, to recruit soldiers, to justify the imprisonment and execution of the political opposition, and to continue a war that was causing economic deprivation, the Iranian state launched a successful war propaganda machine, employing cultural productions like mourning songs, movies, and television shows.

Most of Iran's urban population experienced the war with Iraq (1980–1988) through the burden of privation and the fear of possible airstrikes. Thus, state-produced media on national television became the main apparatus through which they connected their daily lives to the national conflict. During the war, national TV and radio stations were the primary advertisers of 'the culture of martyrdom and resistance' amongst citizens and they regularly broadcasted war mourning songs. However, it was the most important television production of the Iran-Iraq war era, *Ravaayat-e Fath* [The Narrative of Triumph] that set the stage for the war discourse of war by redefining the meaning of death through generating novel meanings of martyrdom.[3] In this chapter, through content and discourse analysis of *Ravayat-e Fath* and war mourning songs, I explore the ways in which war propaganda in general, and the concept of martyrdom in particular, generated tools like shaming to control and regulate the population during and after the war.

Studying wartime propaganda reveals one of the Iranian State's central yet invisible methods of social-political control: shaming. The Iranian state's employment of martyrdom and

1 A version of this chapter was published in *Middle East Critique*, vol. 28, issue 2, Apr. 2019, pp. 177–95.

2 Stanley J. Baran & Dennis K. Davis (2011) Mass Communication Theory: Foundations, Ferment, and Future, p. 80 (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth).

3 Mazyar Lotfalian (2009) Islamic Revolution and the Circulation of Visual Culture, *Radical History Review*, 105, pp. 163-167, p. 166.

the immediate cultural productions of the war were drenched in the discourse of shame, particularly the shame of being or remaining alive. In this rhetoric, the *shahid*, or the martyr, was the chosen one; the one who was worthy enough to be called by God. Under this definition, the veterans who survived were marked as unworthy and incompetent and hence shamed. In what follows, I illustrate the use of shame as an instrument of state control and its effects on the identity and socio-political life of returned combat veterans and their families.

Modern propaganda techniques changed the ways wars were carried out and armies congregated. Throughout the 20th century, radio and television provided powerful means for propaganda messages to outspread to the populations. Although war propaganda objectives are focused on the wartime matters, because of the ways in which propaganda functions, its effects exceed the war time. The goal of a propaganda campaign is to change the way people act by changing their opinions. Moreover, it leads them to believe that they themselves generated those acts and views authentically and voluntarily.[4] However, to reach this objective, "propagandists must first change the way people conceive of themselves and their social world."[5]

My goal in examining wartime propaganda is not simply to understand its effect on the individual's state of mind who self-sacrificed for the cause, but the tools that propaganda provided for controlling the population during and after the war. Although the focus of my study is state propaganda and its dominant ideology, the achievements and effects of propaganda should not be overestimated. Media power is mostly "symbolic and persuasive"[6] and its effect on the individual is always limited by many factors, including interpretation and access. After all, propaganda is the selective representation of the reality, not the reality itself.

[4] Pratkanis, Anthony, and Elliot Aronson. "Age of propaganda." *New York* (1992). P.9.
[5] Baran & Davis, *Mass Communication Theory*, p. 76.
[6] Teun A. Van Dijk (1995) Power and the News Media, *Political Communication and Action,* 6(1), pp. 9-36, at p. 10.

From Holy Defense Paradigm to Martyrdom

In the Winter of 1979, after a popular revolution, the Islamic Republic replaced the Pahlavi monarchy. The religious leader, Ayatollah Khomeini (1902-1989), who had initially gained the support of various political parties from leftists to radical Islamists, immediately began to suppress opposing parties. In September 1980, shortly after Iran established an Islamic Republic, Iraq invaded Iran, sparking a deadly war between the two countries that lasted for eight years with enduring ramifications. For the young Islamic Republic, the war was indeed a divine war, for it gave the regime an opportunity to rid itself of both internal political opposition parties and individuals. Through mass imprisonment, execution, and forced exile, the state erased any possible threat to its existence and secured its future without facing acute public objection. Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi states, "The war had become the one, and perhaps the only, medium through which the state managed to perpetuate the revolution and to nurture its legitimacy."[7] Thus, from the very beginning, the Islamic Republic bound its existence and identity to the Iran-Iraq War. War, or 'the Holy Defense,' has remained a crucial aspect of the constitution and self-representation of the Islamic Republic's makeup; in fact, the state continues, perhaps even more strongly than before, to promote the 'culture of Holy Defense' through a variety of mediums.

The Islamic Republic inherited a powerful army. Mohammad Reza Shah, the last Pahlavi Shah, had made the army of Iran the second most powerful army in the Middle East after Israel, heavily relying on weaponry and equipment manufactured in the U.S. and other Western countries. However, after the Revolution, because of the turmoil of its relationship with the West generated from the hostage crisis, obtaining parts and supplies was not easy for Iran.[8] Nonetheless, despite

[7] Ghamari-Tabrizi, Behrooz. "Memory, Mourning, Memorializing the Victims of Iran-Iraq War, 1980—Present" *Radical History Review* 2009,105 (2009): 106-121, p.107.
[8] David Segal (1988) The Iran-Iraq War: A Military Analysis, *Foreign Affairs*, 66(5), pp. 946-963, at p.951.

Iraq's military superiority[9], its widespread international support, and its use of the element of surprise in a military attack against a fragile state-in-formation, Iran sustained the war for eight years and pushed back against Iraqi troops. Iran's greatest advantage was its infantry numbers, and the state utilized this human resource generously. Iran, with a population three times larger than Iraq, had nearly six million male citizens who were fit for military service in comparison with only two million potential Iraqi soldiers. Iran was able to mobilize around 2.75 million ground troops and militia[10] and if needed another one million men could have been mobilized, while Iraq's first-line ground forces were less than a quarter of that number.[11] But how did the Iranian state mobilize this army for such a long time?

Martyrdom, a significant concept in Iranian Shi'ism, was of critical significance in the state's attempts to mobilize the youth to join the Iran-Iraq War. The young Islamic Republic reconceptualized martyrdom by creating a Holy Defense paradigm and utilized Shi'i mourning rituals to create its ethos. The state promoted the so-called culture of "Holy Defense" through documentaries, music, art festivals, and publications. The Holy Defense Broadcasting Station, the Cinema of Holy Defense, the Festival of the Generation of the Holy Defense, and the Moghavemat (defense) International Film Festival are some examples of this cultural propaganda. The Holy Defense paradigm emerged from Shi'ism, the dominant form of Islam in Iran, and its cultural and religious symbols and meanings. As I stated in the Introduction, the overarching discourse of Holy Defense was an adoption of the most tragic Shi'i historical event, the murder of the third Shi'i Imam, the Imam Hussein, or the Master of all Martyrs, in the battle of Karbala (680 AD). The discourse of Holy Defense, similar to discourse about the Battle of Karbala, was centered on the

[9] Segal, p.951.
[10] Segal contends that Iran "mobilized about 2.25 million first-line ground troops (2 million army and 250,000 *pasdar*) in addition to the 500,000 second-rate *basij* militia.[10] Another one million men (about 500,000 *basij*, 400,000 army troopers and 100,000 *pasdar*)…[could have been] mobilized if needed" (p.954)
[11] Segal, p.946

concept of martyrdom, which employed the elements of victimization and sacrifice. Utilizing cultural productions, the state sanctified the war by presenting itself as the victim of Saddam Hussein's U.S. backed attack against Iran and created the notion of 'Holy Defense' (*Defa-e-Moghaddas*). In reality, however, in the summer of 1982, Iran finally gained the upper hand in the war, but Khomeini continued the war despite Saddam Hussein's announcement of the Iraqi Army's withdrawal from Iran on June 20.[12] While Iran was not on defense after the second year of the war, 'Holy Defense' remained the war's dominant paradigm and the state has continued to perpetuate this rhetoric until this day. 'Holy Defense' paradigm was propagated both by mass media for the general public and for the soldiers in the war fronts by holding live recitals.

National Television was one of the main outlets by which the Holy Defense paradigm was created. With the order of Khomeini, during the war, various state-funded organizations supported and invested in war movies and documentaries to advertise *the culture of martyrdom and resistance*.[13] Jihad's Television documentary film unit, the producer of *Ravayat-e Fath*, was created within this new-found state attention to media, co-sponsored by the state national media corporation of Voice and Vision of the Islamic Republic and Construction Jihad.[14] Avini, the writer and director of *Ravayat-e Fath*, who was a liberal art student with Marxist beliefs during the pre-revolutionary era in Tehran, was transformed with the revolution into a devoted Shi'i. The

[12] For more information read Smith, James DD. *Stopping wars: Defining the obstacles to cease-fire*. Routledge, 2018. pp 275-276. In reaction to Saddam Hussein's announcement of withdrawal from Iran, Khomeini responded;…if the war between Iran and Iraq continues, and if in the war Iran defeats Iraq, Iraq will be annexed to Iran; that is, the nation of Iraq, the oppressed people of Iraq, will free themselves from the talons of the tyrannical clique and will link themselves with the Iranian nation. They will set up their own government according to their own wishes-and Islamic one.[12]

[13] For more information on production of war documentaries and movies read H. Naficy (2012) *A Social History of Iranian Cinema, Volume 4: The Globalizing Era, 1984–2010* (Durham: Duke University Press) p 5-41.

[14] Also referred to as Construction Crusade, is an organization established in June 1979, by Khomeini's official order for the purpose of building infrastructure in rural and deprived areas of the country. The organization was also active in propagation of the state Islamic ideology.

synchrony of Avini's subjective change with the Islamic Revolution placed him at the seat of the head of Jihad's Television documentary film unit where he created the prominent *Ravayat-e Fath*.

Apart from Avini's affinity with the political strata and his ideological ascendancy in the realm of Islamic media, *Ravayat-e Fath* 's authority in the state production of the discourse of war and martyrdom, and in general, Iran-Iraq war propaganda and its efficiency, was enabled as much by the possibilities that communication technology had created in Iran in the early 1980s as the limitations of the technology at that time. In the absence of satellite television and limited access to home videos, the majority of Iranian audience had limited viewing options during the war. The Iranian television only had two channels, Network One and Network Two, each broadcasting roughly five hours daily a mixture of religious, educational, and informational programs.[15] Moreover, television was one of the main methods of transmitting emergency warnings to the population, alerting people of air raids and urging them to seek shelter. Television, whether as an instrument of entertainment and obtaining news or a vessel of dire warning, became the background noise of every house, the *sine qua non* of everyday life.

In addition to the state being the sole controller of communication technologies, content production was also monopolized by the state. The state limited the access of international news agencies to the warfronts. While government officials seldom granted foreign journalist reporter permissions to cover the war from the Iranian side, *Ravayat-e Fath* crew had full access and freedom in documenting the war front.[16] The conditions of communication technology indicates the potential capacity, if not actual information about transmitted messages, of propaganda.

[15] A. Sreberny-Mohammadi & A. Mohammadi (1990) Hegemony and resistance: media politics in the Islamic republic of Iran, *Quarterly Review of Film & Video* 12(4), pp. 33-59, p. 50-51.
[16] R. Varzi (2006) *Warring souls: Youth, media, and martyrdom in post-revolution Iran* (Durham: Duke University Press) p. 26.

During the war, *Ravayat-e Fath* was aired every evening for half an hour from Network One and has been televised sporadically in the past thirty years since the war ended, the last time in 2016. The series is now sold on DVD and available on various on-line platforms. The first four seasons focused on major battle operations, while the fifth was an overview of the war and its ending. The series as a whole was a fusion of three distinct visual landscapes: combat zones, the city rallies, and the houses of martyrs' families which were mostly in the villages. Avini's voice-over throughout each episode, reading the audience a 'story of triumph' written by himself, was central to the series. The dominance of his voice and poetic writing pushed the images of the war to the background as a secondary matter, bringing the format of the series close to music videos. The gaps between Avini's narration were filled with random interviews with soldiers, comparatively more specific interviews with martyrs' families, and politically directed short interviews with participants of one of the state-organized rallies. Often the episodes were accompanied by mourning songs.

Although the state presented *Ravayat-e Fath* as a journalistic work, *Ravayat-e Fath* entered the realm of fiction to fulfill its objectives: the recruitment of soldiers. Avini admitted this objective without reservation: "The film shows you how to get closer to God. We made a film that kept the war holy. We made this films in order to entice people to go to war, and not to entertain and inform the public."[17] Roxanne Varzi, in her study of media in post-revolutionary Iran, explains that Avini wanted to represent a spiritual world and journey. His goal was not to replicate *reality* as is expected in a documentary but to construct a new reality "that would eventually find its way to the very heart of the matter: faith."[18]

[17] M. Avini (2000) "*Yek Tajrobeyeh Mandegar*," Ravayat-e Fath, Tehran. p. 29. In Varzi
[18] Varzi, p.79.



Figure 1 & 2: Avini in 'Ravayat-e Fath' title sequence

Following the first season, every episode opened with a disclaimer asserting the impossibility of documenting the reality of the warfronts. The title sequence, which set the tone of the program, showed Avini writing while looking at footage displayed on a monitor in a darkroom [see Figure1 and 2]. The camera turned to him and he started writing while the voice-over commenced: "Our duty was to tell the story of a triumph, but through which language and wording and, through which medium could we truly capture such story?"[19] Avini himself called his method of documentary-making *Ishraqi*, [illuminationist,], suggesting that through his method he was able to transcend the physical world and common understanding of reality and illustrate the unseen paradigms of human wisdom and consciousness.[20] Avini stated that he and his crew "had learned

[20] Avini refers to *Ishraqi* or Illuminationist Philosophy (حکمت اشراق), an Islamic philosophy founded and developed in 12th century by Shahab al-Din Suhrawardi, a Persian philosopher. The Oxford Dictionary of Islam defines *Ishraqi* Philosophy as wisdom by illumination. It further explains, "In the Sufi and later philosophical traditions in Islam, ishraq referred to the apprehension of truth through a light emanating from God, who is described in the *Quran* (24:35) as 'the Light of the heavens and the earth.' For the more mystically inclined philosophers, such as Ibn Sina (Avicenna), the ultimate stage in the process of philosophical development is a nondiscursive stage whose roots ought to be sought in the East (al-sharq). A century and a half later, al-Suhrawardi (d. 1191) made Ishraq the pivotal point of his philosophy, embodied in a famous treatise entitled *Hikmat al-ishraq* (*The wisdom of illumination*). Here al-Suhrawardi claims to go beyond rational (Hellenistic) philosophical methods to more direct, experiential modes of insight deriving from ancient Eastern, predominantly Persian, sources. The Ishraqi tradition reached its zenith in the work of the Persian philosopher Sadr al-Din al-Shirazi, known also as Mulla Sadra (d.1641), generally regarded as the greatest exponent of the philosophy of ishraq, which continues to have a significant following in Iran today." Hikmat al-Ishraq. In *the Oxford Dictionary of Islam*. Ed. John L. Esposito. *Oxford Islamic Studies Online*.

from experience that it is possible to illustrate the existential truth in cinema, as long as the technique and the technology of cinema are well cultivated, as they are unceasingly bar such closeness [to the truth]." [21] Both Avini's remarks and his effort in explaining his genre demonstrate that he knew *Ravayat-e Fath* was never a conventional documentary.

The title sequence was followed by a *nohe*, sung by Sadegh Ahangaran, the most famous *nohe* singer of the war, who earned the nickname Khomeini's Nightingale. Many experts have agreed that *nohe* was the most effective tool of the Iranian state in the war with Iraq. The importance of *nohe* in the war is also evident in Ahangaran's memoir. He started singing *nohe* for Moharram ceremonies at a young age, but his involvement with war initially was not because of his aptitude for *nohe* singing. Before the triumph of the Islamic Revolution and the fall of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, he got involved in revolutionary acts against the Shah's regime in his hometown Ahvaz.[22] After the Revolution, and because of his revolutionary involvement and his affiliation with Islamists, he became one of the founders of Sepah, the Army of the Guardians of the Islamic Revolution in Ahwaz.

In his memoir, Ahangaran reports that during the war, prior to an operation, he would go to fifteen or sixteen cities [villages] to sing to recruited soldiers before any mission, thus creating sentiment through *maddahi*. At the beginning of the war he participated in combat operations, but after almost a year, *maddahi* became his only assignment and he was commanded to stay in the headquarters for his safety. He writes: "[T]he routine was to go to the combat line from one area to another (by the orders of the commands) after each operation and sing for the wounded and the ones who had served in the combat the night before and had lost their energy, I would sing as much

[21] Morteza Avini (2011) 'Ayeneh-ye Jadoo' [The Mirrors of Magic], pp. 180–181 (Iran: Vaheh).
[22] The capital of Khuzestan province in the southwest of Iran close to the border with Iraq.

as I could to boost their morale."[23] Moreover, he would go to the cities to sing monodies on the death of recently martyred soldiers. He had to prepare different modes and lyrics of *nohe* for each different circumstance: an epic poem and music for the recruitment, a different mode for the preparation of soldiers for combat, another for the operation itself, etc. Ahangaran was not the only *nohe* singer who participated in this undertaking. According to him, in the third year of the war the War Propaganda Headquarters formed a 'prayer league' for arranging the dispatch of speakers, preachers, and *nohe*-singers to the battlefield. The league later changed its name to '*Maddahan*'s Convention'.[24] Lesley Hazleton points out the role of *maddahan* in the war. She asserts that Khomeini stayed in power with the support of the manipulated Karbala story. She states:

> Thousands of Iranian boys were given headbands inscribed with the word "Karbala," then sent off to become human minesweepers. Wave after wave of them ran headlong into Iraqi minefields to be blown up to clear the way for Iranian troops, each of them in the desperate faith that he was heading for a martyr's paradise. Frontline troops were inspired to sacrifice by visits from singers and chanters of Karbala lamentations, the most famed of whom was known as "Khomeini's Nightingale.[25]

Through a collage of mythical stories, epic narratives, dramatic cinematography, and mourning songs accompanied by reports from the war fronts, *Ravayat-e Fath* strived to tell a story of human triumph over self through martyrdom. However, in order to tell such story, Avini, as an influential figure in the formation of the state identity, emboldened and reconfigured social divisions that were heavily informed by gender and class.

Martyrdom

[23] Ahangaran, p.64
[24] Ahangaran, p.163
[25] Hazleton, Lesley. *After the prophet: the epic story of the Shia-Sunni split in Islam*. Anchor, 2010.p.198

The discourse of martyrdom dominated Iranian political rhetoric from the 1960s to the present day. However, the use and the meaning of the concept has constantly changed. The discourse played a major role in the success of the 1979 Revolution. The revolutionaries in the uprisings against the Pahlavi Dynasty used the term martyr – *shahid*[26] – to refer to those who were killed by the Pahlavi regime during the anti-regime protests, regardless of their political affiliation.[27] Both religious and left-wing political groups, such as the Organization of Iranian People's Fedaian, used martyrdom as an effective tool to implant a sense of self-sacrifice and loyalty in their followers and the public.[28] After the revolution and with the start of the Iran-Iraq War, martyrdom became essential to the formation of the Islamic Republic's identity. In the shadow of war, the Islamic Republic's continuing power was solely dependent on the numbers of supporters who were willing to sacrifice their lives. The Islamic Republic substantially benefited from the notion of martyrdom. Martyrdom is still a major component of the state ideology and continues to be beneficial to the Islamic Republic.

Manoochehr Dorraj examines popular mythology and literature to present a historical account of the use of martyrdom in the political culture of Iran and its social implications. He argues that the celebration of martyrdom amongst Iranians is rooted in the Manichean concept of the refinement of the soul and Iranians' desire for tragedy. He explains that in an Iranian context, martyrdom was more an act of self-aggrandizement than of self-negation.[29] It displayed loyalty to the community, which eventually resulted in communal regeneration.[30] Martyrdom in the Islamic context always offered redemption and eternal life. Primarily, Muslims achieved martyrdom

[26] In Arabic Shahid means 'witness.'
[27] S. Talebi (2012) From the Light of the Eyes to the Eyes of the Power: State and Dissident Martyrs in Post-revolutionary Iran, *Visual Anthropology* 25(1-2), pp. 120-147, p. 127.
[28] M. Dorraj (1997) Symbolic and utilitarian political value of a tradition: martyrdom in the Iranian political culture, *The Review of Politics* 59(3), pp 489-522, p. 516.
[29] Dorraj, p. 497.
[30] Ibid, p.498.

through *jihad*, fighting the unbelievers for Islam. However, *jihad* and martyrdom are fluid concepts and historically specific to political conditions. For example, during the anti-shah movement, Khomeini defined martyr as one who died protesting social and political oppression. Assma Afsaruddin in her study of *jihad* and martyrdom stated that within Shi'ism, Khomeini's views radically departed from "the classical legal and political tradition, which essentially considered the military jihad to be in abeyance in the absence of the rightful Imam of the age."[31] Khomeini's radical views changed after the revolution and the start of the war. He drew parallels between the Iran-Iraq War and Imam Hussein's martyrdom. In his discourse on war, Saddam Hussein represented oppressive Umayyad leaders who martyred Imam Hussein, and the Iranian nation symbolized a defenseless Imam Hussein and his supporters.[32] The narrative of martyrdom was based on Karbala tragedy and Imam Hussein. Drawing on the original meaning of *jihad* and martyrdom that is concerned with defending Islam, Khomeini extended the concepts by including the state and clerics as representative of an Islam that should be defended. He said, "Those who oppose the mullahs oppose Islam itself, eliminate the mullahs and Islam shall disappear in fifty years."[33] Martyrdom in the Iran-Iraq War, Mateo Farzaneh argues, had both religious and nationalistic elements. Examining the martyrs' wills, he shows that there was a balance between the martyrs who fought for religious and secular reasons. Though they all shared the same goal and ideology, namely "a strong willingness to self-sacrifice for one's belief, modeled on the story of Karbala and Imam Hussein."[34]

Apart from martyrdom as a religious practice or individual's intention, the term has been

[31] Afsaruddin, Asma. *Striving in the Path of God: Jihad and Martyrdom in Islamic Thought*. Oxford University Press, 2013. p.293
[32] Farzaneh, Mateo Mohammad. "Shi'i Ideology, Iranian Secular Nationalism and the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988)." Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism 7.1 (2007): 86-103. p.92.
[33] Farzaneh p.96
[34] Ibid. pp. 96-97.

an honorary title that the community granted to its fallen heroes who sacrificed their life for the community. During the war, the Iranian state completely took over the narrative of martyrdom and produced a very specific and limited category of martyrs by co-opting the term and narrowing its usage. In the state's rhetoric of martyrdom, everything started at the moment of death when there was no individual subjectivity. In this way, martyrdom arises as a product of the state and not a result of the individual's choice, intentions, or religious beliefs. All soldiers who lost their lives on the battlefield were considered martyrs. In the new rhetoric, Shahla Talebi writes, a martyr was no longer just an individual who had willingly sacrificed his/her life for communal benefits; a martyr was one who had lost their life defending Islam and the state.[35] She continues:

> On the contrary the opponents of the state were stigmatized as ''the warriors against God'' (mohareb-e ba khoda). This discriminatory recognition of deaths of those killed for the state and those by the state led to the emergence of segregated graveyards, within or outside the mainstream cemeteries. This polarized delineation of one kind of death as ''martyrdom'' and the elimination of the other as ''corruption on earth'' not only justified the segregation of the dead within and outside the cemeteries, it was also the reason and the harbinger for the invasions of the dead into the terrain of the living.[36]

She refers to these two perceived opposing groups as either "state martyrs," killed in the war, or "dissident martyrs," killed by the state.[37] The new state discourse of martyrdom was perceived as an effort to distort the history; in resisting, the families of the 'dissident martyrs' continued referring to their lost ones as martyrs.[38] The exclusive state category of martyr as one who defended Islam and the state obscured the many Iranians who participated in the war for other reasons such

[35] Farzaneh, pp. 96-97.
[36] Talebi, p.127
[37] Ibid p.122
[38] Ibid, p.127

as serving their compulsory military service or local populations of the captured cities that took arms to defend their homes. The new definition of martyrdom portrayed all martyrs as supporters of the state and devoted Muslims who lost their lives defending Islam and the state. Painting all martyrs as religiously homogeneous required a homogenous body of soldiers. Therefore, the state discourse eliminated the complexities of the social and political conditions (class, gender, ethnicity, and sexuality) within which martyrs' subjecthood was formed. Ahangaran and Avini, played a crucial role in the creation of this discourse.

Martyrdom of the Insignificant

The homogenization of soldiers and martyrs was not limited to religious uniformity. It reduced all of them to a single gender, social class, and political view. A martyr was now Shi'a, male, poor, and pro-state. This image of soldier-martyr was produced by various cultural and political forces. In what follows, I exhibit how Ravayat-e Fath, the most important television series of wartime, produced that image.

To create a homogenized image of martyrs and soldiers, their individual pasts had to be erased. Hamid Naficy argues that it was the qualities of the martyrdom that did not allow for the individuality of martyrs that fed into stereotypes. He states that as martyrdom is "the highest level of human spiritual achievement" the characters of the martyrs cannot be depicted as "weak or hesitant" or "evolving" so even though "the filmmakers were inclined to show these psychological states, they are disarmed by the fact of martyrdom [or limited in the depiction of martyrdom]." [39] I argue that it was not the qualities of the category of martyr that did not "allow for individuality of the martyrs," [40] as Naficy suggested, but, rather, that in the Iran-Iraq war, martyrdom was

[39] Naficy, Hamid. *A Social History of Iranian Cinema, Volume 4: The Globalizing Era, 1984–2010* (Durham: Duke University Press) (2012). p.14
[40] Ibid.

configured by erasing the individuality of martyrs. In such a context, Avini and his crew crafted a mystical figure of a spiritual hero that appealed to a primarily young male audience.

Masculinity on Sale

Ravayat-e Fath advertised war and martyrdom in order to attract volunteers to go to the warfronts. Teenaged males were the easiest population to manipulate. Young male recruits were advantageous to the Iranian government. They easily were mobilized; they tended to follow orders unquestionably; and they were excitable, which could raise morale in the battlefields on the Iranian side while destroying it for Iraqis. In other words, teenage boys were the greatest asset of the Iranian state's war machine. Victimhood was a major element of Karbala's martyrdom. What, other than innocent adolescents deliberately sacrificing their bodies, could better convey the state's definition of martyrdom? What better way to terrorize Iraqi ground troops than with human waves of teenaged youth charging their machine guns, wave after wave forcing their deaths upon an unwilling enemy? It is truly emasculating for a man to be killed by a child; and who can claim to be a hero for killing or defeating an army of children?

