

**Fetishization of the Disabled War Veterans in Iran through the Ideological
Construction of “Living Martyrs”**

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Abstract

This paper explores the ways in which disability gets fetishized in the global context using the case study of disabled war veterans in Iran who were injured during the Iran-Iraq war. Relying on a Disability Studies' lens, I analyze the ways in which the Iranian state after the Iran-Iraq war has “dealt” with its disabled veteran and civilian population. The paper argues that since the war ended in 1988, the Iranian state has engaged in what I call “fetishizing” the disability of its injured population, both veterans and civilians, in several ideological ways. Throughout this paper I indicate how the state has managed to use the disabled bodies of the injured survivors as a way to guarantee its survival by portraying them as an ideological construct called “living martyrs,” as opposed to disabled humans in need of physical and affective care. Additionally, the paper discusses how the injured survivors’ disability has too been fetishized in the global context during and after the war, as the world has remained silent in the face of violent chemical attacks on Iran and Iraqi Kurdistan.

Keywords: Middle East, Iran, Iraq, war, transnational, martyrdom

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My research program is located in contradictions among transnational Human and Disability Rights frameworks in the context of global and regional imperialism(s). For the past decade, I have been studying the living conditions of injured survivors of war, incarceration, forced displacement, political torture, acid attacks, and punitive limb amputation in parts of the Middle East such as Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Iraqi Kurdistan. This paper stems from the study¹ of the living conditions of the Iranian veterans and civilians who became injured/disabled during the Iran-Iraq war, in the middle of which I was born. My methodology was archival research and digital study of the disabled veterans’ memoirs, eyewitness testimonies, and online comments that they posted on the Iranian state-sponsored News Agencies’ websites. This was their only podium to express their discontent² with the utterly inadequate care they received. Conducting the project and observing the every-day violence around the globe, I started wondering about the ways in which disability/injury of war survivors become fetishized in both local and global contexts. Growing up in a post-war Iran, I witnessed how the nation-state uses disabled bodies to legitimize its existence and guarantee its survival by portraying them as an ideological construct called “living martyr” as opposed to injured/disabled people in need of care.

On the other hand, I have observed that, in the global context, the disability of disabled people, whether wounded veterans from Iran or other parts of the “global south,” are soma-fetishized, meaning their disablement is perceived as the “natural” state of affairs

¹ I have talked about different social and political aspects of this war and the disabled bodies it has produced elsewhere see Kazemi, 2017, 2018, 2019.

² The veterans’ narratives expose their post-war experiences, including poverty, unemployment, inadequate medical-care, lack of medication due to the Islamic Republic’s regional-imperialist adventure and the resulted U.S.-imposed economic sanctions, as well as the presence of a dysfunctional disability-measurement system employed by the Iranian state (Kazemi, 2019, p. 1).

(Erevelles, 2011; Kazemi, 2018). The fetishization of disabled bodies in the global south, or what I call “soma-fetishization,” takes place through political, economic, cultural, and intellectual production sites, such as the mass media and the academies of the global north when violent processes that render those bodyminds³ disabled, are masked/justified/naturalized⁴. In this paper, I clarify the concept of soma-fetishization through the case study of the Iran-Iraq war, highlighting the Iranian state’s role in *disabling* populations and then masking and justifying their injury/disability in order to legitimize its own existence and survival.

Soma-fetishization of the Disabled

Let me explain this further by first defining what commodity-fetishization of the body or soma-fetishization means in both original Marxian as well as Materialist Disability Studies’ (DS) terms and present a few examples.

As soon as an object is produced and exchanged, it becomes a commodity (Marx & Engels, 1867). Marx argued that a commodity becomes fetishized when it is viewed without any social and historical context. For example, if a worker builds a product, and we look at that product, but don’t see the worker who is oppressed and exploited in the process of building that product, we engage in what Marx calls “commodity-fetishism.” A concrete example of commodity fetishization occurs when we look at a table in a furniture store and just “see” the table as a neutral commodity without thinking about the worker who has been oppressed and exploited in the process of making it. Therefore, looking at a product, whether it be cultural, physical, or intellectual, outside the power relations that mediate its production,

³ Eli Clare, Margaret Price, William H. Poteat, and Sami Chalk, among others, have contested the dualism of/between body and mind, arguing that the two are inseparable as they actively affect each other.

⁴ I have extensively defined what I mean by fetishization elsewhere (Kazemi, 2018).

is fetishizing that product.

Within the capitalist system, there are conditions in which disability is produced including the commodification of human beings for profit. Within this very system, discrimination produces disability by virtue of the fact that labor is purchased for an exchange value. The lesser the exchange value, the higher the profit. Labor power in the capitalist system is purchased for an exchange value, the lesser the exchange value, the higher the profit. Furthermore, race, as Young claims (2009), is an important factor to consider within a political and economic context, because it is exchanged for less. Young (2009) further adds that race is not a commodity, but a “commodity fetish” that has been historically deployed to accumulate more profit for the capitalist system. This has been primarily accomplished by occluding the oppressive historical and social relations behind its production as a deviance and less “valuable”/ “less profitable.”

Erevelles (2011) has argued that the same discrimination has been applied to disabled bodies, because the capitalist economy purchases the labor power of a worker with impairment for less. This *produces* disability among workers in the global context. This can be better understood if we look at different examples around us such as sheltered workshops, subminimum wages, and the financial exploitation of disabled people. Sheltered workshops or sheltered work settings, also known as affirmative industries, training facilities, or rehabilitation centers, are segregated spaces that amass a large number of disabled people to exploit their labor power (The National Disability