The war death toll on the Iranian side indicates that a major portion of the recruited soldiers were the youth. Based on the Islamic Republic's most updated report, the total number of Iran's battlefield casualties was 155,081.[41] Of that number, approximately 33,000 were students, over 7,000 of them were under the age of 14.[42] Although boys under the age of 18 constituted at least

[41] There are conflicting reports on the war death toll. Iranian official reports cite 194,931 deaths in Iran, including civilians. (Woods & Murray (2009), *Saddam's War: An Iraqi Military Perspective of the Iran-Iraq War* p. 57) Most of the recent reports agree on the approximate number of 213,000. Civilians form 15% of this number, with the rest being soldiers who either were killed or declared missing in the action. 60,000 should be added to this number to account for Iranians who were injured by chemical weapons and died after the war due to their injuries. See "60,000 Veterans Affected by Chemical Weapons Share Their Pain." *Holy Defence News Agency*, 29 June 2015, https://dnws.ir/48982. accessed February 13, 2019.

[42] "Finally, Iran-Iraq War Casualty Report Is Published." *Azadegan Iran News Agency*, 31 May 2016. https://azadeganirankhabar.ir/88184, Accessed October 9, 2017.

21 percent of martyrs, they are hardly present in *Ravayat-e Fath*. In Episode One of Season Two, the camera stopped on a group of youngsters. In the middle of the group there was a boy who appeared to be 15 or 16 years old; a more experienced soldier was wrapping a bullet chain around him. On his left was another boy who was trying on a gas mask. The scattered group gathered when the camera got close. The camera zoomed in on the first boy; a few small heads filled the image in the background; they moved left and right, trying to stretch their height, and moved along with the camera smiling, the smile of a person who was seeing a camera for the first time, excited to be recorded and seen. The reporter asked the boy in the middle: 'What was your job before coming to the battle?' He responded: 'Danesh Amooz [primary education student].' The camera zoomed out and turned to the boy with the gas mask. The reporter asked (jokingly): 'Have they just dropped a chemical bomb?' The kid laughed in shyness: 'No, I was just trying it on.' What the camera displayed was a group of young boys who were playing with armor and war gadgets in a fetishistic manner, not a group of men preparing for the battlefield. [43]This scene was unique in *Ravayat-e Fath*, as Avini hardly included these youngsters' voices in his docudrama; when they made it to the screen, they were mainly in the background, as part of the scenery.

For advertisement purposes, the state had to represent the war as grand and serious for it to be attractive to the teenage boys, offering them manhood. Essayist Roger Rosenblatt argues that war creates a space for boys to seem like men and, although this might seem of little benefit, 'it is no small thing for a teenage boy to have something that yanks him out of his social floundering and places him, unlaughed at, in the company of heroes.' [44] *Ravayat-e Fath* excluded the already recruited young soldiers from its footage to appeal to the prospective boy soldiers desiring manhood, fulfilling its recruitment mission.

[43] Author's translation from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EgbTG7ci2kY 20:00, accessed November 23, 2017.
[44] R. Rosenblatt (1983) *Children of War* (New York: Doubleday), p. 101.

Women were completely absent in the state's dominant discourse and representation of martyrdom during the Iran-Iraq war. Although female martyrs constituted only a fraction of battlefield martyrs, less than half a percent, they were present at the fronts, mainly delivering medical aid.[45] *Ravayat-e Fath* portrayed women mostly as mothers who heartlessly and proudly offered their sons to the state as a religious obligation. Similar depictions or non-depictions of women were reproduced in feature fiction and nonfiction war movies; the stories were about men told by male directors and if women were shown, they were depicted as grieving family members.[46] Offering manhood was one of Avini's selling points; however, attaching martyrdom to one gender is a testimony to his patriarchal view of women as only producers of martyrs, and not themselves capable or worthy of martyrdom.

The Revolution of the Barefoot

The state ideology, which divided the dead into martyr and non-martyr extended to the society of the living across class lines. Despite the Islamic Republic officials' efforts to popularize the concept of 'the revolution of the barefoot'[47] and *mustaz'afin* [the oppressed], suggesting that the Islamic revolution was carried out by the poor, it was the middle class that "sparked off the revolution, fueled it, and struck the final blows."[48] The barefoot were the foot soldiers on the fronts. According to Assef Bayat:

> The clergy directed its attention to the *mustaz'afin*, or the lower classes, predominantly after the revolution. They did so, first, because the lower classes were seen as a solid social

[45] Based on State reports during the 8 years of war approximately 25,000 women were sent to the fronts as medical aides; see: "Statistics of Holy Defence." *Ma'aref Journal*, no. 87, Oct. 2011, https://hawzah.net/fa/Magazine/View/5211/7602/95062, Accessed Sep. 15, 2017.
[46] Naficy, A Social History of Iranian Cinema, Volume 4, pp. 24–25.
[47] Ruhollah Khomeini (2008) *Sahifeh-ye Imam [Imam's Book]: An Ontology of Imam Khomeini's Speeches, Massages, Interviews, Decress, Religious Permissions, and Letters (Vol. 1-22),* (Tehran: The Institute for Compilation and Publication of Imam Khomeini's Works-International Affairs Dept), vol 19, p. 34.
[48] Ervand Abrahamian (1982) *Iran between Two Revolutions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), p. 533.

basis for the new regime; second, because lower-class radicalism in the post-revolution forced the clergy to adopt a radical language; and third, because the clergy's emphasis on *mustaz'afin* could disarm the left's proletarian discourse after the revolution.[49]

I argue, however, that mobilizing the poor for the war should be added to Bayat's list. The *mustaz'afin* discourse provided the ideological base for the foundation of *Sazman-e Basij-e Mustaz'afin* [Organization for the Mobilization of the Oppressed], a voluntary-based paramilitary group that Khomeini established in 1979 to mobilize the marginalized population to defend 'their own revolution' in the war. The *mustaz'afin* consisted of an economically and socially marginalized strata who lived in rural regions or in the poor urban neighborhoods and peripheral areas of large cities[50]— they constituted 75 percent of combat soldiers.[51] They also formed Avini's main audience and his targeted recruits. This class disparity is reflected in the educational demography of casualties on the front: 37.1 percent of those who died had an elementary education or lower; 25.6 percent had a middle school education; and 30.5 percent had a high school education. Only 5.1 percent had a college education or advanced degree.[52]

In his voice-overs, Avini referred to this population as 'the insignificant' or 'the ordinary,' signified by either their occupation or residence, or both. For example, in Episode Seven of the first season, after expressing the happiness and enthusiasm of the soldiers rushing to the battlefields, the narrator intoned: "they are the neighborhood-mates of you and I; the ones that you see in mosques, bazaars, here and there. One of them is a shopkeeper, one of them is a [basic

[49] Asef Bayat (1997) *Street Politics: Poor People's Movements in Iran* (New York: Columbia University Press), p. 4
[50] Ashraf Zahedi (2006) State Ideology and the Status of Iranian War Widows, International Feminist Journal of Politics, 8(2), pp. 267–286, at p. 272.
[51] Saeid Golkar (2015) *Captive Society: The Basij Militia and Social Control in Iran* (New York: Columbia University Press). p. 179.
[52] Behruz Ghamari-Tabrizi (2009) Memory, Mourning, Memorializing: On the Victims of Iran-Iraq War, 1980—Present, Radical History Review, (105), pp. 106–121, at p. 103.

education] student, and one of them is just a simple farmer…" (Series 1, Episode 7).[53] Over the course of filming the five seasons, *Ravayat-e Fath*'s production team visited thirteen villages in total to conduct interviews with the martyrs' families; most were farmers, and only four families lived in cities. Season Two, in particular, was heavily invested in glorifying the villagers and their 'simple' non-materialistic lifestyle. In one of the episodes, Avini illustrated a village neighborhood where a farmer lives or calls on people who live in a poor neighborhood of a big city: "It doesn't matter if you are a weaver or a state employee, if you are an eyeglass maker or a student, if you are *talabeh* or just a blue-collar worker…" (Series 1, Episode 8).[54] Avini sometimes included populations that were assumed to be lower middle class, such as lower-level government employees [*karmand*]. However, only 5 percent of government employees were required to participate in war activities.[55]

With the repetition of this kind of rhetoric, Avini assumed a collective, homogenous audience and simultaneously erased aspects of soldiers' singularity. Firstly, the audience only learns the soldiers' names if they are high-ranking commanders or martyrs who were filmed by the crew but subsequently were killed before the episode aired. Examples include: 'Hassan Hadi became a martyr that day' (Series 3, Episode 1); 'we stayed in the trench with Shahid Mehrdad Abedini-zadeh…' (Series 4, Episode 1); 'Shahid Kazempour (camera shows him on a boat) joins Shahid Khalil Motahharnia' (Series 4, Episode 1); and 'Shahid Nazempour is preparing the explosive disposal unit' (Series 4, Episode 2). Additionally, the interviewees who are the members of a martyr family are identified by their relationship to the martyr, such as 'the father of Shahid

[53] The level of poverty also varies considerably across occupations. In the rural sector, poverty was the highest among farmers and miscellaneous occupations. The farmers contributed more than 65 percent to the poverty during the period of this study. In the urban sector, the production workers and miscellaneous occupation group contribute most to the poverty.

[54] Talabeh is the student of Hawza, the Islamic school where clerics are trained.

[55] Golkar, Captive Society, p. 40.

Chegini' (Series 4, Episode 12).

Secondly, most of the time 'Where are you from?' was the first – and sometimes the only – question that the team asked the interviewees. The soldiers' answers to this question concurrently erased their distinctiveness by accentuating their regional diversity, thus codifying the state's legitimacy. Interestingly, *Ravayat-e Fath's* exhibition of the ethnic/local diversity of soldiers (the majority of whom were volunteer *Basijis*) reveals an element of Iran's military to which scholars of the Iran-Iraq War have paid little attention. The military was segregated on the basis of ethnicity and statehood.[56] In other words, soldiers were grouped and sent to the fronts with their families, friends, and neighbors, and they formed strongly-bond communities. This strategy not only kept the soldiers excited and motivated, but also aided the state to unite Iran's multi-ethnic society while facing a foreign enemy.

Lastly, the second most common question that the interviewer asks the interviewees is about their occupation before joining the fight. Questions that, far more than signifying the individuals' characteristics to celebrate their bravery and display appreciation as common in hero-based war propaganda, reduce them to two general categories: class and township. Similarly, when the soldiers are not directly addressed by the camera and are only providing imagery for Avini's rhetoric, the narrator usually refers to them by their role in the fronts or their group association, which is mainly their township: the truck driver, that youngster from Khomein (a small city in Iran), and an old man from Mashhad. Finally, Avini added a dimension to the documentary's

[56] The military was divided into three organizations, the Army, the Pasdaran and Basij. In 1979 the Sepah militia (Sepāh-e Pāsdārān-e Enqelāb-e Islāmi) was formed for the purpose of internal security. When Iraq invaded Iran, the Pasdaran was still in the process of developing and did not have an official budget and its members were inexperienced. They partook in the war with funds and equipment provided by donations from communities and clerics. Today Sepah-e Pasdaran is one of the most powerful economic and political institutions of Iran. (Kenneth Katzman (1993) The Pasdaran: Institutionalization of Revolutionary Armed Force, *Iranian Studies*, 26(3-4), pp. 389-402, at p. 391).

rhetorically homogenous audience and subjects by linking them to Islam. In season 3, episode 6, Avini said:

> … [Marter Amir Eskandar Yeketaz] is a son of a taxi driver. God has chosen amongst the people; farmers and workers, ironworkers and laborers, drivers and shopkeepers, youngsters with names Mohammad and Ali and Amir, Hassan and Hossein and Ghasem, Akbar and Reza and Mahdi [all the names of Shi'i Imams] and has brought them in one big army to end tyranny, ignorance, and imperiousness [of the west].

Through the repetition of such statements in *Ravayat-e Fath* and war propaganda more generally, the Islamic Republic appropriated an entire economic class by marrying the *mostaz'af* with Islam, presenting the poor as always religious and further developing the class divison between the devoted Muslim poor and the cynic middle class. In fact, propaganda enabled the Islamic Republic to detach its identity from its middle-class origins, the precise group of people that was resisting the state's transformation to a theocratic dictatorship and attaching it to the *mustaza'fin* by claiming to be their representative. Season Two of *Ravayat-e Fath*, in particular, is heavily invested in glorifying the villagers and their simple, nonmaterialistic lifestyle. A dominant aspect of the pre-revolutionary, anti-Shah movement—in all its forms— was criticism of the Shah's extravagant and prodigal lifestyle. The dichotomy of palace-dwellers [*kakh-neshinan*] with respect to tent-dwellers [*kukh-neshinan*] emerged in relation to the monarch and his dependents. After the Islamists consolidated power, the so-called palace-dwellers were all either killed by the Islamist revolutionaries or were exiled. In both cases, all their properties were confiscated by the Islamic Republic. After the political elimination of the monarchy, Khomeini's rhetoric substituted for the monarchy the secular middle class that was resisting his authority. Consequently, the definition of a lavish lifestyle changed from a critique of the Shah's spending to a condemnation of the comfortable and allegedly lax urban middle class whose sons fought in the front in less

significant numbers. Avini compared these two populations frequently: "These young men [soldiers] …see their dreams coming true in Karbala and God has granted their wish. They are different that those neglecting tired and miserable [people] who are scattered across the cities and nothing connects them to the magnificent historical events of tomorrow" (Season 1- Episode 13). Through making these specific associations between class and religion, the poor and Islam, the Islamic Republic sends a clear message to the nation as to who constitutes its citizens. Avini borrows from this binary to build his perfect mystical martyr as the one who renunciates the material world, including the body.

The Body at the Threshold of Heaven

The state's homogenization of martyrs was enabled not only by erasing the individuality of the soldiers whom both Avini's camera and the audience perceived as future martyrs, but also by denying the martyr's physical body.[57] The body represents earth and mortality, the only barrier that stands between the servant and God, between misery and contentment, and between perfection and the flaw. In *Ravayat-e Fath* there are few images of the martyr's body. In the seventy half-hour episodes, each frames a landscape of battlefields, machine guns, tanks, and soldiers armed cap-à-pie for battle, yet there is no sign of death, nothing that resembles destruction and non-existence.

The discourse of martyrdom in the Iran-Iraq War, like other categories of martyrdom specific to their time and geography, offers spiritual transcendence. Dorraj writes that *kamal* [perfection] is only achievable through negating earthly pleasures.[58] In this context, death becomes a natural outcome of life that is seen as a new beginning of 'the journey [*m'araj*] toward unity with

[57] The Forty Witnesses, a documentary group, was formed to document the war rather than making films. They started with forty armature cameramen each assigned to a military unit. Their close connection to their units resulted in capturing many moments of explosions, death, and killing. The majority of their footage never has been screened publicly. See Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema,* Volume 4, pp. 9-11.
[58] Dorraj, p.500

God.'[59] Martyrdom is the deliberate embrace of death. It ends suffering and delivers a better life in heaven.

The representation of martyrdom in Avini's discourse is built on the future and the promise of immortality through martyrdom. The state is the only entity that has the power and the means to promise immortality to the citizens. The line of *Shahidan zendehand*, [Martyrs are alive] often is presented in *Ravayat-e Fath.* State leaders frequently cited one of the verses of the Quran, Al Imran III:169: "Count not those who have been killed in the way of Allah as dead, nay, alive with their Lord, provided for."[60] Islamic clerics have argued that "alive" refers to an existential life and is not used symbolically. In this portrayal of death, death is equivalent to life since the ultimate life starts in heaven after death. Death does not represent non-existence but, rather, functions as an elevator that leaves the body on the wretched earth and lands the soul in the eternal utopia.

Avini's promises, however, were not all spiritual. While Avini underscores the social-political-historical insignificance of his audience, he promises them the opportunity of "becoming someone worthy'" in the battlefield. He reads, "They [soldiers] are the ones who are building the human's history…" (Series 1, Episode 2); "…[the] same ordinary people, but here everything becomes extraordinary;" Or "these are kids … who the earth was awaiting for centuries to set foot on this diseased planet and end the ignorance…" (Series 1, Episode 3). This type of discourse is present in most episodes, especially in the first three seasons. Avini not only offers the opportunity of becoming someone worthy and important in a population with a very small chance for social and economic success, but also proposes the possibility of becoming a true 'citizen' and part of the official history, positions normally reserved for the powerful. In fact, by incorporating the most

[59] Dorraj, p. 501.
[60] Gieling (1999) *Religion and war in revolutionary Iran*. (London: I. B. Tauris). p. 46.

ignored populations, he creates an illusion of inclusion both in history and state power.

In episode ten of the first series, Avini describes the night of one of the major missions, *Va-alfajr-e Hasht,* most likely Iran's most successful attack.[61] Avini's voice over the images speaks to the audience:

> This is the army of god and they execute God's will on Planet Earth. Again, the time is awaiting a significant event. This is where the most important event in history will take place. The night of the attack, this is the night of entering the ark of the master of martyrs (*Seyyed ol-shuhada,* Imam Hussein). He who enters it, will be saved and he who does not, will be sunk in a destroying storm [referring to Noah's story].[62]

War martyrdom seemed a win-win for both the poor man who saw no glorious future ahead of him and who attained salvation through martyrdom, and the state, which used its most "disposable" bodies to its advantage. These unskilled, poor male laborers required little training and few resources to maximize profit. However, the rhetoric gradually shifted from achieving victory to reaching martyrdom: one goes to war to die, not to win. War was now sold as an opportunity to enter heaven and to become immortal. Battlefields became a threshold to heaven with equal access and opportunity for everyone to reside in. Nonetheless, this equal access did not guarantee martyrdom. The concept becomes deceiving when it is fused with the doctrine of Mahdism, a messianic ideology that believes the Twelfth Imam, the Mahdi, will return to earth to restore justice and equity accompanied by, in Avini's words, a regiment "chosen by God," the "best of the best," only those who "deserve" martyrdom. In one of his speeches, Khomeini said, "they [martyrs] are like stars, shine light on others but don't see themselves, otherwise they did

[61] First Battle of *al-Faw,* or Operation Dawn 8.
[62] *Ravayat-e Fath,* Season 1, Episode 10.

not deserve to be the soldier of Imam Zaman."[63] With the fusion of martyrdom with Mahdism, passing through the threshold of heaven becomes a matter of individual spiritual qualifications and the 'self', "only rewarded to the blessed" (Season 1, episode 9). Under this definition, the surviving veterans are marked as unworthy and incompetent and martyrdom starts operating as a shaming apparatus.

The Doomed and the Blessed: Shame and Martyrdom

The Iranian state's employment of martyrdom and its cultural productions of the war were drenched in the discourse of shame, particularly the shame of being or remaining alive. The state's discourse of martyrdom valued and classified soldiers' bodies during and after the war. Many of the soldiers who held frontline roles on the battlefields returned only to face increasingly difficult economic conditions, all the while dealing with the war's effects on an individual and familial level, including family and relational tensions, disability, and mental health challenges. The Iranian veterans who survived the war lost in both battles. In the heavenly battle, they did not become martyrs, and in the earthly battle, they still faced familial and economic hardships.

In addition to the high economical cost of the Iran-Iraq War for both countries and irrecoverable social damages, many lives were lost and mutilated. Iran suffered over one million casualties, a number that is still rising after almost 30 years since the war ended for two reasons: the Iranians who were poisoned by chemical weapons are now dying; the explosions of undetected and unremoved mines in lands that were once war-zones continue to claim lives.[64] As of 2017, the

[63] Ruhollah Khomeini (2008) *Sahifeh-ye Imam [Imam's Book]: An Ontology of Imam Khomeini's Speeches, Massages, Interviews, Decress, Religious Permissions, and Letters (Vol. 1-22),* (Tehran: The Institute for Compilation and Publication of Imam Khomeini's Works-International Affairs Dept), vol 4, p.4.

[64] There are conflicting reports on the war death toll. Dilip Hiro (1991), in his book *The Longest War: The Iran-Iraq Military Conflict*, outlines the death toll from three different reports: conservative western sources have estimated 367,000, from which 262,000 were Iranians and 105,000 Iraqis. Iranian official reports give the number of 194,931 including the civilians. Iraq estimated the death toll of 800,00 Iranians (p.250). However, Lacina and Gleditsch (2005) present a dataset of battle deaths in armed conflict for the period of 1946–2002 in which the disclosed number of Iran–Iraq War battle death is 644,500 (p.154). Most of the more recent reports agree on the approximate

Martyrs and Veterans Affairs Foundation has reported 574,101 wounded veterans in Iran, 41 percent of whom suffer from 25 percent or greater disability. The Islamic State's cultural productions' direct objective was to attract and mobilize soldiers, which had further deep and enduring social impacts. The upshot of their project of fabricating martyrdom is the valuation and classification of the bodies of the soldiers during and after the war.

Tayebeh Zandipour, who surveyed 100 war-wounded veterans, reports that a fraction of veterans suffer from "society's negative attitude (mostly from people and authorities) toward cut limbs, also the inconvenience of taking part in social gatherings and associations, feelings of failure, disability and over-demandingness of oneself" and "feeling[s] of shame."[65] Although survivors of war and veterans in general often report guilt—feeling guilty that one survived while others died—Iranian veterans persistently express shame. Ruth Leys explores the dichotomy of shame and guilt. She notes that after the theorists' reevaluation of shame in the 1950s, shame changed from being a negative emotion to a potentially positive one that is not destructive and perhaps even has healing attributes. Leys states that now theorists consider guilt as "shame's 'other'" and some believe that "shame serves at the limit as a site of resistance to cultural norms of identity." She argues that in theorizations of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), shame has replaced survivor's guilt. This positive reevaluation of shame is based on two grounds. First, while the act that creates the feeling of guilt is often irreversible and hence incurable, shame targets selfhood and is therefore susceptible to change. Secondly, theorists find shame a more useful

of 213,000. Civilians, mostly women and children, form 15% of this number and the rest are soldiers who were either killed or missed in the action. 60,000 should be added to this number for Iranians who were injured by chemical weapons and died after the war. "60,000 Veterans Affected by Chemical Weapons Share Their Pain." *Holy Defence News Agency*, 29 June 2015, https://dnws.ir/48982. Accessed Feb. 13, 2019).

[65] Tayebeh Zandipour (2008) The Role of Religious Beliefs and Thoughts of Holy Defense Veterans in Accepting the Difficulties of Imposed War, in *Counselling Psychology Quarterly*, 21(1), pp. 75-83, at p. 77.

theoretical tool that can contribute to queer theory, testimony theory, trauma theory, and gender and cultural studies.[66]

Scholarly discussions of shame often have employed a philosophical-cognitivist approach that privileges the individual.[67] Although shame is generated in a person in relation to others, the ways in which shame is shaped by external factors is also important. For example, the quality and quantity of the spectators and their gaze can add different layers to the individual experience of shame. Ruth Leys explains that a common theoretical agreement about shame is that it turns the attention from the act to the self and to one's deficiencies, while guilt concerns actions or the intention of an action or its fantasy. For this reason, personal identity becomes crucial in the context of shame.[68] Helen Lewis argues that in the experience of shame—in contrast to that of guilt—"the whole self is the object of the 'other's' disapproving look," when in guilt the experience of the self is neutralized.[69]

Shame is a more complicated and developed concept in the Islamic-Iranian school of thought. In contrast to the coupled relationship of shame and guilt in Western culture, in Iranian culture there is no presumed relationship between the two. In fact, a more common term for expressing the feeling of guilt that is caused in relation to another being is *Azab Vejdan*, which literally means the 'troubled conscious.' Guilt (*Ehsase-gonah*) is used in legal and religious context. In modern Iran, two words are commonly employed, often interchangeably, for the expression of the feeling of shame: *sharm* (Persian*)* and *Haya* (Arabic). In fact, *haya* is a state of the ego that prevents one from wrongdoings or sin out of fear of being shamed. Abū Hilāl al-'Askarī, an Islamic scholar of the 10th century, argued that *haya* concerns the intention of an action

[66] Ruth Leys (2009) *From Guilt to Shame: Auschwitz and after* (Princeton: Princeton University Press*) pp.124-125*
[67] Ibid p. 124.
[68] Ibid p.12.
[69] Ibid, p.128.

and functions as a deterrent, while shame enters when the action takes place. In *ahadith* (plural of *hadith*), *haya* is named as a source of distinction between the human and animal and is divided into two general types: *haya* in relation to god and *haya* in relation to another human. *Haya* is considered a positive moral imperative and is placed amongst the nine top human moral characteristics by Shaykh Tabarsi, an important Persian Shi'i scholar. Abd al-Karīm ibn Hawāzin Qushayri, a well-known philosopher of the 10th century and a Sufi expert writes that there are seven different kinds of *haya*. The Dehkhoda encyclopedia explains that there are two kinds of *haya*: one is sensual, and thus innate to all humans (e.g. the shame of nudity), and the other is dependent on the person's faith and is about the violation of god's will. It can be said that *haya* is basically the fear of being shamed and functions as a deterrent. So, in this context shame is always produced in relation to others or to god as a result of an action or behavior.

The case of Iranian veterans complicates the discussions of shame and guilt because shame is not generated in relation to others, but instead has been produced and reinforced by some political apparatuses as an oppressive tool. In his theorization of affects, Silvan Tomkins identifies nine affects of which shame is one.[70] Tomkins explains shame as an experience of "the self by the self," the most reflexive of all affects in which "the phenomenological distinction between the subject and object of shame is lost".[71] He argues that any object can trigger shame. The living Iranian veteran embodies a chronic shame, since his body and its existence are the source of shame. Contrary to current scholarly understandings of PTSD that evaluate shame as positive and changeable compared to survivor's guilt,[72] Tomkins conceptualizes shame as a toxin that "leaves

[70] He studies the physical effects of shame and traces the origin of the shame to the infancy period, between 3 to 7 months of age before the Oedipus complex and before understanding the concepts of taboo and prohibition.
[71] Silvan Tomkins (1963) *Affect Imagery Consciousness: Volume II: The Negative Affects* (New York: Springer Publishing Company), p. 141.
[72] Ruth Leys writes that this positive reevaluation of shame is based on two grounds. First, while the act that creates the feeling of guilt is often irreversible and hence incurable, shame targets "selfhood" and is therefore susceptible to

man naked, defeated, alienated, and lacking in dignity."[73] In the absence of a Persian word for war veterans, a neologism was created: *janbaz*, the one who sacrifices by his/her life. The term is an adjective referring to a quality of a 'self' in relation to his or her body. This category constantly reminds veterans and other citizens of the failure of surviving veterans to achieve the highest level of perfection: martyrdom.

Paul Gilbert writes that "both in an individualistic or collective society people seek to self-enhance and compete to be valued" by conforming to the norms in order to not be shamed.[74] Shame is associated with a feeling of inferiority to others and it "relates to the competitive dynamics of life."[75] It signals that a person has not fulfilled society's expectations. By constructing martyrdom as a hegemonic discourse, the state created a competition among living soldiers, where there are winners and losers and the losers are those who survived. A *janbaz* embodies a failed death, a martyr trapped in a living body. What would life mean to a veteran whose social identity is strongly tied to his (non)death? Avini's crew did not once visit the wounded of the war or their families. The *janbaz* was portrayed in *Ravayat-e Fath* only when he returned to combat to fulfil his blessed mission of martyrdom. As Avini stated, "Yes, martyrdom is only reserved for the blessed."[76]

According to a February 2014 Iranian Students News Agency (ISNA) interview with the head of the Foundation of Martyrs and Veterans Affairs, there are currently over half a million wounded veterans of the Iran-Iraq War. The total number of people who the Foundation cover,

change. Secondly, theorists find shame a more useful theoretical tool for advancing queer theory, testimony theory, trauma theory, and gender and cultural studies. p.124-125

[73] Tomkins, p.185.

[74] Ibid.

[75] Gilbert, p.1208.

[76] Season 3, Episode 3.

including war veterans, martyrs, and their families, is 3,200,000 people.[77] One of the concrete ramifications of the state's representation of an immortal image of the *shahid* in which the body was absent and death sanctified, is the stratification of bodies in relation to government social services. The State excluded veterans whose injuries were evaluated as less than 20 percent disabling from governmental support and services, including many of the veterans who were affected by chemical weapons and veterans with psychological disabilities. Thirty years after the war ended, the Islamic Republic has failed to provide adequate economic and medical services to many of its former soldiers, placing them among the most marginalized populations of Iran.[78] It is worth remembering that the majority of the veterans belonged to the *mustaz'afin* class, that is, the barefoot.

Although the shame of Iranian veterans is caused by a sense of one's personal deficiency, the feeling is not retained within oneself and has a significant impact on every aspect of their lives. In addition to depression, according to Paul Gilbert, shame results in submissive behavior and social anxiety.[79] This shame has led to the political and partial social death of a group of veterans and has excluded them from Iran's political arena. The post-war situation of veterans has been expressed most clearly by the prominent film director Ebrahim Hatamikia (1961), renowned for his fictional depictions of the Iran-Iraq War. In *The Glass Agency*[80] [*Azhans-e Shisheh-i*], Hatamikia depicts the personal, social, and economic sufferings of two veterans, Abbas and Kazem, in the aftermath of the war. Abbas is a low-income farmer *janbaz* [wounded veteran] in

[77] Available at "The Head of Martyrs and Veteras Association: More That 65,800 of Vetrans' Children Have No Jobs." *Iranian Students' News Agency (ISNA)*, 17 Feb. 2014, https://www.isna.ir/news/92112819771/. accessed January 18, 2017.
[78] Ishaq Jahangiri, Vice president speech. January 19, 2017. Tehran. Available at https://mehrnews.com/news/3881435, accessed May 22, 2017.
[79] Gilbert, *Evolution, Social Roles, and the Differences in Shame and Guilt*, p. 1206.
[80] Hatamikia, Ebrahim. *The Glass Agency*. Boshra Film, 1998.

need of an immediate surgery for the removal of a piece of shrapnel that threatens his life. Kazem, who was Abbas' commander during the war, takes it upon himself to get Abbas the proper medical care. The movie captures a day of their struggle and ends with Abbas' death. Abbas represents the figure of the soldier as it is characterized by Avini: a poor simple villager and a selfless, devoted Muslim. Moreover, he embodies the state's perfect *janbaz*, one who has no demands, never complains, and is full of shame. This shame is expressed in Abbas' words and body language throughout the movie. Although it seems that Hatamikia, the director, is criticizing the state for its failure in taking care of the veterans,[81] he still envisages martyrdom— a premature death caused by the war injuries— as the only possible and proper ending for a war veteran. In *The Glass Agency*, the state's failure in providing medical care and financial support for the wounded veterans, presents Abbas with a second chance to fulfil his prophecy and reach martyrdom. The glorification of martyrdom continues to serve the state by covering up its deficiencies in the post-war era.

In April 1993, while visiting a war site near the Iraqi border, Avini stepped on a landmine and was killed. The state honored him with the title of martyr. Perhaps the legacy of the martyrdom he helped to craft is best manifested in experts of his favorite mourning song:[82] the lyrics below, one of Ahangaran's famous war mourning songs included in one of *Ravayat-e-fath* episodes, manifests the state-supported enforcement of its particular vision towards veterans and martyrdom.[83] Most veterans, especially *basijis* -- the members of a voluntary-based paramilitary

[81] Naficy argues that in *The Glass Agency*, Hatamikia deals with 'the crisis of reintegrating war veterans into a society that nearly a decade after the war's end seems apathetic to their plight. It critiques the government, which had recruited the soldiers to fight and now seems to have abandoned them, and it critiques society, which revered the soldiers but now wants to get on with life.' Naficy, p. 28.

[82] Qader Tahmasebi wrote the lyrics and it was performed by Sadegh Ahangaran, the most famous singer of war mourning songs. An Instagram page dedicated to Avini claims that this song was his favorite mourning song (instagram/sayyedmorteza) accessed February 28, 2018.

[83] This is only one example, most of war's *nohes* have the same theme.

organization that was established in 1979 by the order of Khomeini to fight in Iran-Iraq war-- share this vision as well in the virtue of their faith in the Islamic state and their Shi'i-based beliefs.

Free from sin, they [martyrs]left

They called me 'poor' and left

Riders passed my body

I cried and begged but they didn't look back

I am captive, wounded, and disabled

Oh, my comrades, what kind of a madness is this?

If I missed the martyrs caravan, I was injured

I was locked down by my earthy neediness

Please don't close the door of martyrdom behind you

Please don't laugh [in ridicule] at our wretchedness from the other side [heaven]

My comrades prayed for me, wounded and left behind

They abandoned me to stay in prison [body, anything earthly]

They left me here to be a wanderer

You have gone high, I am stuck in the soil

Oh, brother, I am disgraced, I am shameful [84]

The popularity of the song testifies to the number of people who identity with the poem.[85]

This *nohe* depicts a monologue of a wounded soldier directed at his dead comrades at the moment of their death. The first sentence equates martyrdom with innocence. Only the one who is free from sin can earn martyrdom, and surviving is a sign of degeneracy. Though in this song, it is

[84] Translated by the author from Persian. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TKFwxnRhfoY&t=43s. Accessed March 23, 2015.

[85] The song's poet became famous after the release of this song and major Iranian newspapers published his interviews See, for example, *Iran Newspaper* (2006), no. 3519, Dec 10, p. 15. Moreover, the song is sold as a ring tone.

one's behavior, being free from sin and wrongdoings, that is considered decisive in determining the entitlement of a soldier to martyrdom, for it is the "*captive, wounded, and disabled"* body that is blamed. In the verse "*If I missed the martyrs caravan, I was injured,"* the soldier explains to his comrades that the reason he failed to join the group was the body, thus condemning it. This verse has another message: the capacity of heaven/the army of the Imam Mahdi is limited and if one joins the troops too late, he might lose the opportunity. If, as Gilbert suggests, shame is related to the competitive dynamics of life, by counting time as a defining factor in martyrdom, the state creates a competition. In a competition there are winners and losers, and the losers of this contest are the ones who lived. Tomkins argues that in a competition shame can be experienced through the successes of others. He states, "to the extent to which any individual so defines his relation to others, he is vulnerable to shame and envy."[86] In contrast to most war survivors or the survivors of Nazi camps who suffer from 'survivor's guilt, the Iranian veterans are troubled with the shame of not being dead. In survivor's guilt, the value is in life, while in not-being-dead shame, the value is in death. The shame of a *janbaz* is caused by a feeling of inferiority, something not necessarily caused by others but rather the awareness of one's own defect. The shame that the war-wounded soldiers of Iran face is disabling. Calling themselves the ones who are lagging behind the caravan of martyrdom, they feed into the "culture of expectancy," which propagates the doctrine of Mahdism.[87] This rhetoric encourages passivity and is therefore less politically active. In the case of Iranian veterans perhaps guilt could be more enabling because of its relationship to reparation.

The majority of the soldiers who held front-line roles on the battlefields came from an impoverished background; thus, the majority of them did not have much to lose. But if they

[86] Tomkins, p.225.

[87] Similar to messianism. Believing that Shi'i twelfth imam, Mahdi, "will appear before the day of Judgement, to restore justice and equity on earth" (Abdulaziz Sachedina, 1978). Muslims should wait for him patiently while praying for his reappearance.

survived, they did not have much to gain either. Moreover, the soldiers were often called "*rahiyan-e Karbala*" (travelers of Karbala), whose ultimate "destination was Karbala."[88] Karbala has only one conclusion: martyrdom.

Conclusion

The majority of Iran's urban population experienced the Iran-Iraq War through the burden of privation and the fear of possible airstrikes. However, people's daily lives were connected to the national conflict through state-supported national television that became the main apparatus through which the images of war and destruction were conveyed to people's houses. The series itself became a place for hopeful family members to perhaps get a glimpse of their sons or brothers, especially those who had gone missing or were already *shahids*. But these images were not solely objective journalism from the war front; rather, the Iranian government deliberately used them for propaganda.

Although the primary objective of war propaganda was to mobilize soldiers, it had far deeper and enduring social repercussions, perhaps contributing to the social divisions that prevented the 2009 and 2017–2018 uprisings from mobilizing much of the Iranian population. War propaganda cultural productions like *Ravayat-e Fath* enabled the Islamic Republic to homogenize and Islamize the public perception of the poor, to detach its identity from its elite/middle class roots, and to link it to the lower classes. It thus exacerbated a political and cultural divide on the basis of class. This distinction enabled the state to undermine middle-class opposition and to mobilize the poor in favor of the war.

Furthermore, war propaganda, through a discourse of martyrdom drenched in shame, assisted the state in restraining and managing combat veterans after the war. For the Islamic

[88] The location of the Battle of Karbala (680) where Imam Hussein was martyred., the third Shi'i Imam.

Republic, supporting veterans in the post-war era not only was an economic project, but also a major political one, as the state had to convert the illusion of shared power into a reality. In order to free itself from this debt, the state utilized shame to seclude, silence, and restrain those war veterans who were not absorbed into the political elite.



Figure 3. A scene from Ravayat-e Fath, Season 2, Episode 1.

Ravayat-e Fath was one of the Islamic Republic's main propaganda tools in its first decade and assisted the state in recruiting some of its best youth in an unnecessary, extended war. Almost 40 years have passed since it aired for the first time, and it now serves as a valuable archive of and witness to the war's policies and politics. Today, the series has become irrelevant for most people and unfavorable to the state. As I will exhibit in the next chapter, the ideology of Avini's era has lost its appeal, while the revolution in communication technologies and the invention of social media has created a space for other voices to emerge and other narratives to be told. Now, the images of the young men, who Avini referred to as "insignificant" and "ordinary," overpower his rhetoric of martyrdom and urge us to look deeper into that period of Iran's history to find answers to current social divides and political failures [see figure 3].

CHAPTER TWO: THE MESSIANIC GENERATION OF THE NUCLEAR ERA

Enthusiastic Maddahi, a newly emerged form of mourning rituals, has proliferated over the past ten years due to the state's economic support. It has become the primary medium through which the state propagates its ideology and harvests a new generation of supporters and troops. In this chapter, I argue that to attract a greater audience, Enthusiastic Maddahi relies on homoeroticism. The homoerotic mood of these ceremonies is created by the setting, diction, and the male mourners' partial nudity. The ceremonies are rooted in Iran's rich premodern history and the literature of homosexual love and desire. However, the Islamic Republic, which began as a puritanical state, ironically revitalized and affirmed homoeroticism in public in two ways: first, by drawing upon a historiographical tradition that obscured homosexuality among men and same-sex desire generally;[1] and second, through decades of punishment and persecution of women in public on heterosexual grounds. I further argue that Enthusiastic Maddahi not only created a channel for propaganda and recruitment for foreign wars, but also altered the narrative of mourning rituals by replacing the stories of Karbala and Imam Hussein's martyrdom with poor quality love songs that lacked story and were disconnected from Shi'i history.

From a political perspective, the popularization of Enthusiastic Maddahi was in fact just one element of a much larger political project that began at the end of the reform era in 2005 and included the institutionalization of mourning rituals. Political, material, and ideological forces played a part in this project: the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005-2013); the

[1] Afary, Janet. *Sexual politics in modern Iran*. Cambridge University Press, 2009. & Najmabadi, Afsaneh. *Women with mustaches and men without beards: Gender and sexual anxieties of Iranian modernity*. Univ of California Press, 2005.

establishment of the *Di'bil Al-Khuza'i*[2] Foundation to organize, manage, and surveil *nohe* singers and poets; and the promotion of the millenarian doctrine of *Intizar*, where the faithful expect and await the return of the occulted Twelfth Imam Mahdi.[3] The state supported Enthusiastic Maddahi became a vehicle for the propagation of the doctrine of *Intizar*.

During Ahmadinejad's presidency, the state's financial contributions towards religious institutions increased by nearly 6,626 percent within seven years (2005-12).[4] The *Di'bil Al-Khuza'i* Foundation (in short *Di'bil*) was established in 2006 from the new windfall of cash.[5] Sponsoring specific mourning groups and singers, the Ahmadinejad government and the *Di'bil* Foundation provided the political and institutional support for Enthusiastic Maddahi to develop and expand. It should be noted that all of the above had not materialized without the support of the strongest man in Iran's political structure: The Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.[6]

There have been significant cultural tensions around these ceremonies. Traditional *nohe* singers, members of their communities, and some clerics and state officials are strongly critical of Enthusiastic Maddahi for exhibiting nudity. Notwithstanding, Enthusiastic Maddahi continues to grow in popularity, especially amongst young men, and is becoming prevalent in larger urban centers. Though criticized by some state officials, the emergence and popularization of Enthusiastic Maddahi was the result of a concerted state effort.

[2] Named after the 8th century Shi'i poet, Di'bil Al-Khuza'i (765-859)
[3] "In the history of the Shi'ite sects in Islam, one finds that a belief in the future coming of an Imam, from among the descendants of the Prophet, termed the Mahdi (rightly guided one), is a salient feature. Al-Mahdi, in general Islamic tradition, is a title reserved for a messianic restorer of the faith. [....] The Imamites maintain that their twelfth Imam, Muhammad b. al-Hasan al-'Askari, who disappeared (or, as they would phrase it technically, 'went into occultation') around 256/873-874, is the promised Mahdi, who will appear before the day of Judgement, to restore justice and equity on earth."(Abdulaziz Sachedina, 1978. p.109)
[4] from 83 billion *toman* in 2003 to 5,500 billion *toman* in 2012.
[5] http://www.deabelnews.ir/vsda%5eln1lkt47,1.k5hk4.html Accessed August 15th, 2019
[6] Golkar, Saeid. "Iran after Khamenei: Prospects for Political Change." *Middle East Policy* 26.1 (2019): 75-88. p.75

In what follows, I investigate the cultural, social, and political significance of Enthusiastic Maddahi ceremonies. My objective in this chapter, is to understand how power, gender, and eroticism intersect in *Shi'a* mourning rituals and how they have become foundational to political action and identity for both the state and the individual. I will provide a context by tracing the history of the forces that are behind the institutionalization of the rituals and their influence on the rituals' traditional structure. I will further examin the political, cultural and social implications of these alterations by studying the performance practices and the literary content of the Enthusiastic Maddahi. Particularly, I focus on how the genre evokes and employs homoeroticism in its practices.

Setting the Stage

A piece of iron is only dear to me

when it is your alam [phallus shape sign]

Under the alam

I will give my head

for you [die for you]

if it is of any value to you[7]

In a black-walled, dark hall, the camera pans on a tight crowd of bare-chested, sweaty young men. A ray of red-light beams on the bodies that rock, disorderly, hopping up and down to the rhythm of the music. At first glance, such a setting is not dissimilar to any popular gay nightclub on a Saturday night, the energy and physicality of which evoke a potent erotic imagery. However,

[7] *A Selection of Javad Moghaddam Enthusiastic Nohe*. YouTube, 2017, https://youtu.be/v-g0mNwAevY. Accessed September 10, 2019

these are in fact the features of a newly fashioned Shi'i mourning session in Piroozi, an older, low-income neighborhood of Tehran, in the Moharram of 2017.[8]



Figure 2: A scene from an Enthusiastic Maddahi ceremony – Moharram 2013- Tehran

The *nohe* singer Hussein Sib-Sorkhi, is one of the leaders of this style of mourning producers and fans often refer to as 'Enthusiastic Maddahi*'*. Using simple, common-time rhythmic patterns, the crowd continuously repeats the name of the martyred Imam, "Ho'sayn, Ho'sayn, Ho'sayn…" Putting an accent on the "say" of "Hussein," one only hears "sayn, sayn sayn." At the same time men beat their bare chests, creating syncopation by emphasizing the backbeat, an essential component of popular Western dance music. A striking departure from the various traditional forms of Iranian Shi'i mourning music that preceded it, the style and provocative energy of Enthusiastic Maddahi more closely resembles the house and club music of the late 1980s and 90s.

From Pop to Enthusiastic

One of the early starts of the new style of *nohe,* was Sayyed Mohammad Javad Zaker Tabatabai (1976-2006), a young theology student from the religious city of Qom. The style that at

[8] *An Interview with Haj Mansour Arzi*. 7 Oct. 2016, https://www.yjc.ir/00ONYc. Accessed September 7, 2018.

the time was labeled as "pop" attracted a lot of attention, both negative and positive. The young religious men of the city who attended his sessions became devoted fans while the traditional clerics and *nohe* singers rebuked him. In addition to his deep, powerful voice and unique style of singing, using simple words and fast rhythms, he was physically attractive, charismatic, and stylish. Sayyed Zaker was anti-establishment and the first one who dared to cross many forbidden religious boundaries. Eventually, he was expelled from *hozeh* (Islamic university), beaten up, and cast out by his powerful opponents. His popularity continued to grow daily and provided him with some level of security. However, he remained an outcast until his early death at the age of thirty. One of Zaker's prime critics was a well-known conservative *maddah* who later became the leader of the Enthusiastic Maddahi campaign: Haj Mansour Arzi. Arzi was also one of the founders of *Ansar-e Hezbollah* (Ansar for short), a hardliner paramilitary vigilante group devoted to the Supreme Leader. Arzi was born and raised in Nazi-Abad, a neighborhood built in 1953 by the government as part of its low-income modernist housing projects to house workers and slum dwellers in Tehran.[9] He started singing *nohe* at the age of five. Later, he participated in the 1979 Revolution and the Iran-Iraq War as a *maddah* but soon was alienated from the main body of the war *nohe* singers after a disagreement in 1981. Arzi started his own mourning group in Shohada Mosque, located in the famous lower-class neighborhood of Piroozi. However, Arzi remained unknown to the public and his fame did not extend outside of his circle for decades until the late '90s with the establishment of *Ansar*. When the Iran-Iraq War ended and low-ranking soldiers came back, they faced difficulties in adjusting and assimilating into a society that was quickly moving away from a wartime mindset and focused more on rebuilding itself. War propaganda ideologies that were heavily built around martyrdom had expired and were deemed irrelevant to

[9] Habibi, Rana, Bruno De Meulder, and Seyed Mohsen Habibi. "Re-visiting Three Neighborhoods of Modern Tehran: Chaharsad-Dastgah, Narmak and Nazi-Abad." *Urban Change in Iran*. Springer, Cham, 2016. 31-46. p.43

post-war society. The reality of veterans' lives was characterized by economic hardships and political disfranchisement while dealing with combat-related injuries and trauma. As I argued in Chapter One, depression and shame forced some into isolation. However, some of the veterans started to assemble and organize, centering around mourning rituals. In 1991, three years after the war ended, this group of veterans formed *Ansar*. Arzi held mourning sessions for Ansar members every week.

On paper, Ansar's mission was to revitalize Islamic values in the society. In reality, they were a fundamentalist militant group, working as an unofficial regressive arm of the state. They enjoyed unlimited authority to violently impose their values, viewpoints, and ideologies on citizens, with impunity. In their early years, they prioritized combating representations of Western culture in the society, policing women's hijabs, raiding parties, attacking music concerts, etc. With the birth of the reformist movement, their focus shifted to politics, targeting the government of Mohammad Khatami (1997-2005).

Mohammad Khatami, the leader of the reformists and the fifth president of Iran, took office in 1997, drawing a great number of votes. His presidency blew a breeze of hope for more social and political freedoms. Under his presidency, the political pressure on civil society lessened for a brief time, which increased people's participation in social and political sphere.[10] For *Ansar* members, Khatami's ideas of civil society were a threat to their model of an ideal Islamic society. Ansar, thus, harshly criticized Khatami's moderate policies and used violence against whoever they deemed an enemy of Islam.[11] Ansar's allegiance to the Supreme Leader and their activities

[10] At the end of his eight-year term, however, many people were disappointed with his government and skeptical about the party he represented. The people widely blamed Khatami for not challenging the Supreme Leader's monopoly of power and failing to push for the effective reforms that he had promised.
[11] Hooglund, Eric. "Khatami's Iran." *Current History* 98.625 (1999): 59-64. p.61

and operations have always been in line with his viewpoints and have enforced his political interests.

With the start of the 21st century, *Ansar* centered its activities on mourning rituals as a vehicle for political propaganda. Arzi started advocating for the politicization of the *nohe* singers, arguing that the *maddah* should be a political and not just a passive singer.[12] They played an instrumental role in the election of Ahmadinejad when they launched a smear campaign against his opponent Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (1934-2017), a former two-time president (1989- 1997), a member of the Assembly of Experts, and the second most powerful man in the Islamic Republic after Khamenei.[13] Traditional *nohe* singers criticized the practice for converting a holy ritual to a partisan political exercise detached from the rituals' true meanings. Nonetheless, Arzi continued to use the rituals for propaganda and attacked the reformists with impunity, increasing his political power.

Gradually, a small group of young *nohe* singers who all identified as Arzi's students took over Tehran's mourning stages. Like their master, Arzi's students infused politics into the rituals by giving partisan speeches during their ceremonies, expressing gratitude and subordination to the Supreme Leader, and advertising the doctrine of *Intizar* and Mahdism. They became celebrities with the support of the influential politicians and with generous coverage from state-run television. Arzi's students began to charge large sums for performing Enthusiastic Maddahi, a break from tradition. Usually, *nohe* singers dedicated their voice to the *imams* for spiritual gains and the

12 12 *An Interview with Haj Mansour Arzi*. 7 Oct. 2016, https://www.yjc.ir/00ONYc. Accessed September 7, (min 3:03)
13 Ganji, A. (1999). *Alijenabe sorkhpoosh va alijenabane khakestari.*Tehran

respect of the community.[14] Eventually, Enthusiastic Maddahi became the prevalent mode of mourning at the service of the establishment. In reciprocation, they became rich and famous.

Eventually, Arzi's concept of political *maddah* reconfigured the mourning rituals power structure. Traditionally, the sole task of *nohe* singers was to sing *nohe*. However, *maddahan* took over the mosque podiums (*menbar*) by integrating political speeches into their *nohe* and pushing away Qom educated clerics.[15] *Maddahan*, who now fulfilled two previously distinguished roles, instead of delivering religious sermons, voiced Khamenei's concerns. The traditional cleric, all of the sudden was an Imam with no flock.

The Doctrine of *Intizar*

In 2005, the Islamic Republic's rhetorical claims about its ideological underpinnings was increasingly foregrounded by the doctrine of *Intizar* or Mahdism, in which the community was expecting and awaiting the return of the Twelfth Imam. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was one of the influential figures who contributed to the popularization of the doctrine of *Intizar*. From the very beginning of his presidency, Ahmadinejad infused his political rhetoric with that doctrine.[16] Twelver Shi'as conventionally belief that the Imam Mahdi, the twelfth and the last Imam, went into occultation almost 240 years after the Prophet Mohammad's death. He will eventually return to establish an idyllic egalitarian society throughout the world. However, Ahmadinejad's most important and consequential to the doctrine of *Intizar* was prophesying the reappearance of Imam Mahdi during his presidency.

[14] Tehran Bureau Correspondent. "The Lucrative Business of Mourning in Iran", The Guardian, 2014, (https://www.theguardian.com/world/iran-blog/2014/nov/05/iran-high-cost-business-mourning) Accessed September 5 2018

[15] Fayyaz and Rahmani, p.68

[16] Jafarzadeh, Alireza. *The Iran threat: President Ahmadinejad and the coming nuclear crisis*. St. Martin's Press, 2007. p.30.

Believing in the advent of a savior is not a new trope in the politics of the region. The origin of Mahdism, Mohebat Ahdiyyih contends, goes back to Zoroastrian beliefs.[17] He writes that the 10th-century poet Ferdowsi, the author of *Shahnameh (The Book of Kings),* Iran's national epic, wrote that a "noble man" would appear in Iran who will spread the religion of God throughout the world.[18] The current rise of Mahdism in Iran, Rashid Yaluh argues, is "an extension of a doctrinal debate that has accompanied Twelver Shi'i political thought since its birth."[19] However, the resurfacing of an apocalyptic atmosphere, Premysl Rosulek argues, was presented during the revolution by Khomeini that "allowed himself to be titled 'an Imam,' which happened for the first time in Shi'a history."[20]

After the Revolution, the doctrine of Mahdism became incorporated into the government's structure by the concept of *velayat-e faqih,* the Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist.[21] The Islamic Republic was formed on the basis of *shari'a* law, Western legal and political structures, and Khomeini's doctrine of *velayat-e faqih*. Sayyid Ruhollah Khomeini (1902-1989), the religious leader of the 1979 Islamic Revolution and the founder of the Islamic Republic, granted himself unrestricted sovereignty by creating the position of the *velayat-e faqih*. In the concept of *velayat-e faqih,* the *faqih* represents the Imam Mahdi while he is in occultation. In his study of the institutionalization of *velayat-e faqih,* Said Saffari notes that the doctrine gives *ulama,* as the deputies of the Twelfth Imam, absolute authority over believers.[22] He writes,

[17] Ahdiyyih, Mohebat. "Ahmadinejad and the Mahdi." *Middle East Quarterly* (2008).
[18] Ibid. P.28
[19] Yalouh, R. (2011). Mahdism in contemporary Iran, Ahmadinejad and the occult Imam. *Arabic Center for Research and Policy Studies. DohaQatar. Retrieved from http://english. dohainstitute. org/Home/Details*. p.1.
[20] Rosulek, Premysl. "Madism, Shi'a Ideology and Ahmadinejad's Docrtine." *Central European Journal of International & Security Studies.* vol. 9, no.1 (2015). p.68
[21] Ahdiyyih, M. (2008). Ahmadinejad and the Mahdi. *Middle East Quarterly*. 15(4). 27-36 p.27.
[22] Saffari, Said. "The Legitimation of the Clergy's Right to Rule in the Iranian Constitution of 1979." *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 20.1 (1993): 64-82. P.XX

> Khomeini argued that various Islamic *hadith*[23] established the jurists as the *vali-ye-amr* (guardian of affairs) who possessed the qualifications necessary to serve as deputies during the absence of the Hidden Imam. Khomeini defined the responsibilities of the *fuqaha*' (those learned in jurisprudence) not merely as encompassing judicial and spiritual authority, but also embracing 'absolute authority' over political, economic, and social matters.[24]

The doctrine of *velayat-e faqih* allowed Khomeini to serve as the guide of the community in the absence of the Twelfth Imam.[25] Under such a definition, the role of the Islamic Republic and its supporters is 'to prepare for the occult Imam's return' and the establishment of the global Islamic government.[26]

Maybe He Comes This Friday, Maybe[27]

Known as a populist president, Ahmadinejad entered the presidential election with slogans that targeted a wide range of the population from different social and economic backgrounds. On a youth-oriented TV show, he both criticized the restrictions on public appearance that were drawn from Islamic *shari'a* law and, amongst his older conservative comrades, promised the formation of a true Islamic government. In meetings with college students and intellectual elite, Ahmadinejad gave speeches on the necessity for a scientific method towards the management of the country. In his talks with religious audiences and former revolutionaries he spoke about the need to move towards the Islamic utopian ideals. However, above all, his campaign themes focused on the economy and social justice.

[23] A narrative record of the sayings or customs of Muhammad and his companions.
[24] Saffari, p. 65.
[25] The hidden shi'i Imam who is believed to be gone into occultation in A.D. 873
[26] Ahdiyyih P.28
[27] The title of a poem written for Imam Mahdi by Mohammad Reza Aqasi(1959-2005). Some shi'i texts note that Imam Mahdi will appear on a Friday.

Ahmadinejad represented a population that were politically marginalized. Seeking better opportunities, Ahmadinejad's family moved to Tehran from Garmsar, a village in north-central Iran, when he was an infant in the late 1950s.[28] The family resided in Nezam Abad, a poor neighborhood of primarily migrants.[29] Ahmadinejad's low-income background and his public image as a common simple man independent from and outside to existing power structures, garnered him a lot of support from the poor. Voting statistics from the 2005 election show that Ahmadinejad gained a higher number of votes in economically disadvantaged areas than his opponents. After he assumed power, in order to maintain the support of his political base, he continued his focus on lower-income classes.

In addition to his class affiliations, Ahmadinejad's lack of turban and his modern, rather than religious, education also placed him outside a power structure populated by clerics in the higher ranks. Nonetheless, Ahmadinejad, who was backed by the Supreme Leader and his propaganda machines, went through a consecration process. It was a process galvanized by fanciful and superstitious stories. With the support of some conservative circles in the holy city of Qom and some influential clerics, Ahmadinejad presented himself as the Imam Mahdi's chosen leader. After he was elected, his proponents regarded his victory as a result of the interference of a supernatural power. For example, Ayatollah Mohammad Taghi Mesbah Yazdi, a hardline cleric and a member of the Assembly of Experts at the time, stated that some phenomena are not intelligible through simple reasonings. He conjectured that Ahmadinejad's victory was not

[28] Habibi, Nader. *Economic Legacy of Mahmud Ahmadinejad*. Brandeis Univ., Department of Economics, 2014. p.1

[29] This neighborhood is significant to this study because it has become a hub for *maddahan* and has produced many prominent figures of the new wave of *nohe* singing. Unfortunately, I could not develop a class analysis because of the lack of data and access.

predictable.[30] *Partow Sokhan*, a weekly cultural, political, social, and economic journal published an article that quoted Ayatollah Yazdi,

> Last night a friend said: before the first round of election, I visited a cleric in the city of Ahwaz, and he told me: don't worry! Ahmadinejad will be elected. The cleric said that on the 23rd of the month of Ramadan he fell asleep and dreamt that someone calls and orders him to get up and pray for Ahmadinejad. He said at the time he had not even heard Ahmadinejad's name and did not know who he was.[31]

There were many instances of this nature from influential clerics suggesting that Ahmadinejad was protected and supported by the occluded Imam. Ahmadinejad himself claimed that his government worked under the guidance of the hidden Imam. After he took office, inspired by the Prophet Muhammad, he started writing letters to the world's political and religious leaders, inviting them to monotheism and the practice of religion. His letter to George W. Bush was praised by his supporters.[32] A fundamentalist cleric called the letter "a revelation from God" and requested the letter to be included in the curricula of schools and universities.[33] Ahmadinejad's decrees were received as holy commands, rendering their execution into a religious responsibility rather than a political one. He even selected some of his ministers based on their conviction in Mahdism.[34]

Some believed that Ahmadinejad used the Imam Mahdi to impress people and legitimize his power among the clergy, while others were convinced that his employment of the notion of

[30] "Mr. Ahmadinejad Is a God-Sent Treasure." *Tebyan News Institute*, 4 Mar. 2007, https://article.tebyan.net/34526/آقای-احمدی-نژاد-ذخیره-خداوند-برای-امروز-ماست. Accessed March 11, 2013
[31] "Ahmadinejad Is Blooming." *Asr-e Iran News Agency*, 7 Mar. 2007, https://www.asriran.com/fa/news/13313/الهاماحمدي-نژاد-در-حال-شكوفا-شدن-است. Accessed February 27, 2014
[32] "Transcription of Ahmadinejad's Letter to George W. Bush." *Fars News Agency*, 9 May 2006, https://www.farsnews.com/news/8502190630/-متن-كامل-نامه-احمدي‌نژاد-به-جورج-بوش- Accessed February 14, 2014
[33] "Ahmadinejad's Letter to Bush Should Be Tought in Schools." *Aftab News*, 12 May 2006, https://aftabnews.ir/fa/news/46235/نامه-احمدي-نژاد-در-مدارس-تدريس-شود., Accessed February 14, 2014.
[34] Rosulek. p.67

reappearance was to mask his economic blunders.[35] Regardless, an undisputable fact of his presidency is that he "challenged the supreme leader's authority by channeling the Hidden Imam."[36] The appearance of the Mahdi would signal the end of the Supreme Leader's authority. The historian Abbas Amanat recognizes the emergence of a *subversive* reading of messianism in its early stages in the course of Ahmadinejad's election. He recollects a memory of his visit to Iran in the summer of 2005.[37] He walked in to a *Husseinieh* at a time of Moharram ceremonies. He writes,

> Everything in the Husayniya seemed familiar in a typical Shi'i Moharram surrounding. But when I walked closer to the *nakhl*,[38] a small graffiti caught my attention on the base of the large structure, written with a felt pen and in a coarse hand. It read: "Yearning is our faith" (*entezar mazhab-i mast*). The message took me by surprise. As a student of messianic Shi'ism who for more than thirty years was engaged with its diverse expressions, this was an unexpected revelation. Some quarter of a century after the victory of the Islamic Revolution, and sixteen years after the death of its leader, Ayatollah Khomeini, the messianic imam of that revolution, here I was encountering an almost subversive messianic message of eternal yearning for the return of a savior, and of all places on the base of a

[35] Rosulek, p.69
[36] Ahdiyyih, M. (2008). Ahmadinejad and the Mahdi. *Middle East Quarterly*. 15(4).27-36. p.33
[37] Amanat, Abbas. *Apocalyptic Islam and Iranian* Shi'i*sm (Library of Modern Religion; 4)*. IB Tauris, 2009.
[38] Peter J. Chelkowsky explains, "The *nakhl* is an artistic representation of the improvised stretcher on which the body of Imam Hussein was carried from the place of his martyrdom to his tomb and is the direct antecedent of the Caribbean *tadja* as well. In English, *nakhl* is translated as "date palm." Many Shiites believe that Hussein's body was moved to the shade of a palm tree; hence his bier is called *nakhl*. However, it seems more plausible that his bier was fashioned from the only material available in the Karbala desert: palm tree branches. Over the years, this modest pallet evolved into an extravagantly decorated framework, which reached its culmination in the 19th century. For use in Ashura rites (the 10th day of Muharram), *nakhls* are built from wood in sizes that range from simple forms easily carried by two men to colossal structures three- stories-high supported by hundreds of people. This large wooden structure is carried in procession on the Day of Ashura in villages and towns along the Kavir and Lut deserts in Iran, the regions where the greatest number of *nakhls* and *nakhl*- related rituals are to be found. Most are seen in the Yazd district. In addition to its religious significance, a *nakhl* is a symbol of pride and social unity for a town, village, or district." Chelkowski, Peter J. "From the Sun-Scorched Desert of Iran to the Beaches of Trinidad: Taziyeh's Journey from Asia to the Caribbean." *TDR/The Drama Review* 49.4 (2005): 156-170. p.157.

symbolic edifice commemorating the "Lord of the Martyrs," whose tragic fall in the battle of Karbala virtually defined Shi'ism.[39]

On July 1, 2008, the banned newspaper *Etemad-e Melli* cited Ahmadinejad, writing that when the Supreme Leader rebuked Ahmadinejad for claiming that "the Lord of the Age will appear in two years." Ahmadinejad responded to him in the same tone: "[He] thinks he has appointed me while I am a president appointed by the Lord of the Age."[40] Ahmadinejad and his allies maneuvered to repurpose millenarianism to challenge the Supreme Leader's authority. Soon the traditional conservative party distanced itself from Ahmadinejad's camp (which they had named a "perverted camp") and flooded his administration with objections and disputes.

Ahmadinejad's popularization of Mahdism that continued after his presidency might not be a radical break from the tradition, but it entailed a major difference in principle: rather than insisting upon the impossibility of knowing when the Imam Mahdi would return, he claimed that the Imam Mahdi would appear at any given moment. After the regime seized the *subversive messianism* of Ahmadinejad's party, this seemingly small adjustment opened a new ideological possibility for the Islamic Republic and the Supreme Leader. After the end of Ahmadinejad's presidency, Mahdism has been at the center of the state's ideological strategy. However, instead of Ahmadinejad, the Supreme Leader became the representative of the Imam Mahdi. The same influential clerics that supported Ahmadinejad's claim to representing the Imam Mahdi started having dreams and revelations about the Supreme Leader as representative of the occluded Imam. The Ayatollah Khamenei had discovered a convenient means of resolving the crisis of legitimacy that plagued his time in power since Ayatollah Khomeini's death in 1989.

[39] Amanat, p. viii
[40] Ibid

As a high-ranking Shi'i scholar, Khomeini possessed a claim to divine right, which authorized him to issue verdicts with *fatwas*. But the *velayat-e faqih* gave him political power—the power of a ruler, not merely a leader. The position of *velayat-e faqih,* of the Supreme Leader, posed a challenge to the continuation of the Islamic Republic after Khomeini's death in 1989. The *velayat-e faqih* was a garb cut to fit only Khomeini's persona, with his charisma and credible religious expertise and political power. Khomeini had no succession plans. Khamenei lacked religious credentials, especially in the opinion of the senior clerics who were more eligible for the role.[41] Khamenei took on some tasks in the field of religion to consolidate his power. First, he took away the clerical establishment's economic independence by giving them governmental stipends and exclusive benefits, eventually turning them into state employees. This tactic not only incorporated the clerical establishment into the state structure, but also slimmed down the clergy's role as the exclusive "managers of the sacred affairs."[42] Second, Khamenei created his own religious apparatus by institutionalizing the mourning rituals and controlling their narratives. The mourning rituals became one of the main venues within which the doctrine of *Intizar* was propagated.

The Institutionalization and Regulation of Mourning

Up to the last decade, collective mourning was a ritualized spectacle that took place on specific days of the religious calendar. After the family, the neighborhood was the most important social institution and mourning rituals were the locus of the collective activity therein, especially during Moharram.[43] Each neighborhood had one or two *hey'ats* that would gather and carry out

[41] Khalaji, Politics and the clergy. P.3
[42] Ibid
[43] The most spectacular and engaging ritual taking place during the first ten days of the month of Moharram (the first month of the Islamic calendar) in commemoration of the martyrdom of the third Shi'i Imam, Imam Hussein (625-680) in the battle of Karbala. For ten days, every evening, mourners gather for the ritual in a *husseiniyeh* (named after Imam Hussein) or a *takīya,* temporary or permanent structures specifically made for Moharram mourning rituals

the yearly rituals during the month of Moharram. For ten days, people commemorated the tragic death of Imam Hussein, the third Shi'i imam. Neighborhoods competed with each other over the size of their *hey'ats,* the quality of *nohe* singers, and the gloriousness of their *alam* – a heavy metallic symbol decorated with feathers and cloth that strong young men carry in front of the *hey'at* when they took to the streets on Moharram nights. [figure 2]



Figure 2- alam, a heavy metal symbol – Photo by Meghdad Madadi published in Fars News

In the past decade, collective mourning venues have become a permanent part of Iranian social life in the cities. As of 2019, each neighborhood in Tehran has, on average, 35 *hey'at*s. The number of the registered *hey'at*s all over the country is around 92,000.[44] For every 880 Iranians there is one *hey'at*, with tens of thousands of active members that make up "the largest cultural and advertisement network in Shi'i world."[45] Accordingly, mourning rituals are not limited to religious events anymore and are hosted a few nights a week. In his 2011 book on the mourning rituals, Seyyed Hesam Mezahari argues that this new phenomenon is rooted in the Iran-Iraq War,

[44] "Participation of 92,000 Mourning Groups in Moharram Rituals."

[45] This number was 91,618 in 2017. Mir-Hadi, Khadijeh. *Mourning Groups, Most Valued Social Resources*. 13 Mar. 2018, http://ido.ir/post/867072. Accessed Sep 28, 2018.

when mourning ceremonies did not have to be limited to religious occasions.[46] In addition, the mourning rituals, which served as a vehicle for the Islamic Republic to propagate its ideology during the Iran-Iraq War, was repurposed again in 2005, at the end of the reformist era, for the state's policies and projects.

Ahmadinejad's administration not only supported previously established religious institutions, but also invested heavily into building new institutions. In the first government's budget proposal, mosques and *husseiniyehs*[47] were exempted from paying for water, electricity, gas and sewage. The number of mosques grew to an extent that the Head of Administration of mosques declared a shortage of clergy as the most crucial issue for mosques at the time.[48] The budget of *Sazeman-e Tablighat-e Islami* (Islamic Propaganda Organization) that supervises the *hey'ats* all over the country increased by 370 percent.[49] At the same time, other traditional forms of mourning rituals like *ta'zieh* passion plays suffered from a lack of governmental support, almost disappearing from Moharram rituals.[50] The trend of increasing the budget of religious institutions continued in later years.[51]

The Di'bil Foundation, was founded by the order of the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei to organize, support, and serve the Society of Worshippers of Ahl al-Bayt (the Prophet Mohammad and his successors) that includes *nohe* singers, poets, and writers.[52] The organization's website defines the Di'bil Foundation as a scientific, educational, and cultural institution to support

[46] Mazaheri, M.H. (2011) Shi'i *Media.* Sazman-e Tablighat-e Islami. Tehran. P. 214-215
[47] *Husseiniyeh* is a temporary or permanent structure building specifically made for mourning rituals.
[48] "30,000 Mosque Withough an Imam." *Hamshahri News Agency*, 29 Aug. 2016, https://www.hamshahrionline.ir/news/344789/هزار-مسجد-کشور-امام-جماعت-ندارد-جدول-اظهارنظر-مسئولان-۳۰. Accessed Oct 10, 2017.
[49] "A Sharp Increase in the Funding of Religious Institutions under Ahmadinejad." *Deutsche Welle Persian*, 06 2009, https://p.dw.com/p/IVl9. Accessed July 10, 2018.
[50] "Even the Destruction of Tekyeh Dolat, Did Not Stop Ta'ziyeh." *Mehr News Agency*, 11 2013, mehrnews.com/news/2173269. Accessed September 4, 2018.
[51] http://www.mardomsalari.com/template1/News.aspx?NID=70848 Accessed August 17, 2018.
[52] "About Us." *Deable News*, http://www.deabelnews.ir/vsda%5eln1lkt47,1.k5hk4.html. Accessed August 19, 2018

and serve the Society of Worshippers. In addition to managing and organizing the singers and the related body, the organization has a disciplinary mission that consists of "constant observation and analysis of the Society of Worshipers," and "[i]dentifying and inspecting the activities of real and legal persons in the field, their social capital and their communication network, and the role they play in the field of praise."[53] Moreover, it surveys cultural trends and study the content to "understand and define discursive elements," organizes conferences and workshops, dispatches singers, offers training and coach training courses, runs a news website, and gives annual awards. However, Di'bil's ultimate goal is "to fulfil the Supreme Leader's demands,"[54] and strengthen the relationship between "the Imam [the Supreme Leader] and the *umma*, [the Islamic community]."[55]

The Di'bil's goals and missions are based on the Supreme Leader's guidelines. [56] In 2012, the Di'bil Foundation published a collection of Khamenei's guidelines titled *The Decree of Worshipping* directed at Ahl al-Bayt singers and eulogists.[57] The book consists of five chapters. In its first chapter, "The Position of the Worshipper," the Foundation described the honorable position of *maddahan* (*nohe* singers*)* and likens their positions to that of missionaries and clerics. The next three chapters are focused on ethics and conceptualize *nohe* singing as an artform. The Di'bil Foundation uses the last chapter as the backbone of some of its activities, since it clearly states what can and cannot take place in the ceremonies. [58]

[53] Ibid
[54] "Close to 2,000 Maddah Recieved Health Insurance through Di'bil Foundation." *Mehr News Agency*, 18 2016, mehrnews.com/news/3716973. Accessed Sep 18th, 2018.
[55] Mir-Hadi, Khadijeh. *Mourning Groups, the Most Valued Social Resources*. 13 Mar. 2018. In an interview published on Sazman-e Tablighat-e Islami (Islamic Propaganda Organization) website, the organization's head of National Religious and Cultural Institutions stated that one of their main objectives is to guide *hey'ats* in a direction that their outcome is strengthening the relationship between the Supreme Leader and the people.
[56] "About Us." *Deable News*, http://www.deabelnews.ir/vsda%5eln1lkt47,1.k5hk4.html. Accessed Sep. 18, 2018
[57] "With Support of Di'bil Institute, the Book of Maddahi Got Written." *Iran's Book News Agency*, 17 Jan. 2012, http://www.ibna.ir/fa/doc/naghli/127460/منشور-ستایشگری-نوشته. Accessed September 19, 2018
[58] ibid

The Di'bil Foundation supports and serves the Society of Worshippers by providing social services such as medical insurance, life insurance, pensions, loans, and retirement to worshippers and their households. The organization has provincial branches in every state, with 12,000 registered members to-date, providing services for five thousand families.[59] In fact, Di'bil is what the sociologist Kevan Harris describes as a "parallel welfare institution," a kind of institution that the Islamic Republic has relied upon since its inception to manage society which the Islamic Republic has.[60] Harris argues that the turmoil between social and political forces in the aftermath of the 1979 Revolution resulted in a set of parallel organizations that overlapped with state activities, including welfare.[61] Rather than bringing these parallel welfare organizations together, the Islamic Republic created new organizations and redefined the activities of existing ones.[62] The parallel welfare institutions have helped preserve the state's authority. They have done so by directly targeting economically-marginalized populations to organize and channel the power within social activities that potentially could undermine the authorities and their power resources.[63]

During and after Iran-Iraq War, the rate and pace of migration from villages to cities created a new and fast-growing social stratum that resided in the outskirts of major urban centers, especially Tehran.[64] Migrants who had escaped unemployment and poverty in villages with the hope of finding jobs in cities became some of the most marginalized and disenfranchised citizens. Forty years after the revolution, this group constitutes 25 percent of Iran's population. Rapid demographic shifts unsettled the fabric of traditional rural communities. Mourning rituals and *hey'ats* became a space that enabled the emergence of new identities and alternative communities

[59] Ibid, accessed website on August 30, 2018
[60] Harris, Kevan. *A social revolution: politics and the welfare state in Iran*. University of California Press, 2017.
[61] Ibid, p.18
[62] Ibid. p.82
[63] Ibid, p.91
[64] Bayat, A. (1997) *Street politics: poor people's movements in Iran*. Columbia University Press. pp. 76-98.

amongst the growing multi-ethnic population of rural migrants. However, historically, people have used mourning rituals to undermine the power structures. In fact, Islamists and clerics benefited from the political opportunities and network that mourning rituals provided in the anti-shah movement that led to the 1979 revolution. Moreover, in the space of the rituals class and ethnic lines can lose their significance. In turn, collective identities can form within mourning groups, uniting individuals who otherwise would not identify with one another. Altogether, the social power of the mourning groups gives the local community visibility and political power in a broader public domain. Since mourning rituals are sites of meaning-making and identity-formation, the Islamic Republic is incentivized to manage them as it has done with the Di'bil Foundation.

In their traditional setting, mourning groups give communities the possibility of granting deserving members local power and influence. They create opportunities for individuals to access social power and status within the community and outside conventional systems of power. In contrast, Di'bil, similar to other parallel organizations, became a vehicle for the rapid promotion of select individuals within the political structure.[65] As noted above, the Di'bil Organization has a number of subsidiaries that provide job opportunities for select members. Moreover, by actively participating in state-sanctioned mourning groups, individuals find opportunities to access influential figures in the community.

Religious Hey'ats Council, another parallel institution was founded in 2007 to monitor mourning ceremonies and to prevent innovation and superstition.[66] By 2016, the Hey'ats Council became an extensive governing nexus between mourning groups and the state with 404 branches all over the country and 3,161 elected members.[67] On the whole, by inventing a surplus of parallel

[65] Harris, p.89
[66] "Moharram Mourning Banned After Midnight." *Radio Farda*, https://www.radiofarda.com/a/f2_limitation_Ashura/373344.html. Accessed June 11, 2019.
[67] http://ido.ir/post/825320/شورای-هیئات-مذهبی-در-یک-نگاه Accessed August 23, 2019.

institutions and funding them, the state allocated national resources to a small portion of the population, mainly men, that in return perpetuated state power. Arzi, his students, and their hey'ats were amongst that small population that enjoyed financial support from the state.[68]

Erotic and Enthusiastic

You look at me

and I look at you,

Are you tired of me?

Have I disappointed you?[69]

In the Summer of 2016, I met Ahmad in a small corner shop of an old bazaar in Tehran. He was a knowledgeable and eloquent twenty-seven-year-old man who was a staunch Shi'i believer. Ahmad was a manager of a small mourning group and took part in mourning sessions regularly several nights a week. We met a few times and discussed at length the mourning rituals as well as religion, politics, and Mahdism. Ahmad was a son of a low-ranking cleric who moved to Tehran for job opportunities when Ahmad was very young. Ahmad was deeply involved with the rituals because the rituals kept him in line with his religious duties and piety. He believed that when the world is destroyed with sin and tyranny, Imam Mahdi will appear in Mecca and wait for 313 special and exceptional men to join him from all over the world. These men will disappear overnight or will fly to the Imam Mahdi on the clouds to help him wipe the earth of Islam's enemies, bring justice to the world, and establish a global state. Afterwards, the Imam Mahdi will divide the world into 313 states and provinces and appoint each man to one of these state as its leader and ruler. Ahmad's goal was to be one of the 313 chosen ones. Ahmad prayed more than required every morning in dedication to the reappearance of Imam Mahdi. Ahmad did not care

[68] https://fa.euronews.com/2016/10/09/iran-eulogies-business Accessed 3 September 2019
[69] http://babolharam.mihanblog.com/post/category/58

about the heaven that *nohe* singers of the war era advertised. He desired power, fantasizing about being a king. He said, "My main principle in life is to stay away from all sins so Imam Mahdi would advent sooner than later." The rituals reminded him of his ultimate goal and helped him to stay away from "sin." In their *hey'at,* they discussed Mahdism every week. Additionally, in the *hey'at,* he practiced his leadership skills in preparation for that day. He even treated the interview as a missionary moment.

The Islamic Republic has struggled to keep new generations interested and engaged in its policies and projects. Moreover, in the course of Iran's conflict with the Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK) from 2004 to 2013, the Iraq civil war from 2014 to 2017, and the ongoing war in Syria that began in 2011, the Islamic Republic has had to cultivate loyal youth for its military operations and political objectives. How could an Islamic state, with all its religious restrictions, compete with video games, virtual reality, social media, and loads of incoming media content? What can the state offer to these young men, to draw them into a mourning ceremony for a long dead Imam on weekly bases?

With the objective of "attracting the youth" and "bringing them to the ceremonies,"[70] Arzi and his troop utilized the power of eroticism and framed the ritual as "enthusiastic." To understand how the Enthusiastic Maddahi utilizes erotics in shi'i rituals to create a specific kind of political subjects, we need to go beyond theoretical frameworks that limit the erotic to an individual's sexuality. The eroticism of the Enthusiastic Maddahi is both collective and social and although mourning bare-chested is an important component of the practice, it is not necessarily sextual. Purnima Mankekar provides a heuristic approach to erotics that facilities understanding the

[70] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B89GY3oYL8A. Arazi argues that all forms of maddahi is good but it should be improved (min 5) In answering to the payments that maddahan ask for: he calls them all false accusations while his own son in law admits that he received great. He attacks enemy (Bahaiyat) for these accusations who have been accusing in the past 40 years. (min 6)

political dynamics of eroticism in Enthusiastic Maddahi. In a substantial study of the cultural significance of "erotics" in media and popular culture, Purnima Mankekar (2012) offers a constructive definition of "erotics." She defines erotics as "sexualized longings and pleasures constructed at the intersection of the psychic and the structural."[71] She rejects the limited understanding of the erotic as a private matter, "outside the domain of the socius," and argues that erotics extend beyond sextual acts.[72] Highly charged and socially consequential, erotics are the product of "fantasy, everyday practices, social relationships, and political institutions."[73] Enthusiastic Maddahi erotic is molded at the nexus of desire, homosociality, and the order and stability of the state. Mankekar points out that the covert and clandestine tendency of erotics often makes language and discourse inadequate tools for its interpretation.[74] Erotics are expressed differently in different contexts and present themselves in the elements that compose them, two of which are fantasy and desire.[75]

Ahmad's brief memory of his participation in an Enthusiastic Maddahi ceremony encapsulates the fantasy and desire that shape the erotic. I solicited Ahmad's opinion about Enthusiastic Maddahi. At first, he rebuked the practice for its shallowness and un-Islamic music. Later, he admitted that he had attended "those kinds of sessions" a few times with his friends. He shared with me only one short memory. He said:

> I was mourning (sineh-zani chest beating) in a session and I touched a man [accidentally when moving arms] who was mourning as well, I patted his shoulder and apologized right away [but he didn't acknowledge], again after the session ended, I repeated my apology.

[71] Mankekar, Purnima. "Dangerous Desires: Erotics, Public Culture, and Identity in Late Twentieth-Century India." *Media, Erotics, and Transnational Asia* (2012): 173-202.
[72] Ibid, p.185.
[73] Mankekar, Purnima, and Louisa Schein. "Introduction: Mediated transnationalism and social erotics." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 63.2 (2004): 357-365. p.358
[74] Mankekar (2012), p.185
[75] Ibid.

> He had not even noticed, he was not there [transcended his body], he had not even noticed that he was touched, ….so drawn to the love of the Imam, these are the people "we" are looking for, Imam Zaman [Mahdi] is looking for people like him.

The Doctrine of *Intizar*, sets the plot of the erotic in the future. Living in an atmosphere of Impending Armageddon, a state of emergency, Ahmad is longing the reappearance of Mahdi, fantasizing about a glorious future that he will lead a perfect world with his chosen brothers. Ahmad prayed more than required every morning in dedication to the reappearance of Imam Mahdi. The eroticism of Enthusiastic Maddahi is crafted by the fantasy of a utopia that will arrive when Ahmad and his chosen comrades, 312 other men, lead a perfect world.

Enthusiastic Maddahi, participants do not mourn. Rather they suffer "the sorrow of being separated from him [Imam Mahdi]" and "longing for his return." Phrases such as, "tell me how to carry the burden of missing you," "oh, please come to my dream, just once," "please forgive me for hurting you," "I wish I was your guest these nights," are countless in Enthusiastic Maddahi. Sounding more like poorly written love letters between teenagers, hundreds of bare-chested men cluttered together mourn to these songs.

René Girard argues that in modern West, the subject desires the object through an imitation of a model that he calls "the mediator of desire," whose presence evokes and intensifies desire.[76] In other words, the desirer will desire any object as long as "he is convinced that it is already desired by another person whom he admires."[77] So, desire is not aroused upon the coupling of the subject with the object of desire, but instead operates as a triangle. Girard calls this relationship the triangle of desire. Desires that are produced in Enthusiastic Maddahi become popularized

[76] Girard, R. (1965). Deceit, desire, and the novel. *The Novel: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory 1900–2000*, 294-314. P.2
[77] Ibid. p.7

through imitating the desire of others expressed by the *nohe* singer. In other words, *maddah* and all other mourning men become 'the mediator of desire.' The relationship of the desiring subject and the mediator of desire is determined firstly by the accessibility and inaccessibility (unworldly) of the object, and secondly, by whether they are socially in a position to compete over the accessible object. Girard argues that the subject's "impulse toward the object is ultimately an impulse toward the mediator."[78] Eventually, this identification erases differences and creates similarities and a homosocial bond.[79]

Ahmad's comment when he said "these are the people 'we' are looking for, Imam Zaman [Mahdi] is looking for people like him," suggests that in that intense moment during the Enthusiastic Maddahi session when emotions were expressed freely, he created a bond with the man he had touched. The bond is created by way of their identical desire for the Imam Mahdi, even if the man he touched did not acknowledge him. In his fantasy, he is amongst the chosen ones when he becomes one with the Imam,"…these are the people 'we' are looking for." Ahmad's identity, his daily routine, his future, his relationships are all based on a homoerotic fantasy, "constructed at the intersection of the psychic and the structural" by "fantasy, everyday practices, social relationships, and political institutions."[80]

Take Your Shirt off or Get out of Here![81]

Homoeroticism in Enthusiastic Maddahi is overt but unspoken. The erotic mood of 'enthusiastic' mourning is created through music by setting, using red light in a dark place, diction,

[78] P.10
[79] Ibid.
[80] Mankekar, Purnima, and Louisa Schein. "Introduction: Mediated transnationalism and social erotics." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 63.2 (2004): 357-365. P.XX
[81] In the Ashura of 2008, Mahmood Karimi, one of the leaders of Enthusiastic Maddahi, in a mourning session asked the men who are not willing to take their shirt off, leave the ceremony.
https://iranianuk.com/20080503111200019/محمود-کریمی-برای-سینه-زنی-لخت-شوید-وگرنه-گمشید/ Accessed September 16, 2019

and the mourner's partial nudity. Enthusiastic Maddahi replaced the traditional narrations of mourning rituals that told the stories of the Shi'i Imams and their bravery, sacrifice, resistance, and martyrdom against corrupt leadership, with songs containing suggestive sexual language mainly praising the Imam Mahdi.

The practice of mourning bare-chested that is mandatory in some *hey'ats* provoked an ongoing political and cultural tension. However, despite the Western character of Enthusiastic Maddahi music and its striking departure from tradition, the traditional clerics and *nohe* singers mainly found fault with the mourners' nudity as they perceived bare-chested mourning a deviation from religion and tradition.[82] Officials in the positions of power were also divided over the issue. For example, in 2010, by the order of parliament, The National Center of Mosque Affairs banned mourners from taking their clothes off in mosques, considering it disrespectful to the Imams and the religion.[83] The policy was contested in harsh words by Arzi and his students and fans. [84] One of the *ulama* wrote a statement against the new law saying that mourners should be free to express themselves in any way they see fit.[85] Although the practice remained banned in the mosques, it has continued in other venues, drawing many young male mourners away from the mosques. The director of the Department of Cultural and Social Affairs of the Mosques stated that the popularity of *hey'ats* should not be at the expense of the mosques and that mosques should be at the center of Moharram rituals. [86] To push back against the religious figures who opposed mourning bare-chested on grounds that it was non-Islamic, state-run news outlets published a religious inquiry from a select number of *ulama* friendly to the state in addition to the Supreme Leader.[87] They all

[82] Fayyaz and Rahmani, p.68
[83] "The Prohibition of Qame-Zani and Mourning Barechested." *Shia News*, 13 2010, https://www.shia-news.com/fa/news/19400/ممنوعیت-قمه-زنی-و-سینه-زنی-بدون-لباس-در-مساجد. Accessed July 29, 2018.
[84] khabaronline.ir/news/109080 Accessed July 29, 2018.
[85] http://sedayeshi'i.com/showdata.aspx?dataid=5708&siteid= Accessed August 7, 2018.
[86] http://shabestan.ir/detail/News/726159 Accessed September 5, 2018.
[87] The persian term is Berahneh برهنه, which literally means naked.

issued a *fat'wa* in favor of the practice, drawing on Islamic teachings that concluded that nudity was harmless.[88] The ruling is significant in light of the Islamic Republic's record of controlling how men ought to appear in public – a record that has been overshadowed by its aggressive efforts to force women to wear the *hijab*. While women in Iran are the primary representatives of religiosity in Iran, men also are obliged to represent "Islamic-Iranian culture," a coded formulation for anything is not Western.

The Islamic Republic has systematically policed and punished men, as part of a campaign against Western cultural invasion. While the law concerning the *hijab* is clearly defined, laws concerning men are arbitrary. For example, in 2011, the moral police warned men who wore necklaces to take them off.[89] In 2018, the municipal government of Qazvin informed taxi services that their drivers were forbidden from wearing short sleeves.[90] Even homosocial spaces did not evade restrictions. The state required that the athletes of gymnasiums named *zurkhanas* who traditionally practice shirtless to wear t-shirts, notwithstanding a conventional understanding in



Figure 3- A scene of Nasser Taghvai Documentary, Arba'in.

[88] https://www.yjc.ir/00QF6y Accessed 25 August 2018
[89] https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/jun/14/necklace-ban-men-tehran-police. Accessed July 26, 2018.
[90] https://www.jamaran.ir/fa/tiny/news-966580 Accessed August 3, 2018.

those spaces that covering the upper body is unethical.[91] Houchang Chehabi argues that in the absence of women, such impositions can only be ascribed to anxiety about homoeroticism.[92]

In fact, mourning bare-chested is not an unprecedented practice. In Southern Iranian beach cities like Bushehr, the warm humid weather, in addition to the sailing culture, has affected men's attire. In his famous 1970 short documentary, Arba'in, Nasser Taghvai depicts a mourning ceremony in Bushehr in which men performed bare-chested. However, they all stand mourn and move orderly with a gap between them. [see Figure 3]

The uncommon in Enthusiastic Maddahi is the erotic representation of the mourners' bodies in closed spaces. I argue that the tension over mourners' nudity is rooted in the long history of same-sex relationships and homoerotic love and desire. A history that went hiding during the modernization era in early 20th century.[93]

"In Iran, we don't have homosexuals"

In September 2007, during a question and answer period with Mahmoud Ahmadinejad following a lecture he delivered at Columbia University, a student asked him about the treatment of homosexuals in Iran. In response, he stated: "In Iran, we don't have homosexuals. We don't have this phenomenon. I don't know who has told you we have it."[94] Ahmadinejad's statement was met by harsh criticism as the denial of human rights and in the light of the state punitive and puritanical policies. This reductionist interpretation of Ahmadinejad's comment fails to understand the Middle East outside of radical Islamism. Attention to history will help clarify the Islamic Republic's relationship to gender and sexuality.

[91] Chehabi, H.E. "GENDER ANXIETIES IN THE IRANIAN ZŪRKHĀNAH." *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, vol. 51, no. 3, 2019, pp. 395–421, pp 408-409
[92] Ibid, p.409
[93] Najmabadi, 2005
[94] Whitaker, Brian. "'No Homosexuality Here.'" *The Guardian*, 25 Sept. 2007, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2007/sep/25/nohomosexualityhere. Accessed February 21, 2019

In her study of the history of sexuality and marriage in Iran, Janet Afary demonstrates that same-sex relationships were implicitly recognized cultural practices in the Mediterranean and Muslim world despite explicit decrees forbidding them.[95] In the mid-nineteenth century, sexual and gender dynamics began to change. Afsaneh Najmabadi argues that in that period Iranians responded to the scrutinizing gaze of Europeans, who perceived homoeroticism and same-sex practices as backwards and perhaps unmanly.[96] Homoerotic desire was concealed and the "heteronormalization of eros and sex" became scripted as a condition of "achieving modernity."[97] Najmabadi argues that heteronormativity is a cultural product of modernization processes that "has screened out other nineteenth-century gender positionalities and has ignored the interrelated transfigurations of sexuality in the same period."[98] Najmabadi writes that denying homosexuality to sterilize homosociality has been a cultural project continuing into the present.[99]

If we consider Ahmadinejad's comments in light of the history of erasure delineated above, his denial of same-sex relationships in Iran is firmly in line with the longer history of modernization and attendant anxieties about Iran's place in the civilized world. He followed that comment by praising women, their beauty, and their high stature in society, implying that Iranians preferred heterosexual relations over homosexual ones. He said, "This is our culture and we are proud of it."[100] He also insisted that "homosexuality was a result of a faulty society that needs its education and social mores re-evaluated."[101] In another point he turned the table and said, "I think the politicians who are after atomic bombs, politically, they're backwards. Retarded."[102]

[95] Afary P.79
[96] NajmAbadi, p.3-4
[97] Ibid
[98] NajmAbadi, p.3-4
[99] Ibid, p.38.
[100] https://youtu.be/RUE0tukdr4c accessed 3 August 2019
[101] Ibid
[102] https://www.nytimes.com/2007/09/25/world/middleeast/25iran.html, accessed 3 August 2019

Ahmadinejad's comments suggest that the anxieties over Europeans' gaze that as Najmabadi argued, marked Iranians backward for their sexual practices, is still very much alive. A concern that the young mourners doesn't seem to have.

Private vs Public

More than anything else, the history of modernization and the enforcement of heteronormativity in Iran has been a project of 'reshaping the visual field.'[103] In a study of the relationship between visuality, power, domination, and control, Gil Hochberg argues, "How much one can see, what one can see, and in what way one can see or be seen are all outcomes of specific visual arrangements that are created and sustained through particular configurations of space and various processes of differentiations along national, ethnic, racial, religious, gender, and sexual lines."[104] Concealment and Surveillance are two of the organizing principles that shape the visual arrangement.[105] Concealment and surveillance have been the operative strategies in efforts to modernize Iran.

Starting in the late 19tth century, the male as the object of desire disappeared from the Qajar paintings.[106] In turn, paintings depicted bare-breasted women, visually producing the gender binary.[107] Later, in 1928, Reza Shah ordered all urban-dwelling men, except for clerics, to replace their traditional attire, including their hats with European-style clothing.[108] In 1936, Reza Shah banned urban-dwelling women from donning the veil, naming the project 'Women's Awakening.' Women were surveilled, prosecuted, and punished for five years. The swift unveiling directed the

[103] Hochberg, Gil Z. *Visual Occupations: Violence and Visibility in a Conflict Zone*. Duke University Press, 2015. P.7.
[104] Hochberg, p.7
[105] Ibid
[106] Najmabadi, p.26.
[107] Ibid, p.39.
[108] Afary, p. 156

public gaze to women's body.[109] After the 1979 Revolution, the state made veiling mandatory for women. The *hijab* became a symbol of the Islamic Revolution and a marker of its identity.[110] The necktie was also banned since it was ostensibly a symptom of imperialism and Western Culture. State officials punished men for wearing it. Men's hair styles and hairstylists were continuously surveilled, and some models were banned to "resist manifestations of Western culture." [Figure.3] The regulation and controlling of the visuals of the public space by different regimes, have been consistently structured around two main elements: heteronormativity and the western gaze. However, to some extent and in secrecy same-sex desire and love continued its way of life.[111]



Figure 3-Unveiling five approved Iranian men's hairstyles at the Honor and Hijab Conference,Mehr News Agency, June 2010.

The visual field that internationally broadcasted heteronormativity by punitive approaches towards sexuality, concealed homosexual relationships at home. Najmabadi argues that in the late 19th century, representations of same-sex desire were erased from the public sphere by way of the two-fold negation of "denial and disavowal," both of which were the "conditions of possibility and reproducibility" of same-sex relationships."[112] In other words, the negation of same-sex desire "set in motion two seemingly contradictory, yet in fact enabling, dynamics. It marked homosociality

[109] Ibid.
[110] Hassan, Riaz. *Attitudes toward veiling and patriarchy in four Muslim societies: an exploratory study*. GE von Grunebaum Center for Near Eastern Studies, University of California, 2000.P.19
[111] Personal experience and observations
[112] Najmabadi.p.38

as devoid of sexuality, thus making homosexuality "homeless," endangered because denied. At the same time, by insisting on that exclusion, it provided homosexuality a homosocial home for masquerade."[113] The lengthy cultural project of sterilizing homosociality by denying homosexuality, allowed the Islamic Republic to bring back homoeroticism to public spaces while enabled the Enthusiastic Maddahi mourners to keep the masculinity intact.[114]

One of the contributing factors that laid the groundwork for the emergence of a public homoerotic space in Enthusiastic Maddahi, was the state long tenacious regulation of public and policing practices that were applied on the citizen's bodies, especially women, through hijab and sex-segregation. Though the Islamic Republic's enforcement of the compulsory veil and gender segregation seem like familiar tropes continuous with modernizing efforts in the late nineteenth hand early twentieth century, they had a fundamental difference. Both Afary and Najmabadi have separately observed that gender during the period of modernization, extending from the mid-eighteenth to mid-twentieth century, was not immediately associated with love, beauty, and sexuality.[115] In the pre-modern era, the gender segregation and practices of veiling were not shaped by sexuality. They were rather inscribed across gendered difference between men and women. Those differences mapped across public and private domains. Islamic Republic redrew the lines based on sexuality, transforming sex-segregation to sextual-partitioning. Such reconfiguration with the aid of Hijab law gave the state [an all other men] unlimited access to the citizen's body for discipline and punish.

[113] Ibid
[114] Ibid
[115] Afary p.86 & Najmabadi.p 17.

Although hijab mainly targeted women, the article under which hijab is criminalized is not gendered. Categorized under "Crimes against public virtue and morality," Article 638 of penal law states,

> Anyone who commits a *harām* (sinful) act in public, in addition to the punishment reserved for that specific act, shall be sentenced to two months' imprisonment or up to 74 lashes; and if they commit an act that no punish is ascribed to, yet disturbs the public virtue, they shall only be sentenced to ten days to two months' imprisonment or up to 74 lashes.

The law regarding the hijab was included as an amendment four years after 1979 Revolution in 1982 to Article 638: "Women, who appear in public without wearing an Islamic *hijab*, shall be sentenced to ten days to two months' imprisonment or a fine of 50 to 500 thousand Rials." The amendment presents the enforcement of the hijab a strictly Islamic matter insofar as it is described as *haram*, as a sinful act. There are no other laws in regard to the covering of the body. Moreover, except for women's hijab, law does not explicate or define what constitutes the *haram* act. The ambiguity of the law in defining the *haram* act made the citizens vulnerable to the state's selective policies and opened a window of opportunity under which the state can punish its citizens.[116]

Sextual-partitioning formed only on heterosexual desire. Gender and sexuality that over a hundred years ago were irrelevant unlinked categories now were chained together. The philosophy of women's covering as an Islamic practice, changed to preventing men from committing sin as they might be aroused by seeing a woman's hair. Now only women had to cover themselves so men would not fall into the sin, the Islamic Republic, to protect women from sin, limited their access to the public places that men did not have adequate covering. For instance, one of the most

[116] Kar, Mehrangiz. "The invasion of the private sphere in Iran." *Social Research: An International Quarterly* 70.3 (2003): 829-836. p.834

visible sites of struggle and tension in the past two decades was created in relation to women's presence in soccer stadiums.[117] Women were banned from attending men's soccer matches in the immediate aftermath of the 1979 Revolution, a ban that was slowly extended to other sports.[118] The reason specified for women's ban from the stadiums is that the male athletes clothing and their partial nakedness might possibility get women sexually aroused.[119] The policies are mostly preposterous; women can watch male athletes on screens (even wrestling), the same games that they are not allowed to watch live in person in stadiums. The seemingly paradoxical religious laws about covering the body suggest that the Islamic Republic, not Islam, is more concerned with the politics of covering rather than its religious aspect.

Afary argues that in the early-20th century when Iran was going through modernization, new political discourses emerged around modern gender ideologies, one of which was a conservative religious discourse that strongly opposed Western modernity and saw it as a threat to the social and political establishments. Contemporary Islamist discourse in Iran is rooted in this standpoint.[120] Afary explains, "Implicit in all of these discourses was the fact that redrawing the boundaries between the public and private arenas also disturbed the (male) homosocial environment and its semi-clandestine sexual norms."[121] Therefore some of the opposition to unveiling was not concerned with safeguarding the honor of women but to preserve the privileges

[117] A young woman put herself on fire to protest the law. Taqizadeh, Faren. "Why Did 'Blue Girl' Burn Herself?" *BBC Persian*, 10 Sept. 2019, https://www.bbc.com/persian/iran-49647341. Accesssed Dec 11, 2019.
[118] They have even disguised themselves as men to avoid these discriminatory restrictions. Over the past few years, Iranian women and rights organizations have also tried to reverse the policy through direct appeals to FIFA and the international volleyball federation (FIVB).Women have campaigned and lobbied parliament until finally in June 2018 with FIFA's pressure and threat women were allowed to enter the landmark stadium of Azadi to watch a live screening of the last two games of Iran's national football team at the 2018 World Cup. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2018/06/20/for-the-first-time-since-1980-iranian-women-allowed-to-watch-world-cup-in-same-stadium-as-men/?utm_term=.7518db959335
[119] (Grand Ayatollah Naser Makarem Shirazi https://makarem.ir/main.aspx?typeinfo=21&lid=0&mid=250249),
[120] Afary, p. 112
[121] Ibid, pp 110-112.

of men in homosocial spaces.[122] Hijab laws and women's persecution on the bases of heterosexuality and male gaze, created political and ideological devices through which the state controlled women's body in public spaces and at the same time, maintained its modern image; women were not limited to *andaruni* (inner, private space) anymore, but the state could remove them from *biruni* (outer, public space) at any moment.

The everyday scenes of women's struggles with the Morality Police in the streets of the cities became a common sight in the cities.[123] In the past four decades, the Islamic Republic has punished women with the pretext of preserving men's faith. Men mostly, stood as bystanders and watched women's struggle. Women's oppression in public spaces benefited men in two ways. First, women's limitations provided men with more political and economic opportunities. Second, punishing women confirmed men's heterosexuality by acknowledging and validating their heterosexual desire. Another tool for the validation of Iranian men heterosextuality/manhood was the execution of "gays."

In his 2002 article titled *Re-orienting desire: The gay international and the Arab world*,[124] Joseph Massad studied the political dynamics of homosexuality in a global context, arguing that, with the rise of gay movement in the late 20th century that was enabled by human rights discourse, another missionary-like project started to further the colonial agenda by universalizing the concept of "gay rights."[125] Massad states:

[122] Ibid.
[123] On June 16, 2008 *Reuters* reports, "The authorities usually launch crackdowns before the hot summer months…But enforcement of strict moral codes governing women's dress became stricter since President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad swept to power in 2005 with the backing of conservative clerics and the Basij religious forces who condemn such "un-Islamic" practices." The Violators "can receive lashes, fines or imprisonment."

[124] Massad, Joseph Andoni. "Re-orienting desire: The gay international and the Arab world." *Public Culture* 14.2 (2002): 361-385.
[125] Massad.p.362.

> The discourse of the Gay International that both produces homosexuals, as well as gays and lesbians, where they do not exist, and represses same-sex desires and practices that refuse to be assimilated into its sexual epistemology….the Gay International sets itself the mission of defending them [homosexuals] by demanding that their rights as "homosexuals" be granted where they are denied and be respected where they are violated. In doing so, however, the Gay International produces an effect that is less than liberatory.[126]

As explained, the Islamic Republic has punished men for their Western appearance to control the field of visuality. In addition, the execution and prosecution of young urban gay men is a mean to control the field of visuality. At the same time the state has ignored same-sex relations in religious seminaries and bazaars.[127] The state execution and erasure of homosexuals who publicly identify as 'gay', sustain the heteronormative image of the state. The Islamic Republic politics on gender and sexuality allows young men who participate in Enthusiastic Maddahi to safely channel their homosexual desires while their masculinity remains intact. Afary writes:

> …in matters of sexuality (both heterosexual and homosexual), the Islamist state rejected many modern gender constructs but endured and often encouraged other, premodern ones. Polygamy, temporary marriage, and covert homosexuality – that is, hierarchical social relations where one partner is subservient to the other – were allowed and, in the first two cases, promoted, while more egalitarian heterosexual or homosexual relations (feminist and gay/lesbian rights) were pushed back.[128]

However, the Islamic Republic, which was from its outset and continues to be puritanical, could only revitalize and affirm homosocial eroticism in public life by denying and disavowing male

[126] Ibid, p .363
[127] Afary 14
[128] Afary, p.290.

same-sex desire and more generally, by rendering the homoerotic gaze invisible, and by policing sexuality on heteronormative grounds.

Conclusion

Historically, same-sex relations and desires have survived the heterosexual virtue of the Abrahamic religion of Islam. Najmabadi writes,

> In the sociocultural world of the Qajars, despite theological condemnations and punitive actions aimed against same-sex practices, in particular against sodomy (liwat), the domain of paradisiacal pleasure was populated by the *ghilman* and the hur, and male love was focused on the beloved male. Ideas of beauty were ungendered. Within this cultural world, certain same-sex practices occurred in daily life, in spite of the edicts of kings and the clergy to the contrary." This history shows us that this is culture resisting the western structure of nation.[129]

Likewise, same-sex desires have continued to be expressed through various mediums in different venues: in television shows, in mourning rituals, in paintings, and so on. Using sexuality, as a lens unfolds not only the ways in which sexuality informs politics but how politics shape and invoke sexual desire in order to control and discipline.

As I argued in the Chapter One, homosocial bonds in war fronts were created in relation to abstract concepts such as death and martyrdom. The new generation of believers' bond over desire and eroticism. Homoeroticism attracts the new generation of Iranian men that are exposed to the world of possibilities through the internet. It brings them to mourning sessions and groups and creates a venue for the Supreme Leader to communicate with a large body of young men through his agents, *maddahan*. The legitimacy of homoeroticism that is generated in Enthusiastic Maddahi

[129] Najmabadi, p.25.

under the flag of Shi'ism has been constructed from the state's oppressive gender politics and the persecution of sexuality. However, despite the Enthusiastic Maddahi conspiration with the state propaganda, the practice can be counterhegemonic as it subverts the heteronormativity.

Once a structure of symbols and now spaces of entertainment (of men-only religious-themed pop concerts), Enthusiastic Maddahi by switching from Imam Hussein's martyrdom to Imam Mahdi's reappearance, shifted the focus of the mourners from the past and martyrdom to the future and hope. At the same time, Mahdism or *Intizar* culture, promotes passive political attitude by awaiting the reappearance of the Imam. Ahmad was not interested in other Shi'i values, such as justice, that was one of the main promises of Islamic Revolution. He believed different times requires different actions, "today's concern is that the end times is approaching, and we see the signs, …one of the signs is the economic hardships." For Ahmad economic hardships, cultural decay, and international isolation was not the result of a failed government and state mismanagement, but instead, signs of the end of the world. The path to salvation for him, was not political action for structural change, but it was only possible through the reappearance of Imam Mahdi, the savior who would take him "from the land of darkness to the city of light."[130]

[130] A *nohe* performed by Maddah Haj Seyyed Mehdi Mirdamad

CHAPTER THREE: THE DEATH OF THE SAVIOR

Shi'i mourning rites and rituals have played an important role in the legitimation of the Iranian state since the sixteenth century. Over the past one hundred years, these rites and rituals have also emerged as popular religious-cultural sites for political contestation and resistance. In the previous two chapters, I analyzed two major state-directed genres within Iranian Shi'i mourning rituals that diverged from the traditional narratives and practices to fit the Islamic Republic's political agenda: the Iran-Iraq war *nohe* and the Enthusiastic Maddahi. In this chapter, I explore an independent, newly emerged mode of practicing mourning rituals in the city of Yazd. I argue and show that the Yazd new style of mourning practices have turned into a protest *nohe* movement. The movement began almost a decade ago, and it has departed from the rituals' traditional genre in both content and form to serve as the public's political tool. To understand the politics of the Yazd mourning, I use melancholia as a theoretical framework to study the relationship between loss, history, and the political.

Moharram *nohe*, in its simple traditional form, is an emotional narration of the Battle of Karbala and the martyrdom of Imam Hussein, created to make the public emotional and thus enter into mourning. Traditional *nohe* singers add details of the battle to evoke intense crying.[1] In the practices of Shi'i Iranians, crying and making others cry (through *nohe*) for Imam Hussein has *sawab* (spiritual reward) and salutary effects, "as those who shed true tears for the martyrs of Karbala may appeal to them for intercession in the afterlife."[2] Many Shi'i texts emphasis

[1] Deeb, Lara. "Living Ashura in Lebanon: Mourning transformed to sacrifice." *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 25.1 (2005): 122-137. P.126
[2] Ibid

importance of mourning and, specifically, shedding tears for the sufferings of Hussein and *Ahl al-bayt* (prophet's family).[3] Behind the bloody battle stories of Karbala is a political message: " مَوتٌ فی عِزٍّ خَیرٌ من حَیاةٍ فی ذُلٍّ," a death with dignity that is superior to a life in subordination. The message of Karbala is not confined to any time or geography. Hussein represents anyone who stand up against the tyrant and choose death over subjugation. On January 28, 1856 Margaret Garner could be Hussein.[4] She killed her kids because she believed that a life in subordination حَیاةٍ فی ذُلّ did not worth living. On that day Cincinnati was Karbala. The Yazd mourning movement extends beyond the plot and imagery of the battle and focuses on "the message of Karbala." Yazd mourners bring Hussein and Karbala to modern Iran and through, his tragedy, voice their own oppression. A thousand men chant "This is the land of Karbala"[5] and "I am Hussein,"[6] while beating their chest. I argue that Yazd *nohe* moves from religious towards a more secular orientation. It does so by three key measures: by focalizing the message of Karbala around the modern concept of freedom instead of martyrdom and sacrifice; useing *she'r-e now* (new poetry) instead of classical-traditional poetry, the former is less rigid, has uneven poetic lines and irregularity in rhyme, and relates to social context and address social and political issues;[7] and finally, takeing up a participatory approach in practice making it nonhierarchical. The most radical Yazd *nohes* have three political

[3] Mohsen Hesam Mazaheri, Shi'i media p.11

[4] Margaret Garner was born into slavery on June 4, 1834 on Maplewood plantation in Boone County, Kentucky, United States. On Sunday January 27, 1856, Margaret with her husband and four kids escaped for freedom. However, within hours Federal Marshals and the Garner's master located them. Margaret decided to kill herself and her children as she was determined to not return to slavery. When the marshals found Margaret, she had already killed her two-year-old daughter. The other children were wounded but still alive. Garners' trial became one of the longest fugitive slave trials in the history of the United States. Margaret Garner died as a slave in 1858. Nicholas, Casey. "Margaret Garner Incident (1856)." *BlackPast.Org*, Dec. 2007, https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/margaret-garner-incident-1856/.

[5] Sheikh-dad *Hey'at*, mourning session, Moharram 2011.

[6] Be'sat Hey'at mourning session, Moharram, 2012.

[7] Karimi-Hakkak, Ahmad. "Recasting Persian Poetry: Scenarios of Poetic." (1995). p.3-4

implications: they voice sharp radical criticism of political structures and economic conditions, condemn corrupt clerics, and encourage people to stand up against tyranny and oppression.

In this chapter, I engage in a cultural analysis of the most popular political *nohe*s of Yazd over the last decade to examine the conceptual and practical shifts in their meanings and performances. In so doing, I explore the new identities that manifest themselves in these changes. I argue that the Yazd protest *nohe* movement stands in opposition to Enthusiastic Nohe and defines its identity, partially, by distancing itself from that genre and moving in an opposite direction. It presents the communal rather than the individual, the heterosexual over the homosexual, democratic over the hierarchal, and secular over Islamic. I do not claim that such dramatic conceptual shifts are new to mourning rituals. As I have laid out in the previous chapters, mourning rituals have always evolved as political spaces. In the 1960s and 1970s, anti-Shah revolutionaries altered the Karbala narrative to suit their own discourse; they labeled the Shah and his followers as followers of Mo'aviyeh and Yazid, and the equated themselves with the martyrs.[8] The Yazd Movement is therefore, not unique in its utilization of the rituals' space for political matters. However, the movement is distinct from previous political narratives because it generates new meanings and identities and goes beyond making comparisons.

In what follows, I first introduce the city of Yazd, its *hey'ats* (mourning groups), and unique historical and cultural characteristics. Second, I map out the performative framework of the Yazd *nohe*. Next, I investigate the political messages that are conveyed in the Yazd with the centrality of the concept of freedom. Finally, I use the theories on mourning and melancholia to understand the politics of the Yazd mourning.

[8] Aghaie, Kamran Scot. *The Martyrs of Karbala:* Shi'i *Symbols and Rituals in Modern Iran*. No. 13. University of Washington Press, 2004. p.87

The Yazd mourning movement started with one *hey'at*. Shi'i mourning rituals in Iran are generally very diverse. Two neighboring villages might have distinct rituals. Yazd *nohe* has become not only a prominent form in some of the most popular and influential Yazd's *hey'at*s but also other *hey'at*s in cities such as Kerman and Jahrom have adopted similar styles and spirits.[9] What characterizes Yazd mourning as a movement rather than an ethnic-centered ritual is its expansion to other provinces and the historical context within which it has emerged.

The City of Yazd

The city of Yazd, the capital of Yazd province, is around 5000 years old and is one of the oldest cities in the world. Before and after Islam, Yazd has always been a religious city.[10] In the eleventh century, the city got the nickname of Dar-ol Ebadeh (the house of praying). Yazd literally means the holy city or the city of god. In recent times, because of the elaborate mourning rituals, the city has earned another nickname: the *Husseiniyeh* of Iran.

The city's intact ancient mud-brick structures have made it one of the most important historical destinations for tourists in Iran.[11] Yazd sits at the heart of Iran where two large salt deserts of Dasht-e Kavir and Dasht-e Lut meet.[12] The region's harsh geographical landscape and its distance from the borders has protected it from centuries of war and political turmoil.[13] Moreover, it has been a refuge for religious minorities who escaped religious prosecution throughout history, making the city culturally diverse. Today, Yazd houses the largest population

[9] Interview with Be'sat *nohe*-singer and poet. Nafisi, Golrokh, and Ahmad Ali Kadivar. "Interview with Poet and Nohe Singer of Be'sat Hay'at." *Chehel Cheragh Online Magazine*, vol. 1, 11 2018, http://40cheragh.org/-باز-در-شهر-چه-غوغاست-بخش-اول/. Accessed June 13th, 2019

[10] Miller, Isabel. "Local History in Ninth/Fifteenth Century Yaẓd: The Tārīkh-I Jadīd-I Yazd." *Iran* 27.1 (1989): 75-79. P.76

[11] Naimeh Rezaei (2017) Resident perceptions toward tourism impacts in historic center of Yazd, Iran, Tourism Geographies, 19:5, 734-755. P. 735

[12] World's 26th and 27th largest deserts. Dasht-e Lut with a recorded temperature of 70 C/159 F is one of the world's driest and hottest places.

[13] Tashakkori-Bafghi, Ali Akbar, "Tassavof-e Khaneqah-I dar Yazd be Roozgar-e Ilkhanan va Al-e Mozaffar" [Sufism in Yazd during the Ilkhanate and Al-e Mozaffaz], Science-Research, ISC, vol. 2, no.1 (2012), 59-82. p.65

of Zoroastrians and some of their most important holy places.[14] The Jewish community of Yazd, although small, is one of the oldest in Iran.[15] Another unique socio-religious feature of Yazd is the population of *Sadat* (plural of Sayyed). Sayyed is an honorable title given to people who are believed to be the offspring of the second and third Shi'i imams, Hassan and Hussein, and therefore the descendants of Prophet Mohammad.[16] Nine percent of the population of Yazd is Sadat.[17]

In the city of Yazd, Be'sat *Hey'at*, a mourning group at the forefront of Yazd *nohe*, is amongst the oldest *hey'at*s in the city. The current *nohe*-singer of Be'sat, Masoud Hafezi, was born in the neighborhood in which Be'sat Hey'at is housed. Be'sat Hey'at poet, Shahab Mousavi, who writes the group's mourning songs, started his literary work with the Be'sat Hey'at.[18] Shahab Mousavi is not a native of Yazd and his family moved to Yazd during the Iran-Iraq war. However, the people of Yazd have adopted him by giving him the nickname of Yazdi (meaning from *Yazd*). In the following excerpt of an interview, Mousavi explains the social and intellectual significance of Be'sat Hey'at in the history of Yazd:

> [In the 70s] Be'sat Hey'at was the hub of Yazd intellectuals and the center of religious intellectuals where poets and artists gathered. Be'sat is not just a neighborhood, it is a way

[14] http://yazd.iqna.ir/fa/print/3758969 (accessed on 29 June 2019). Including holy place of Atash Bahram [Fire of Victory], the highest grade of a fire that can be placed in a Zoroastrian fire temple. Overall, there are seven Atash Bahram burning today six of which are in India. The fire of the Yazd Zoroastrian temple has been burning since the fifth century.

[15] Thamar E. Gindin, "YAZD iv. The Jewish Dialect of Yazd," *Encyclopædia Iranica*, online edition, 2009, available at http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/yazd-iv-the-jewish-dialect-of-yazd (accessed on 29 June 2019).

[16] In rituals, they distinguish themselves by wearing a green shawl, and in Moharram ritual performances they stand in front of the crowd [see figure 1]. *Sadat*, as notables of the provincial cities, started gaining social and political power in the ninth century and their power increased during the Mongol administration when they became the cultural and religious mediators between Ilkhanate ruling members (1256–1335) and the local population. (Mancini-Lander, Derek J. "Subversive Skylines: Local History and the Rise of the Sayyids in Mongol Yazd." *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* (2018). P.2)

[17] http://www.tabnakyazd.ir/fa/news/649756 ، http://www.farsnews.com/news/13920211000043/-شش-میلیون-نفر-از-جمعیت-کشور-سادات-هستند--تهران-و-مازندران-رکورددار(accessed Jun 29th 2019)

[18] Nafisi, Golrokh, and Ahmad Ali Kadivar. "Interview with Poet and Nohe Singer of Be'sat Hay'at." *Chehel Cheragh Online Magazine*, vol. 1, 11 2018, http://40cheragh.org/باز-در-شهر-چه-غوغاست-بخش-اول/.

of thinking that goes beyond that…Be'sat was the most political *hey'at* during the 1979 revolution.[19]

The political activities of Be'sat Hey'at have not been limited to mourning rituals. In 1976, the students of Yazd University used Be'sat Hussein-ieh to perform a political play. The *hey'at* board members funded this play, and 300 people came to watch. But the Savak, the Shah's intelligence services, attacked the crowd inside the *husseiniyeh*.

Fahadan Hey'at is another influential *hey'at* in the Yazd mourning movement. Fahadan's neighborhood is one of the oldest, if not the oldest, neighborhood in Yazd, which historically was



Figure 1: Fahadan's Husseiniyeh, Yazd, IRNA

home to the city's elites. Fahadan Hey'at is also a well-known mourning group that was founded in early Qajar reign.[20] Hussein Sa'adatmand, the creator of Yazd's new mourning style, was born in this neighborhood and has been a member of its *hey'at* since childhood. Fahadan's *Husseiniyeh*

[19] Nafisi & Kadivar
[20] "Fahadan Hey'at Has Been Holding Mourning Sessions Since the Pahlavi Era." *Yazd Ava News Agency*, 10 May 2016, http://yazdava.ir/en/-/هیبت-فهادان-از-دوران-پهلوی-میزبان-عزاداران-یزدی-است. Accsessed Jun 13 2019.ta



Figure 2: Figure 1: Fahadan's Husseiniyeh, Yazd, IRNA

is registered as one of the Yazd's national heritage monuments and putting up its tent for Moharram mourning is an annual ritual of the *husseiniyeh* [Figure 1 & 2].

Like many other established mourning groups, Fahadan Hey'at has seven board members that not only coordinate the mourning performances but also intervene in the neighborhood matters and mediate between people. Behind these *hey'at*s are socially and economically powerful men of Yazd Bazar.[21] The Yazd *nohe* protest movement was pioneered by older and bigger *hey'at*s, but younger *hey'ats* are following them. One of the most revolutionary *hey'at*s, Alghameh Hey'at, was founded in 1991. Alghameh with 1500 members, is one of Yazd's youngest but largest *hey'at*s.[22]

One of Yazd significant structures is the Yazd Hazireh Mosque or the Mosque of Roze-ye Mohammadi-yeh (حظیره) مسجد روضه محمدیه). The original structure of the mosque was built in the mid 15th century to house the poor. In 1977, right before the revolution, the new mosque was constructed under the supervision of the Shi'i grand cleric Mohammad Sadoughi. Hazireh Mosque

[21] For example Haj Hussein Dastgahdar, one of the founders of Be'sat *Hey'at* was a well-known goldsmith in Yazd Bazar (http://www.besatyazd.ir/مصاحبه-با-جناب-آقای-حاضری/) accessed June 17, 2019
one of Need more research on the details
[22] http://dana.ir/1411456 accessed August 4, 2019

has played an important role in the modern history of Yazd especially during the 1979 revolutionary period.[23] Because of the importance of the Mosque, various major *hey'ats* perform in the mosque back to back on the days of Tasu'a and Ashura.[24]

To understand the most recent transformation of the meanings and messages in Yazd mourning songs, I studied all mourning performances that took place last year on the ninth and tenth of Moharram (September 19 and 20, 2018) in the Yazd Hazireh Mosque. Day nine and ten are the most important days of Moharram mourning rituals. The ninth of Moḥarram, known as Tasu'a, is important because many key events that led up to the battle of Karbala happened on this day. On the tenth day of Moḥarram, known as Ashura, the battle of Karbala takes place when Hussein and his companions are murdered. Tasu'a and Ashura are national holidays and performances reach their peak in intensity and elaboration in these days.

The 2018 rituals were broadcast live from the mosque's Instagram account and on other social media.[25] Each day, from 8 am to 2 pm, eleven *hey'at*s were performed.[26] The videos are archived on the website of Shahid Sadoughi.[27] My analysis and comparison between these twenty-two mourning sessions on the days of Tasua and Ashura (2018) in Hazireh Mosque, conceptually divided the mourning songs into two categories: songs that follow the principle elements ("the narrating and re-enacting of the story of the Battle of Karbala through emotional prose, visual imagery, elegiac poetry and chants…"[28]), and the unconventional political songs that are only loyal

[23] "Hazireh Mosque: The Most Important and Popular Base During the Revolution in Yazd." *Iranian Students' News Agency (ISNA)*, 3 Feb. 2018, https://www.isna.ir/news/96111407841/مسجد-حظیره-مهمترین-پایگاه-مردمی-انقلاب-در-یزد. Accessed June 27, 2019

[24] The most famous hey'ats of Yazd are Baq-e Gandom, Shaykh-dad , Be'sat, (http://www.besatyazd.ir/ accessed June 20 2019) Kooche- Bouyouk. These four hey'at are included in the performers of Hazireh Mosque.

[25] Sadoughi Center Instagram account https://www.instagram.com/sadoughi.ir/ Accessed June 27, 2019

[26] "Hazaira Mosque Mourning Sessions in Yazd Will Be Broadcast Live." *Islamic Republic New Agency*, 18 Sept. 2018, https://www.irna.ir/news/83037465/مراسم-مسجد-حظیره-یزد-پخش-زنده-اینترنتی-می-شود. Accessed July 2nd, 2019

[27] http://www.sadoughi.ir/SC.php?type=component_sections&id=26&sid=147 Accessed frequently February-March, 2019

[28] Hamdar, Abir. "Jihad of words: gender and contemporary Karbala narratives." *The Yearbook of English Studies* (2009): 84-100. p.84

to the spirit of Karbala. Half of the *hey'ats* belong to the former category. Moreover, throughout the past decade some of the Yazd performances have received extensive attention on social media. In addition to the 2018 Moharram ceremonies in Hazireh Mosque, I analyzed these popular performances.

The Performance

On the night of Ashura in 2012, the local TV station in the city of Yazd switched to a ceremony that surprised the country while broadcasting live images of various mourning ceremonies throughout the city. The video later went viral on social media.[29] This mourning ceremony—performed by Be'sat *Hey'at*, a long established *hey'at* of the city of Yazd—was nothing like the country had seen before. A crowd of men stood in an orderly fashion with space in between them in a traditional mourning structure (*husseiniyeh),* all in black long sleeve shirts and with shaved faces, all beating their chests rhythmically in the classic manner of mourning called *sineh- zani* (chest-beating) [see Figure 3].



Figure3: Husseiniyeh Maryam Abad, Ashura night. Photo by Mohammad Javad Rahbar

[29]*Be'sat Hay'at*. YouTube, 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xPOb5GQmNFI. Accessed Jan 9th, 2019

The *nohe* singer sang:

They told us that the king has ordered us not to plant any flowers
And consciousness and enlightening are the manifestation of sin
Blossoms are sentenced to death for being marked as non-believers
Violet flowers are in shackles
Dawn in the exile
Stars drowned in the well

Men responded to the singer:

Stars drowned in the well
Stars drowned in the well

The singer continued, while the rhythm of chest-beating became faster:

This is the city of the dead
New songs forbidden
The sealed lips free, blooming forbidden [criticism is forbidden]
The king's palace [is] prosperous
Ignorance and superstition sanctioned
Oppression unlimited
No tolerance for unfavorable words
No tolerance for undesirable blooms

Mourners responded,

These shadow believers [people who have lost the true meaning]
choose darkness over light
People of Kufa[30] *have stones in their hands [ready to throw]*
It is better to keep the mirror away [mirror is the symbol of truth and consciousness]
It is better to whisper to the well[31]
It is better to be a chopped head in the oven[32] *[it is better to be dead and not witness such tyranny]*

30 The city that betrayed Imam Hussein.
31 Refers to the loneliness and alienation of Imam Ali, the first Shi'i Imam, from the public. Based on a Shi'i hadith, one of Imam Ali's close companions, sees him conversing with a well, expressing his sadness from the political conditions after the death of Prophet Mohammad.
32 Referring to the story of placing the head of Imam Hussein in the oven by Khawli. Khawli was in charge of the delivering the head of Hussein to the ruler of Kufa. He arrives to the city late at night, so goes home and put Hussein's head in the oven. His wife gets up in the middle of night and hear crying from the kitchen. When she realizes that her husband has brought Hussein's head to the house and placed it in the oven, she rebukes him.

In addition to its political lyrics, several factors made the Be'sat performance remarkable at the time of the screening, and we can see these characteristics in all Yazd performances: the participants' orderliness and uniformity; their level of participation in *nohe* singing; the music and diverse rhythms.

Typically, coordinated performances are part of mourning rituals. But they usually have simple forms and rhythms, so anyone can follow and participate. The more elaborate performances take place in small groups under fifty. The Be'sat performance is remarkable in size (approximately 700 men) and perform in perfect—almost militant—unity and order. These are characteristics that performers could have achieved after much practice and rehearsal before the final performance. Performances are recorded professionally. The camera smoothly pans above and across hundreds of men in black, as thousands of hands rise up—a short pause—and they all come down on hundreds of chests at the same time, creating a strong powerful beat. The camera zooms in; shaved men next to young boys, all serious and determined, cry out,

I am Hussein!
Y'all, come back to the truth
I am Hussein!
Y'all, come back to the truth
The night of Ashura is the dawn of consciousness, come back!

Be'sat performance and Yazd *hey'at*s, more generally, are unique because of the degree to which mourners participate in the singing of the *nohe*. In a conventional ceremony, *maddah* sings the *nohe* and mourners beat their chests. In Yazd rituals, mourners sing sometimes as much as half of the song. This style is new for Yazdis themselves and was developed by Hossein Sa'adatmand (1950-2014)**,** the iconic *nohe* singer of contemporary Yazd. Not only did Sa'adatmand give mourners a bigger part in singing, he also diversified the rhythms and introduced duet singing.[33]

[33] "Hossein Sa'adatmand Mourning Songs" http://hosseinieiran.ir/حسین-سعادتمند/ accessed June 29th 2019

Sa'adatmand insisted on the simplicity of the poems to make the message of Karbala accessible to everyone. This made him very popular among the younger generation. To preserve his legacy, Sa'adatmand's *nohe*s have been reperformed and recorded after his death.[34]

The unconventional music and diversified complex rhythms were another startling features of the broadcasted Yazd *nohe*. The Yazd movement *nohe* singers are all well-trained in Persian classical music and their *nohe* is composed in Persian classical music and modals of twelve *dastgāh*s.[35] Finally, the most important distinction between Yazd *nohe* and other forms is the content and its sharp political criticism of the religious sovereign. Contrary to the *nohe* singers of traditional mourning ceremonies that attempted to elicit tears out and the enthusiastic *maddahan* who focused on making the mourners excited and emotional, Yazd *nohe* singers reject the emotional in order to deliver "the message of Karbala." In fact, they differentiate between "*maddah"* and "*nohe* singer" and argue that a *nohe* singer considers *nohe* a form of art with all the necessary elements: good music, poetic lyrics, and an innovative form.[36] There is also another difference between the terms that is of a political nature. *Maddah* is an agent noun from the verb *madh*, meaning 'to eulogize,' so maddah means "the one who praises." *Nohe*, on the other hand, means "the narration of tragedy."[37] While *maddah* is a term denoting an action and therefore not time related, '*nohe* singer' obtains its meaning from its relationship with the past, a tragic historical story that the singer recounts. By choosing and incorporating symbols of modern political struggles into *nohe,* the *nohe* singers and poets of Yazd become agents of political change. Nguyen-Vo Thu-

[34] by Mawa Center a subdivision of Owj Arts and Media Organization which is founded and funded by Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (Sepah) in 2011. http://www.mawa.ir/web/guest/home accessed July 21,2019
[35] DASTGĀH (دستگاه), modal system in Persian music, representing a level of organization at which a certain number of melodic types (*gūša*s) are regrouped and ordered in relation to a dominant mode (*māya*). http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/dastgah Jean During, December 15, 1994
[36] Khorasani, Hesam. "Interview with Mostafa Mohsenzadeh, The Popular Nohe Singer of Yazd." *Shahrvand News*, 9 Sept. 2019, https://www.bartarinha.ir/fa/news/771687/گفت‌وگو-با-مصطفی-محسن‌زاده-مداح-خاص-و-محبوب-یزدی. Accessed Sep. 15, 2019
[37] Dehkhoda

Huong writes, "remembering is a political and ethical act involving choice."[38] The Yazd *nohe* singers and poets make *nohe* lyrics political by referencing to the past revolutions and demands.

Mourning rituals are spaces within which Iranian masculinity is defined and practiced and male same-sex bonds are developed. The Yazd movement's performances are disciplined, emotionless, and homophobic. In contrast to the Enthusiastic Maddahi, which organizes mourning sessions of half-naked young men, Yazd ritual participants wear long sleeve shirts and stand in distance from one another with enough room that no hand, while beating its chest, touches another hand. Moreover, unlike Enthusiastic Maddahi that centers on homoeroticism, both in narrative and practice, Yazd rituals notably lack even the general referrals to male physical beauty that is usually incorporated in the eulogies of religious figures. If the Enthusiastic Maddahi depicts Hussein as the lover, the Yazd *nohe* refers to him as a brother. Displays of individual emotions, sadness, and crying are also absent from Yazd performances. Thus, although Yazd *nohe* is comprised of many lyrical expressions of emotions, the performance does not display emotions.

If Freedom Could Sing a Song, small [39]

In the Shi'i tradition, the Karbala Tragedy and Imam Hussein have stood historically as the symbols of resistance against oppression and injustice. It is in the path of fighting for justice that Hussein gains the badge of "Master of Martyrs." Morteza Motahhari (1919–79), an influential cleric of the Revolutionary era who authored numerous theological books, states in *The Philosophy of Ethic* that amongst the Imams, Imam Hussein has the most concern about human dignity and self-respect.[40] Religious leaders and preachers command Muslims to adhere to Hussein's value using his popular quotations, "a death with dignity is superior to a life in subordination" [مَوتٌ فی

[38] Thu-Huong, Nguyen-Vo. "Forking Paths: How Shall We Mourn the Dead?." *Amerasia Journal* 31.2 (2005): 157-175.
[39] From Ahmad Shamlou poem- Tranlated by Shole Wolpe
[40] Motahhari, M. "The philosophy of ethics." *Tehran, Iran: Sadra [in Persian]* (1993). P.125

عِزٌّ خَيرٌ من حَياةٍ فى ذُلٍّ] and "never to humiliation" [هَيْهاتِ مِنّا الذلَّة] The Iranian state extensively used these phrases for propaganda during the Iran-Iraq war. The state interpretation of these statements that was advertised alongside the quotes centered around martyrdom and *Azadeh-gi.* In English, the closest translation would be 'nobility in character and mind.' *Azadeh-gi* is a human quality that can be achieved individually, freeing oneself from any material dependency and physical needs. Allameh Majlesi (1627–99), the renowned Shi'i scholar of the Safavid era, argued that *adazede-gi* is gained through the rejection of the lust of flesh and worldly materials.

Distinct from the dominant narratives of state and shi'i clergy, Yazd mourning movement has one keyword: *azadi* [آزادی] freedom. *Azadeh-gi* and *azadi,* both derivatives of the term Azad [free], have very different meanings.[41] Contemporary understandings of freedom in the context of Western human rights and as a liberal product, has compelled Shi'i scholars to debate the difference between *azadi* and *azade-gi* and explore the meaning of *azadi* in the Quran and Hadith.[42] In Shi'i thought, *azadeh-gi* is above *azadi* because *azadeh-gi* is the human's ultimate freedom. Contemporary Shi'i ulama insist on the importance of social and political freedom but reject a Western definition of freedom which they define as moral anarchy. Ultimately, they assume that civil freedom should be circumscribed by Shi'i ethics and exclude religious freedom.

Nonetheless, in 2018, eleven of the twenty-two hey'ats in the Yazd Moharram mournings were concerned with the concept of freedom. For example, the entering *nohe* of *Naynava-ye Safaiieh Hey'at* starts with depicting life under an oppressive theocracy:

Once upon a time

There was a prince

[41] In Arabic, it equates to *horri-yat,* from the root *hurr* [free].
[42] For example: Allameh Naini (1860-1936) in Tanbih al-Ummah wa Tanzih Al-Milla (the awakening of the community and refinement of the nations) and Allameh Tabataba'i (1892-1981) in Tafsir al-Mizan

Fighting a battle with the darkness of the night

The demon of tyranny, was hiding behind the cover of religion, under a turban [corrupt religious figures]

Locked up in a jail, the light of freedom

Hanged on the scaffold, hundred knights[43]

The male choir responds:

We salute freedom

We salute the moment you died for it

Outside of the Karbala narrative, the concept of *azadi* as a political and social need, in the context of a modern nation, gained significance in the dominant political narrative of Iran around three major historical junctures: the constitutional revolution (1905–11), the 1979 Revolution, and the 2009 Green Movement. However, although in all three movements Iranians desired "Freedom," and lost their life over the desire, none clearly defined the characteristics and the scope of freedom as a social and political principle. The infusion of the modern concept of freedom modernizes Yazd *nohe* by making it relevant to the politics of the modern era. The Yazd *nohe* detaches Karbala from current dominant narratives of Islam and martyrdom, becoming a story of fighting for freedom. Freedom becomes "Hussein's ultimate message."[44] So essential is this message that even after his death, his beheaded head, "sang the freedom song on the harpoon."[45] The very mourners that Ahmad Kasravi, the prominent Iranian historian called "the enemies of freedom" who fell into

[43] Naynava- Safaeiyeh Tasua 2018
[44] Khalaf Abad Hey'at- Tasua 2018
[45] Naynava -Azadshahr- Tasua 2018- the crowd response

"despair"[46] after the political disappointments of Constitutional Revolution (1905–11), are, one hundred years later, the authentic voice of freedom.

During the constitutional era that eventually changed the representation of the political system from king/subject to state/nation, the constitutionalists perceived freedom, alongside justice and equality, as a pillar of the transformation.[47] However, their concern over freedom was mainly about liberation from colonial powers. Only Shi'i clerics and Babi intellectuals were involved in the debates over other kinds of freedoms such as religious freedom or "freedom of thought."[48] Considering foreign intervention at the time and Iran's economic dependency on them, Iranians strongly desired national autonomy. But people expressed their desire for nation's independence by the term *azadi* (freedom) rather than Istiqlal (independence). For example, Mohammad Khiabani (1880–1920), a political leader from Azarbaijan[49] and a member of the parliament (December 1914–November 1915), after cutting ties with Tehran in opposition to the Anglo-Persian Agreement of 1919 between Tehran and London, declared the province of Azarbaijan independent, renaming it Azādestan, "the liberated land."[50] The fluidity of the line between freedom and independence in the language of the constitutional era shows that although the term freedom was used by the constitutionalists, it had a different meaning from the freedom implied in Yazd *nohe*.

[46] Aghaie, Kamran Scot. *The Martyrs of Karbala:* Shi'i *Symbols and Rituals in Modern Iran*. No. 13. University of Washington Press, 2004. P.25-26. Kasravi wrote, ""the clerics and professional religious mourners and many of the people were moved and began to fight the liberals who were trying to eliminate religious mourning ceremonies . . . They gathered, performed religious mourning ceremonies, fabricated lies and attacked the constitutional movement."

[47] Kashani-Sabet, Firoozeh. *Frontier Fictions: Shaping the Iranian Nation, 1804–1946*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 1999. p.184

[48] Afary, Janet. *The Iranian constitutional revolution, 1906-1911: grassroots democracy, social democracy, & the origins of feminism*. Columbia University Press, 1996. P (119-125)

[49] Iranian Azerbaijan, a region in the northwest of Iran populated with Iranians of Azeri ethnicity.

[50] Amanat, Abbas. *Iran: A modern history*. Yale University Press, 2017. P.645 & Foran, John, ed. *A century of revolution: social movements in Iran*. Vol. 2. U of Minnesota Press, 1994. P.50

Freedom in the 1979 Revolution era was focused on political freedom with an anti-imperial undertone. One of the main slogans that people used against the Shah and put their demands in words, was *Enghelab, Azadi, Jomhurueyeh Eslami* [Revolution (structural changes), Freedom, and Islamic Republic]. Afshin Molavi writes that out of these three demands two were obtained, "but that elusive *azadi* remains unachieved."[51] Revolting against the dictatorship of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the last king of Iran, meant moving towards freedom. Similar to the constitutional era, revolutionary Iranians did not define what they mean by freedom and what freedom meant to them. Perhaps because Iranians, like Shi'i *ulama*, were conflicted about what constituted "freedom" and what was its scope. But contrary to the *ulama*, people, specifically men, were mainly conflicted about social freedom and gender equality.

The 2009 uprisings in which I took part, represented the rebellion of mainly middle-class residents of Tehran. The 2009 Green movement, with the catch phrase of "where is my vote?" was rooted in a common awareness of human and citizen's rights. Although the political turmoil of a contested presidential election prompted the movement, the fire underneath the uprising was lit by already existing social problems. It was the rebellion of a generation that was born around the Revolution and grew up under the Islamic Republic, immersed in the regrets of their parents and their longings for the pre-revolutionary days they had never known first-hand. It was the uprising of a lost generation that was weary of being constantly policed and punished for social behavior such as listening to the wrong kind of music, dating, and drinking alcohol. For this population, the state control and pressure on everyday life that had intensified during Ahmadinejad's presidency, in the midst of regional chaos, lack of jobs, and growing inflation seemed unjustifiable. The protesters' demands did not go beyond the election dispute and immediate political demands. In

[51] Molavi, Afshin. *The Soul of Iran: A Nation's Struggle for Freedom*. WW Norton & Company, 2010. p.XXII

fact, the protestors were so well-behaved that they organized a "march in silence" for a crowd over a million. Freedom, as defined during the 2009 uprisings, remains as limited as a dream of the pre-revolutionary "good-old" days.

Yazd *nohe* makes the most historical reference to the constitutional period. Be'sat Hey'at, in its 2014 Moharram mourning session, performed in Hazireh Mosque, included a constitutional-era iconic poem titled *Freedom* written by one of the most radical poets and journalists of his time and a native of Yazd, Mohammad Farrokhi Yazdi (1889–1939). Besides the meaning and historical implications of the poem, the choice of poet is also meaningful. In 1909, Farrokhi Yazdi published a poem that enraged the governor of Yazd, Zayqam al-Dawlah Qashqa'i, who ordered Yazdi's arrest. While in prison, Farrokhi Yazdi's uncompromising manner further outraged the governor who, as a result, ordered the sewing together of the poet's lips.[52]

Be'sat incorporated in its *nohe* the most popular verses of Farrokhi Yazdi poem:

When I put my foot on the path of freedom

I am ready to die for freedom

In a tormented city

The master of oppression is combating the god of freedom

In 2018, Be'sat Hey'at took resistance a step further and made a reference to the currently, the most (if not the most) popular protest song from constitutional-era, Morg-e Sahar [The Dawn Bird]. Mohammad-Taqi Bahar (1886–1951) wrote the poem in 1927, and Morteza Neidavoud (1900–90) a prominent musician composed the song. The poem pleads to the dawn bird to arise from the darkness and "Sing the song of freedom for human kind."[53] Reza Shah, the

[52] Gheissari, Ali. "The poetry and politics of Farrokhi Yazdi." *Iranian Studies* 26.1-2 (1993): 33-50. P.35
[53] Hosayni Dehkordi, Morteza, and Parvin Loloi. "Morg-e Sahar." *Encyclopædia Iranica*, 1 Jan. 2000, http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/morg-e-sahar. Accessed August 1, 2019.

first Pahlavi king (1925–41) banned the second stanza of the song because of its political and social criticism.[54] In the past two decades, people have voiced their opposition by singing Morg-e Sahar. The song also marks an important milestone in the history of Iranian women. Qamar al-Moluk Vaziri (1905–59), the great Persian singer, sang Morg-e Sahar in her first formal performance in which she appeared without hijab at the Tehran Grand Hotel in 1924.[55] The poem starts with the following lines:

Dawn bird, lament!

Make my brand burn even more.

With the sparks from your sigh, break

And turn this cage upside down.

Wing-tied nightingale come out of the corner of your cage, and

Sing the song of freedom for human kind.

With your fiery breath ignite,

The breath of this peopled land.

The cruelty of the cruel and the tyranny of the hunter

Have blown away my nest.

Yazd *nohe*, using the same melody, referred to Morg-e Sahar as follows:

Let this voice that has been trapped in the throat of these brave men, flies out

Lament! lament!

That they have cut the throat of the Dawn bird

Lament!

The mourners respond:

[54] Ibid
[55] Nakjavani, Erik. *Qamar-Al Moluk Vaziri*. 15 Dec. 2008, http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/qamar-vaziri. Accessed August 1, 2019.

The cruelty of the cruel and the tyranny of the hunter

Have blown away my nest.

As the world, under the pressure of the United States, is completely closing its doors to Iran and Iranians are crushed under the economic hardships of sanctions, freedom has become an intensely political term.[56] The intensity of the state's reaction to the use of the term in the Yazd movement attests to its political nature. In 2018, the state informed two of the Yazd *nohe* singers that they could no longer use the term "freedom" in their songs.[57] However, contrary to the state interpretation, the use of "Freedom" in the Yazd *nohe,* is not a political demand as it was during the constitutional era, 1979 Revolution, and 2009 Green Movement. Yazd *nohe*, locates "freedom" in the determinative moments of Iranians' modern history, at points that their parents and grandparents like Hussein, stood up against the tyrant and chose death over subjugation, only to remind its audience of the past failures. Freedom is an unachieved demand of Constitutional Revolution and its absence is what has remained from the past.

Mourning, Melancholia, or Commemoration?

In *Mourning and Melancholia***,** Freud argues that the psychic state of mourning in an individual represents "the reaction to the loss of a loved person or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as fatherland, liberty, an ideal."[58] He suggests that mourning is a process through which the libido withdraws from the loved object gradually until the ego

[56] My Stealthy Freedom Campaign 2014

[57] "Are Yazd Famous Nohe Singers Banned?" *Fars News Agency*, 16 Oct. 2018, https://www.farsnews.com/news/13970624001018/آیا-مداحان-معروف-یزدی-ممنوع‌الفعالیت-شده‌اند. accessed June 16, 2019. In this report, Farsnews claims that the banning of the use of "freedom" is a rumor. Rumer or not, this report attest to the sensitivity around the term "freedom".

[58] Freud, Sigmund. "Mourning and melancholia." *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XIV (1914-1916): On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works*. 1957. 237-258. p.243

moves on completely and the loss becomes a matter of the past. In contrast, melancholia is a lasting "devotion to the lost object," a mourning without an end.[59] In Freud's view melancholia was the inability of the ego to complete the process of mourning, making melancholia a pathological condition in contrast to this being a normal aspect or stage of mourning.[60] However, he also expressed doubt about this pathological/normal divide and attested that the reason mourning seems normal is because its psychological process is understandable.[61]

Scholars who have studied public mourning and melancholia following the September 11 attacks on New York City have developed theoretical frameworks to understand the process through which loss transforms into political action. Several of these theories may help us to understand the political nature of Iranian mourning rituals. By bringing to light the interrelatedness of the social, political, and aesthetic aspects of "loss," these scholars attempt to synthesize these aspects to expand the understanding of "loss" beyond the individual condition within the psychological or psychoanalytic discourse.[62] Aided by Freud's interpretation of melancholia, David L. Eng and David Kazanjian use melancholia as a theoretical concept to study the relationship between loss, history, and the political. They argue that the unique and unfixed relationship of melancholia with the past creates sites for rewriting the past and reimagining the future.[63] So, the main difference between mourning and melancholia lies in their relationship with the past.

Walter Benjamin offers a historical materialist approach that establishes an ongoing dialectical relationship between history, loss, and its remains. Benjamin writes that knowledge

[59] Eng, David L., David Kazanjian, and Judith Butler, eds. *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*. Univ of California Press, 2003. p. 3
[60] Ibid, p. 4
[61] Ibid
[62] Eng and Kazanjian pp 2-3
[63] Ibid, p.5

about what is lost is only accessible through what has remained since loss cannot be separated from the remains. It is only known through those remains and the ways in which it is "produced, read, and sustained."[64] In another words, to understand what is lost we must study what remains. Through the remains we can establish a relationship with history. From the remains, politics of mourning get generated "that might be active rather than reactive, prescient rather than nostalgic, abundant rather than lacking, social rather than solipsistic, militant rather than reactionary."[65] Benjamin argues that melancholia constitutes "an ongoing and open relationship with the past" in which the past remains alive, "bringing its ghosts and specters, its flaring and fleeting images, into the present."[66]

If as Freud stated, in mourning, the past is dead and as Benjamin argued, melancholia constitutes "an ongoing and open relationship with the past," we can conclude that the Yazd movement has departed from the traditional psychoanalytic definition of mourning and now exists in a state of melancholia. For example, in the traditional and dominant form of mourning rituals, mourners may mourn the death of an Imam or their own personal loss in the past, but the Yazd *nohe*, through its active and ongoing relationship with the past, serves to maintain and reinforce an ongoing melancholic relationship with that past and historical losses. Moreover, the Be'sat Heyat *nohe* in the Moharram of 2014 exhibits several elements that Freud describes as melancholia: loss in the past, fear of the uncertain future, and doubting one's religious identity.

Once again, someone was killed, for a given Fatwa [which ordered to kill]

Many devilry [tyranny] ahead of us, many killed behind us

No devotion, no generosity, river is dried up

[64] Ibid, p.2. This is Eng and Kazanjian interpretation of Benjamin.
[65] Ibid
[66] Ibid pp 3-4

No flower, no tree, only plenty of fear of ruin

Is this being a Muslim? Then shame on the religious.

Freedom, in the Yazd music protest movement, as argued above, is not a desire or hope for a better life or a political demand for the future of the nation, it is a ghost from the past. How does "freedom" in the Yazd *nohe*, represent the ruins of the past and help us to understand the loss? How are the historical losses embedded in the stories narrated in the song?

What is There to Mourn?

As discussed in previous chapters, Shi'i rituals have played an important role in the creation of an Iranian collective identity. Further, some of these rituals may also be viewed as *politically* strategic in their influence, as they have been known to "provide political impetus to support an existing regime or to rebel against a center of control."[67] Beginning with the 1979 Revolution many of these rituals functioned as highly visible media vehicles from which the Iranian state could both openly and surreptitiously broadcast political propaganda. The Yazd *nohe* performances are a prime example of the power and effectiveness of utilizing or re-purposing ancient and familiar traditional cultural forms to deliver a political message: the "true" message of Imam Hussein fighting against tyranny. However, while Yazd *Nohe* is deeply political, it is not politically specific. In other words, rather than being used by specific individuals or parties as a means for achieving political *influence and power*, Yazd *Nohe* functions more as an engine for political *change* on the level of and for the benefit of its community. One of the ways in which Yazd *Nohe* generates political effect is through the creation of a new collective identity. This new identity, although referencing pre-Islamic symbols, is not nationalistic and transcends ethnic

[67] Kertzer in Hegland, Mary Elaine. "Flagellation and fundamentalism:(trans) forming meaning, identity, and gender through Pakistani women's rituals of mourning." *American Ethnologist*25.2 (1998): 240-266. P.242

regional barriers. Yazd *nohe* builds on the symbols and values of the past and offers an identity that is Iranian, but not nationalistic and Shi'i yet not Islamic and instead is rooted in ethics.

In his book, *Four Poets of Freedom*, Mohammad Ali Sepanlou argues that the Constitutional era was a period in which a new political consciousness emerged following Persian defeats in the Russo-Persian Wars of 1804–13 and 1826–28, when the Persian Empire lost what is now Georgia, Dagestan, Azerbaijan and Armenia to Russia.[68] With this tremendous loss of territory came the realization by the Persian Empire that the new world order was one in which Persia was at the bottom.[69] Generally, the literature of the Constitutional era mourns the loss of the glorious past and seeks answers for the loss, begging the question: How did such a vast empire fail to organically become part of the modern and industrial world? Similarly, Farrokhi Yazdi, Bahar, and other poets reiterated the dichotomy of the gloomy present by glorifying the victorious Persian Empire and its kings.

Be'sat *Hey'at*'s use of Farrokhi Yazdi's poem is an example of Yazd *nohe*'s more general incorporation of constitutionalist themes and viewpoints, including the admiration for freedom, a critique of oppression, and the blame of people themselves for not overthrowing this oppressive structure. In this sense, the only difference between the constitutionalists and Yazd *nohe*, is their relationship with the past. The implied optimism in the Constitutionalists' outlook of perhaps a future return to former glory is absent from the Yazd movement of protest *nohe*s. Instead, it is replaced by an ongoing and everlasting oppression. Below verses are examples coming from four different *hey'ats* on the day of Tasu'a, 2018. The *nohe* singer of Shaykhdad Hey'at sings:

[68]Poormohsen, Mojtaba. "An Interview with Seponlu About His Book 'Freedom Poets.'" *Tarikh Irani*, http://tarikhirani.ir/fa/news/7719/گفت-و-گو-با-سپانلو-درباۀ-چهار-شاعر-آزادی-شاعران-محصول-مشروطه-بودند. accessed July 23, 2019

[69] The political consciousness lead to the assassination of king Naser al-Din Shah Qajar (1831-1896) by the revolutionary Mirza Reza Kermani (from a Yazdi family born in Kerman) in the name of people to protest injustices, tyranny, and corruption.

This soil [homeland] is marshy with the blood of my loved ones[70]

The mourners of Naynava -Azadshahr *Hey'at* cry out:

For how long this darkness is upon us? We are tired of being victims.[71]

Khalaf-Abad Hey'at *nohe* singer sing:

The world is full of martyrs, who hoped for a brightened night [a good day] but there is no dawn to this dark night [72]

The choir of Naynava- Safaeiyeh Hey'at sing:

As the world observes time to time

The story of the dark nights persists[73]

As these lyrics suggest, and in contrast to the constitutionalists' literature that expresses regret for the loss of the empire, the Yazd *nohe* acknowledges no such distinctive and glorious past by which the present is generated in juxtaposition. The Yazd *nohe,* in the absence of a glorious past, collapses the time between the present and the past and by so doing creates a melancholic relationship where the past is not just living in the present, the past is the present: Karbala is here and Hussein is one of us, Hussein is me; "I am Hussein, return to your truth,"
"I am Hussein, thirsty for water."[74]

The melancholic relationship of the Yazd *nohe* with the past creates an historical awareness that concludes with the death of the savior.

Atypically, in Yazd *nohe* there is no expectation for a savior:

No one is left to help, no one to take our pain away, Karbala is here.[75]

[70] Shaykhdad Hey'at Tasua 2018. با خون عزیزانم این خاک عجین باشد
[71] Naynava -AzadShahr- Tasua 2018 پایان این سیاهی تا کجا دارد درازا؟ مردیم از بی گناهی
[72] Khalaf-Abad Hey'at, Tasua 2018 جهان پر از پیکر شهید،در آرزوی شبی سپید، سحر ندارد شب سیاه،زمین گرفته مه ریا
[73] Naynava- Safaeiyeh Hey'at Tasua 2018
[74] Abshoor Hey'at- Ashura 2018- In Baq-Gandom Hey'at, the crowd is Hussein, singing:
[75] Abshoor Hey'at, 2018

As the savior has failed,

The survivor is waiting himself [to be saved], today only we are left[76]

As discussed previously, believing in the reappearance of the savior, Imam Mahdi, is essential to the faith. However, the Iman Mahdi is completely absent from Yazd *nohe*. This absence or *death* of the savior conceptually sets apart the Yazd *Nohe* from other Shi'i mourning rituals and more broadly from Shi'ism. The abandonment of the notion of a savior emerges from surrendering to the historical facts, while refraining from the position of victimhood that results from assuming historical subjectivity:

We can blame the universe for what happens or not, but good or bad,

Whatever it is, it is the outcome of our own actions[77]

The Yazd *nohe* places responsibility for change on the oppressed, on "the silent", "the ignorant," "the lost."[78] However, the melancholic loss and the mourners' historical subjectivity has not yet transformed to political agency but could be a step in that direction. The political failures of Iranians in modern times, in addition to the geopolitics of the Middle East, and the country's economic dismay, with no horizon in sight, have made it hard for the citizens to imagine a better future.

The death of the savior in the Yazd *nohe*, is not the sequel of historical subjectivity, it is the remains of the loss of hope. The politics of mourning in Yazd *Nohe* is generated not only by its relationship with the remains of the past, but the seeming impossibility of a different future; a future in which Morg-e Sahar, the Dawn Bird, is supposed to lament and break the cage to end

[76] Koucheh Boyouk Hey'at 2015 منجی خود منتظر است، امروز ماییم و شما
[77] از بد و نیک جهان، جای شکایت هست و نیست
خوب یا بد، هر چه هست از ما به ما برگشته است
Neynava-ye Azadshahr, Tasua 2018
[78] های های ای کاروان رفته در دامان گمراهی
باز راه کعبه را انگار گم کردید، برگردی

the dark night.

Lament! lament!

That they have cut the throat of the Dawn bird

The death of the Dawn Bird represents the death of hope for a brighter future. While the Yazd Potest *Nohe* Movement has a melancholic relationship with and about the past, it mourns the death of hope for the future. Hopelessly, it recalls the spirit of revolution and thirst for justice that defined the character of people in its past revolutions:

Ah, the silent city

What happened to your faith?

What happened to the zeal of your Qalandar [sufi saints]

What happened to your voice of protest?

The melancholic loss, the amalgamation of past and present and consequently the death of hope, have three major implications: "killing" notion of a savior, secularizing the rituals, and erasing nation and nationalism.

The death of the savior humanizes Hussein by making him an earthly hero: "the savior of the human," "the ally of the weak"[79] who sacrificed his life "for us, the people."[80] Mostafa Mohsenzadeh, one of the popular *nohe* singers of Yazd, stated in an interview:

> I like to describe Imam Hussein in a way [so] that anyone, despite religion and belief, gets affected by his character. We have such an [heroic] Imam, why shouldn't we talk about him? Throughout history, there have been many people who fought for freedom and justice,

[79] Hey'at Fahadan- Tasua 2018
[80] Hey'at Koocheh Boyouk- Tasua 2018 the crowed's response

like Che Guevara who is known to the world as a freedom fighter. Why shouldn't we introduce Imam Hussein, who is above all these role models, to the world?[81]

The perspective of Mohsenzadeh about the historical position of Hussein is indicated in the Yazd *nohe*. Hussein the impeccable Imam is recognized as Hussein the comrade. Mourners feel empathy with the earthly Hussein. The Koucheh Boyouk's Hey'at chorus sing:

Freedom, a message killed in your cutthroat

Solo, standing in front of an army.

Your thirst, your pain, burns my heart

Oh, God, oh God, I can't continue [like this]

The crowd raises a hand in the air and continues:

Why is this our life story? A heavy burden to bear

In the next chorus, they replace "our life story" with "Karbala"

This is the story of Karbala; A heavy burden to bear[82]

Moreover, the Yazd *nohe* takes Hussein out of his holy blood lineage and the category of the Shi'i Twelve Imams. In fact, Khalaf-Abad Hey'at elevates his status and calls Hussein "the prophet of freedom.*"* Naynava-Safaeiyeh uses titles such as *pahlavan* [noble athlete], *Shahryar-e eshgh* [the king of love], and *sarv-e ra'na* [high cedar]. These terms are not only secular, but also a reference to *Shahnameh* [The Book of Kings], considered by many to be the basis for the modern Persian identity. While Yazd *nohe* attempts to summon the soul of modern Iranian nationalism by using words with strong connotations to the pre-Islamic past, nation and nationalism are absent from the narrative.

[81]"Unique and Majestic, Like the Yazd Koocheh-Boyouk." *Shahrvand News*, Sept. 2018, http://shahrvand-newspaper.ir/News:NoMobile/Main/142763/خاص-و-با-شکوه-مثل-کوچه-بیوک-یزد. accessed June 12, 2019

[82] Koucheh Boyouk Hey'at Tasua 2018 حکایت حال ما چرا این است؟ تحمل غربتی که سنگین است

Using Zoroastrian binaries of light and darkness, the plot of Yazd *nohe*, in general, depict the struggle between good and bad, day and night, the devil and god. There are three groups of people in Yazd *nohe* who are categorized based on morality rather than dominant social boundaries such as ethnicity or even gender: the religious hypocrites, oppressed bystanders, and the mourners who represent the people who have political consciousness. Yazd *nohe* is timeless with no geographical specificity, with one exception, Kufa. Kufa is the city that betrayed Hussein after receiving bribe from the Caliph. However, Yazd *nohe* uses Kufa as an adjective that symbolizes people who value the *material* over ethics and humanity. The *nohe* calls out "the treacherous Kufis,"[83] "the heartless people," "the hypocrites," "the Kufa of lies and tyranny." Kufis are juxtaposed with the Yazd mourners. Mourners represent Hussein and are the harbingers of his message to the bystanders who have capitulated to the oppressive powers anywhere in the world. Mostafa Mohsen-zadeh, in an interview, was asked about his opinion on themes and subjects of a proper *nohe*. He answered,

> …the story of Ashura has a transnational message…it is relevant to any society at any time…we are the microphones of the Ashura School; we are the messengers of the battle of Karbala…should we just depict how Imam was martyred thirsty in Karbala?... should we stop there or go further? I like to describe Imam Hussein in a way [so] that anyone, despite religion and belief, gets affected by his character. We have such an [heroic] Imam, why shouldn't we talk about him? Throughout history, there have been many people who fought for freedom and justice, like Che Guevara who is known to the world as a freedom fighter. Why shouldn't we introduce Imam Hussein who is above all these role models, to

[83] Shaikhdad Hey'at: 2012

the world? … Our goal is to attract others through our *nohe*. We have based our approach on the Shi'i ideology and its transnational nature.[84]

As the reference to Che Guevara demonstrates, the transnational approach of Yazd *nohe* presents a global identity that is rooted in local culture and history.

Iranian national identity in the modern era has been an ambiguous concept. This ambiguity reveals itself in different fields, including politics, representation, international relations, and even scholarly work. In *Iran: A People Interrupted* (2007), Dabashi argues that for the past 200 years, Iranians have been arrested by a "sense of displacement," a "collectively repressed notion of allocation of a spot in history."[85] He states that Iranians insist on separating themselves from Arabs and Turks, and believe that instead of being ruled by "the most retrograde theocracy in the region," they should have already been living under democracy for generations.[86] Dabashi does not explain which population actually constitutes "Iranians," considering that Iran has both an Arab and Turk population. Dabashi's approach represents the dominant viewpoint of Iranian intellectuals towards national identity, largely ignoring ethnic minorities, which constitute a sizeable section of the population. Ethnic lines in Iran are drawn boldly and politically. After Persians, Azeris (Azerbaijanis) are the largest ethnic group, followed by Kurds. Minority groups' ethnic identities in Iran are strong, and their national identities are intensely informed by their ethnic identity. For instance, over the past few decades the region's Kurds, including Iranian Kurds, have been involved in an armed conflict with the central states of Iran, Iraq, Turkey and Syria in an effort to obtain sovereignty. The rift along ethnic lines had become so extreme that during the 2009 post-election unrest, not one non-Persian central city supported the protests. Even the city of Tabriz,

[84] Unique and Majestic, Like the Yazd Koocheh-Boyouk." *Shahrvand News*, Sept. 2018, http://shahrvand-newspaper.ir/News:NoMobile/Main/142763/خاص-و-یا-شکوه-مثل-کوچه-بیوک-یزد. accessed June 12, 2019
[85] Dabashi, Hamid, 2007. Iran: A People Interrupted. New York: New Press. p.6-7
[86] Dabashi. p.5

which has historically been at the forefront of social and political ethnic-based movements, remained silent.[87] This was despite the fact that Mir-Hossein Mousavi, the opposing presidential candidate and the leader of the uprisings, was an Azeri.

Despite Iran's heterogeneous ethnic makeup, most Iranian scholars have portrayed its national identity in monolithic terms. Contemporary political forces have mostly been reduced to the two oppositional binaries of Iranianist and Islamist. Few scholars have challenged this approach. Mostafa Vaziri (1993) disputes the formation of an Iranian national identity and calls it "forged."[88] He writes that until the early twentieth century, the term "Iran" was used to define a landscape or geographical region, conveying no political connotation. Building upon Edward Said's *Orientalism*, Vaziri argues that Iranian national identity is an invention of Western Orientalists, perpetuated by elite secular natives. Prior to the creation of an Iranian nation-state in the 20th century, the concept of "a homogeneous Iranian people" did not exist.[89] One contribution to the creation of this flawed identity is the West's conflation of Persian ethnicity with Iran the nation. While the words Persia and Persian refer to the language and culture of a specific ethnic group, Iran refers to a geographical area that includes not only a Persian population but other ethnicities as well. Using the terms Persia and Iran interchangeably is not only inaccurate but leads to the marginalization or erasure of other ethnicities that are part of Iran.[90] For example, in *Brown Skin, White Masks* (2011) Dabashi writes that Western Orientalists' *racialized* theories have caused many Iranians to think of themselves as "*Aryans* and as such of the same superior stock as Europeans; only by some unfortunate accident of geography do they find themselves somewhere

[87] One of the historical capitals of Iran, located in northwest of the country. The majority of Tabriz population are from the ethnic group of Azeri.
[88] Mostafa, Vaziri. "Iran as Imagined Nation: The Construction of National Identity." *New York: Paragon House* (1993). p.5
[89] Ibid p.4-7
[90] Vaziri, p.70

between the Arab lands and India."[91] Vaziri questions the Orientalism and racism embedded in current Iranian national identity and nationalism. However, he does not assume any subjectivity for Iranians in this formation and claims it was entirely a product of 'Western Orientalists.'[92] His work focuses on proving the historical fabrication of the "Myth of Aryans" and what Iranian nationality "is not" rather than "what it is and why." Nevertheless, his study demonstrates the ways in which ethnic minorities perceive Iranian nationalism as prejudice against them.

This singular representation of Iranian national identity is mirrored by the Islamist narrative. Minoo Moallem criticizes the "monolithic, masculine narratives of an Islamic *ummat* that ignore the diversity and multiplicity of discourse and practices actually present in the Islamic world."[93] She continues,

> If modern Westernized cultural meanings of Persianness claimed hegemony over the meaning of national identity before the revolution of 1979, in the post-revolutionary era the meaning of identity was countered and then replaced by Islamic notions of community.[94]

The Yazd movement offers a collective identity that is not contained within one category. Encompassing the negative meanings of loss and looking for creative elements of melancholia, Eng and Kazanjian state that melancholia offers a "capaciousness of meaning in relation to losses, encompassing the individual and the collective, the spiritual and the material, the psychic and the social, the aesthetic and the political."[95] In contrast to the traditional mourning rituals that connect *to* the individual with the promise of future spiritual rewards, the melancholic Yazd movement

[91] Dabashi, Hamid. *Brown skin, white masks*. London: Pluto, 2011. p.28
[92] Vaziri, p.70
[93] Moallem, Minoo. *Between warrior brother and veiled sister: Islamic fundamentalism and the politics of patriarchy in Iran*. Univ of California Press, 2005.
[94] Ibidp.26
[95] Moallem, p.26

connects the mourners to one another through their shared historical loss. These historical losses although shared, affect the individuals on a personal level as every individual is affected by these losses in a unique way. The unfixed relationship of melancholia with the past creates the possibility of mourning all those unique losses in one historical domain. In other words, mourning the history is at the same mourning for the individuals' loss.

The historical consciousness that exists in the Yazd movement through its melancholic relationship with the past transcends temporal historical classifications. It is their collective journey that makes them a community, as is illustrated in the following passages:

You, the caravan of countless pain

You, who stood tall in the bloodbath

This is the seven valleys of love we have to pass through

Dare! We have to go on this journey

Even though the Yazd protest *nohe* movement has no hopes or dreams for a brighter future it remains loyal to its ethical foundation and thus keeps going with its mission to follow the path of Hussein and, if necessary, die with dignity.

We are Azadeh [free from material-like Hussein], *we are ready, we are the followers of Hussein's path.*[96]

Be'sat *Hey'at* mourners sing:

People of Kufa[97] *have stone in their hands [ready to throw]*

It is better to keep the mirror away [mirror is the symbol of truth and consciousness]

It is better to whisper to the well[98]

96 Char-Monar Hey'at, Ashura 2018. آزاده ماییم،آماده ماییم، سینه زن حج ناتمام حسینیم

97 The city that betrayed Imam Husayn.

98 Refers to the loneliness and alienation of Imam Ali, the first Shi'i Imam, from the public. Based on a Shi'i hadith, one of Imam Ali's close companions, sees him conversing with a well, expressing his sadness from the political conditions after the death of Prophet Mohammad.

It is better to be a chopped head in the oven[99]*[it is better to be dead and not witness such tyranny]*[100]

They call upon 'Muslims' who put up with the tyrannical rulers—people from "the city of the dead,"[101] "the silent city," people of a "caravan of unlimited pain" to rise up against corruption and economic hardships:

Stand up! Power up! How long do you want to just sit and watch?... Rise up for life! Rise up for bread![102]

Hey, Muslims, Muslims, rise up! bring down the fake gods

Tyranny arises from silence[103]

In her study of Vietnamese Americans and the politics of memory, Thu-Huong writes, "we mourn by way of telling stories that would reconstruct our own identity in our cultural moment so that we can recuperate ourselves from the lost other." In this way loss, as expressed in Yazd *nohe*, could be viewed as the loss of a revolutionary spirit, a communal cry for reconstruction of the collective soul materializing in the midst of a failing, stagnant society. Yazd mourning rituals and their narratives are the sites of melancholic materialization of loss in social, cultural, political, and aesthetics realms in Iran. While these material practices of loss and its remains do not necessarily transform to the political agency desired and needed for rewriting the future, they do have a political by-product, that of creating new representations and alternative identities around which new communities may formed.

99 Referring to the story of placing the head of Imam Husayn in the oven by Khawli. Khawli was in charge of the delivering the head of Husayn to the ruler of Kufa. He arrives to the city late at night, so goes home and put Husayn's head in the oven. His wife gets up in the middle of night and hear crying from the kitchen. When she realizes that her husband has brought Husayn's head to the house and placed it in the oven, she rebukes him.
100 Be'sat Hey'at, Moharram 2012
101 Ibid
102 Be'sat Heyat, Ashura 2018
103 Fahadan Hey'at Tasua 2018

Where did Audience Go?

As we have seen, Yazd performances are a return to a democratic form of participation in the rituals that was dominant in the early 20th century. Contrary to the common version of the rituals in which the singer sings and the audience mourns, in Yazd rituals, mourners and the singer/s become one ensemble with equal participation in singing. This inclusion of the mourners transforms them from passive to active participants. But this transformation of the role of the participants only pertains to men. How is this cultural transformation and it subsequent societal practices limited by the exclusion of women?

For the most part, the non-gender specific lyrics of Yazd *nohe* escape gender ideologies. However, Zaynab, the sister of Imam Hussein and "the matriarch of Karbala,"[104], who became the prominent political figure opposing Umayyad's rule after Hussein's martyrdom plays a more powerful role and is emboldened as a leader:

Like Zaynab, break down the palace of the tyrant[105]

Daughter of Ali (the first shi-i Imam) continues her brother's path

Her words shake the palace of the oppressor[106]

Money has made Kufis blind

O, my sister, wake up the world[107]

In addition to Zaynab's portrayal as a leader, she is the role model for political action. Shi'i theologian, Morteza Motahhari argues that Hussein's mission does not end with his death; it continues by Zaynab's condemnation and criticism of Yazid. Zaynab carried on "the second half

[104] Chelkowski, Peter J. "Iconography of the Women of Karbala: Tiles, Murals, Stamps, and Posters." *The Women of Karbala: Ritual Performance and Symbolic Discourses in Modern* Shi'i *Islam, ed. Kamran Scot Aghaie (Austin: U of Texas P, 2005)* 129 (2005). p.120
[105] Koocheh-Boyouk 2014
[106] Fahadan 2018
[107] Khalaf-Abad Hey'at's, Tasua, 2018

of Hussein's movement."[108] The role that Yazd mourners adopt, that of continuing the path of Hussein, is the role that Zaynab played in "Hussein's movement." The Yazd movement acknowledges the role of Zaynab and uses Zaynab's tools for resistance; speaking out against tyranny and raising the public consciousness. For example, Koucheh-Boyouk, in its 2018 Tasua performance, began with choirs singing,

I am Zaynab (Hussein's sister)

Ended up in Kufa

I have brought with me, a painful memory

Who has suffered much?

I have news that is worse [than any pain you have suffered from] …

It [the news] is the story of freedom and dignity (Azadi and Azadeh-gi)

that I have brought it for the human being

In the second half of the *nohe,* the singers sing Zaynab's recounting of what she observed from her viewpoint:

In every step, fallen canteens, arms, and flags

Spear after spear, a garden of spears

has anyone planted dagger seeds?

The thirsty soil has grown daggers

And her grief:

Curse to your dark conscience, hail to god, what have you done?

Zaynab becomes an important figure in Shi'i history through her witnessing and testimony of the tyranny of Karbala. Most Karbala narratives and *nohes* emphasize Zaynab's public

[108] Aghaei. 2009, p.10

condemnation of Yazid and his followers. They narrate the events of the battle through Zaynab's eyes.[109] In traditional *nohe,* Zaynab is a witness. In Yazd *nohe* the shift from the battle stories to the message of the battle refocuses the perspective from Zaynab the witness to Zaynab the messenger. As the above lyrics demonstrate, Zaynab is not only active but also powerful and assertive. She is shaking and breaking down the power structure and waking up the world. However, bringing a female figure to the forefront of Karbala narrative is not necessarily a shift in gender ideologies but what history (story) dictates.

In Moharram rituals women who participate in the rituals as spectators, are fulfilling the historical role of women in the battle of Karbala: the witnesses of the tragedy. Considering the importance of witnessing in Shi'i thought, Moharram rituals not only *include* women but also assign them the very important role of witnessing. If Zaynab in Yazd *nohe* is more of a political actor rather than a witness, how might this shift affect women participants?

Conclusion

In the largest Shi'i country of the world, Iran, the political-cultural movement of Yazd protest *nohe* emerges from the least expected arena: Shi'i mourning rituals. However, the rituals and their literature have been overlooked by scholars, activists, and artists. They view the rituals as "low culture" and "superstitious," a holdover from pre-modern times, awaiting extinction. But, as this chapter has shown, the relationship of the Yazd movement with Iran's modern political past and its connection with people's current political struggles, shifts the rituals from mourning practices in commemoration of dead religious figures to a melancholic secular political community.

[109] Mohammad Mohammadi Eshtehardi, Sugnameh-e al-e Mohammad (Qom, Iran: Entesharat-e Naser-e Qom, 1997), p.66.

A sociological study of political participation of Yazd youth, based on volunteering for political parties, running for office, participation in the formation of public policies and politics within the political system, concludes that their political participation is below the national average but their sense of nationalism was higher than average.[110] The political participation of the people of Yazd is not happening in the conventional avenues of political change. Instead it is practiced in a cultural space that is guarded by religious institutions. This transformation presses the issue of the dominant scholarly view in the studies of Iran that tend to examine religion, culture, and politics as separate fields.

Moallem writes that Reza Shah's establishment of a centralized state was built on several principles, one of which was the restructuring of gender ideologies around hegemonic masculinity. She goes on to say that the new gender structure provided "a frame of reference for the newly emerged state-related classes (military, bureaucratic, bourgeois)," by creating hierarchical social categories and binaries of urban versus rural, ethnic identity versus national identity, secular versus religious, and traditional versus modern.[111] Today, these hegemonic binaries of the modern era are a prominent trope of Iranian society. The Yazd *nohe* protest movement breaks some of these binaries and offers new possibilities outside the framework of Western modernity. Yazd *nohe* generates new identities that can overcome the artificial cultural divides of the modern era.

Yazd mourners who already constitute a community through the shared past as both Yazdis and Iranians, become a political community as they take a political position towards those shared historical losses. In her essay on the role of public mourning in the formation of the social subject in the political and community spheres, Judith Butler argues that loss and grief are transformative

[110] Farahmand, Mahnaz, Ghasemabad, Somayeh Vakili. and Poor-Rajimian, Elahe. "Bar-resi Mosharekat-e Siasi Javanan-e Shahr-e Yazd [Examining the Political Paticipation of Youth in Yazd City and Factors Influencing]" *Strategic Studies of Sport and Youth (Iran).* vol. 15, no. 33, 2016, pp 1-37. p 26-27

[111] Moallem, Minoo. *Between warrior brother and veiled sister: Islamic fundamentalism and the politics of patriarchy in Iran*. Univ of California Press, 2005. Pp 64-65

experiences. Contrary to the common western perception of grief as a private and depoliticizing process, Butler argues that grief "furnishes a sense of political community of a complex order" by highlighting relational ties and ethical responsibility.[112]

Yazd movement *hey'at*s offer more than just an opportunity to participate in a mourning session. Membership in these *hey'ats* means membership in the community and connecting to the neighborhood's rich history. Identity requires continuity through time. Therefore, memory is central to the concept of identity.[113] Yazd spatial and cultural consistency generates a community-based identity that is rooted in its history. Contrary to the Enthusiastic Maddahi in which *nohe* singers are not bound to a specific location, with mourners following the *nohe* singer, Yazd *hey'at*s and their members are defined by the space—the neighborhood, the *husseiniye.* Such a strong sense of belonging to this space allows the *hey'at* leaders to lead the *hey'at* on a path that is aligned with the *hey'at* 'historical political position', rather than 'the politics of the time.' In Yazd many generations of sovereigns and tyrants have come and gone but *hey'at* and *husseiniyeh* still remain:

It is the hypocrites turn to rule

But there is always an end to the cruelty of oppressors[114]

Yazd movement creates a new sense of political belonging forged not only through narrative and ideology but also through a strong historical connection with the city of Yazd and its structures. The social and religious weight of the *hey'at*s and their history, which is much older than the Islamic Republic's current lifespan, make it a formidable social entity. The *hey'at* members become a political community through their association with the *hey'at* and its political

[112] Butler, Judith. *Precarious life: The powers of mourning and violence*. verso, 2006.p. 22
[113] Linde, Charlotte. *Working the past: Narrative and institutional memory*. Oxford University Press, 2009. p.77
[114] Be'sat Hey'at, Moharram 2012. دور، دور دین فروشان است ای فرمانبران ظلم
دور ظلم ظالمان روزی آخر می‌شود هرجا

history and therefore are the vanguards of cultural-political change. If we perceive Yazd *hey'at*s as a social and political entity, a revolution has started in Iran

CONCLUSION

Iranian mourning rituals are spaces within which culture, politics, and religion are manifested and social relations are formed. They are historical sites of remembering where "remembering is a political and ethical act involving choice."[394] They generate a sense of belonging and unity as ego boundaries fade and "merge with others" and as suffering becomes "a collective experience and pain the patter of raindrops on a shared roof."[395] They are spaces where gender is defined, and sexuality is explored. For the artists, mourning rituals set the stage and mise-en-scène to tell a story to an audience who knows how it ends and yet, every time Hussein is martyred, they sob.[396] Classical Persian repertoire survived the music ban through the mourning rituals.[397] Mourning season is a season of love. It is the time that secret lovers engage in *nazar-bazi*, the play of gazes.[398] Mohammad Fazel writes vividly about growing up in a Shi'i community:

> It was also during Moharram that I became aware of the rattling of the skeleton for the first time. For it was during Moharram that the *chador*-draped girls wrestled with our attention. With *chador* nipped in their teeth, they smiled with their eyes through a triangular window that barely revealed their "two eyebrows in one." They smelt of perspiration and rosewater, of joy recalling guilt. It was as if while riding in a funeral procession, you passed a stalled Rose Parade at one of the traffic lights.[399]

[394] Thu-Huong, Nguyen-Vo. "Forking Paths: How Shall We Mourn the Dead?." *Amerasia Journal* 31.2 (2005): 157-175. p.159
[395] Fazel, Mohammed K. "The politics of passions: growing up Shia." *Iranian Studies* 21.3-4 (1988): 37-51. p.46.
[396] Chelkowski (2010), p.16
[397] Chelkowski, Peter J. "Time out of memory: Taziyeh, the total drama." (2005): 15-27. P.21
[398] Haeri, Shahla. "Sacred canopy: Love and sex under the veil." *Iranian Studies* 42.1 (2009): 113-126. P.120
She explains nazar-bazi as "the infinitely nuanced ways Iranian men and women are cultured to look at each other, to meaningfully interpret the exchanged glances and to communicate their desires"
[399] Fazel, p.46

Mourning rituals are also spaces of indoctrination, of cultivating soldiers for the Supreme Leader to embark on foreign wars: where, for the disadvantaged, martyrdom is advertised, and death glorified; where boy-soldiers were once lured to run into minefields to clear a path in the Iran-Iraq War. Mourning rituals can be ahistorical sites driven by the politics of forgetting. Moreover, mourning rituals are the battlefield of popular culture, where there is a continuous struggle between uneven and unequal powers. They create a sphere in which the power of "the people" is commensurate with state power, and is able to shift the power dynamic between the Iranian state and the people.[400] What makes this realm a unique space, compared with other more passive forms of popular culture like television, is that the "people" are producers as well as receivers. To this extent, then, the "people" are in direct and collective conversation with the state. However, the intersection of Shi'ism, nationalism, and popular culture also represents a critical space of negotiation between the state and the semblance of the "people." All of these characteristics make mourning rituals a significant domain for research.

I have focused on *nohe* ceremonies because they are one of the most interactive practices. In *nohe* ceremonies, in contrast to *rawzeh* and *ta'ziyeh*, mourners change their position from being members of the audience to being active performers. Mourning rituals with the exception of *ta'ziyeh* are perceived as pre-modern. Most studies on collective Shi'a mourning rituals have viewed the rites within the framework of political Islam and religion. Sondra Hale, in her study of Sudanese politics and society, identifies "two seemingly antagonistic forces juxtaposed: "secular" forces, usually associated with the nationalist era; and Islamic forces, having older historical roots."[401] This categorization that is created in relation to other strict contrasting

400 Hall, Notes on deconstructing 'the popular', p.447.
401 Hale, Sondra. *Gender politics in Sudan: Islamism, socialism, and the state*. Westview Press, 1997. P.6

categories such as modern and backward, *mellat* (nation*)* and *umma*, dissident and conformist, and liberated and oppressed, reproduce and perpetuate the actual differences that divides the Iranian society and prolong the political change. As Catharine MacKinnon puts it, "difference is the velvet glove on the iron fist of domination. The problem is not that differences are not valued; the problem is that they are defined by power."[402] These reductionist categorizations are vividly depicted in Marjaneh Satrapi's popular graphic novel *Persepolis* where there are only two categories of Iranians: the secular middle-class and Islamists. She successfully humanizes the urban upper-middle class in Iran by depicting their commonality with the West and with Western culture at the expense of rendering Islam an alien other. Mourning rituals, while strongly connected to their regional context, are hybrid spaces within which complex identities are expressed. If we conceptualize Yazd *nohe* as an Islamic practice, bundled under the category of the religious ritual, we miss a major historical moment that has the potential to become the engine of a political change.

Although today women are less visible in the public performances of the rituals, historically, they have participated as performers, singers, audience, and financial supporters. A study of women endowments in the first half of the twentieth century in Tehran, shows that many women donated their properties for the public mourning rituals, especially passion plays.[403] In his memoir, Abdollah Mostofi, the clerk of a Qajar king, wrote that mourning rituals singers and performers gained popularity by impressing women, "the more emotions they evoke from the women, the more popular they become."[404] The does the exclusion of women from Enthusiastic

[402] MacKinnon, Catharine A. *Toward a feminist theory of the state*. Harvard University Press, 1989.p.219
[403] Women Endowments of the Constitutional Functions until the End of the First Pahlavi, Case Study: Female Benefactor of Tehran- Journal of Historical Researches, Vol 9, No 35, Autumn 2017
[404] Mostofi, Abdollah. "The Administrative and Social History of the Qajar Period, Vol. 1, From Agha Mu ammad Khan to Naser ed-Din Shah (1794–1896), translated by Nayer Mostofi Glenn." *Costa Mesa: Mazda Publishers* (1997). p.408

Maddahi, changed the ceremonies? More broadly, how does women spectatorship shape the performances and the content of *nohe* rituals?

When I started this project, I was trying to understand what individuals mourn in the mourning rituals. I wondered what common pain brings them together and how they connect their personal pain to the narrative of the Imams. The more I studied, the more I realized the priority of the collective over the individual. Mourning groups have been strong social and political entities that govern society and form group identities. The diversity of the rituals and their distinct differences not only from one region to another and between ethnic groups but along the ideological lines and subjectivities demonstrates their fluidity. Mourning rituals are living entities, they can be converted both to fuel wartime ardor and to power freedom movements.

Throughout my life, I have participated in many different mourning ceremonies. My childhood memories of them are joyous and peaceful. I remember my grandmother's old neighborhood, the streets that were decorated with strings of light, colorful feathers and forty burning lanterns; the sound of music and the smell of delicious food. However, my fondest memory of the mourning rituals is from years later on an Ashura's noon in a hot summer on one of Tehran's main streets. At noon on Ashura, when Hussein is martyred, mourning groups take to the streets and all merge together in a mourning parade. Each *hey'at* has its own music ensemble and a singer with a distinct performance style.

In the middle of the street, as the mourners swayed left, right, and forward, swishing their chains in the air with the march of the drums and the *nohe*, a boy of roughly five years of age was dancing in the middle of the street at the heart of the ritual. With his eyes closed, his little hands were waving in the air with grace, and his feet moving with the rhythm, like a little Sufi. I stood there for more than an hour and the little boy danced the whole time with a smile on his face as the moving stream of mourners parted around him. His father was close by, watching him. With

wonder, I expressed my admiration for his little son's deep understanding of music and its relationship to his body. The father said that his son could not hear the music as he was born deaf and blind. But he felt the vibration of the drums and the motion around him, and that brought his little boy so much joy. The radiant dance of the boy in the rivers of mourners is a manifestation of the rituals: a collective vibration running through the body of the city, connecting the people.

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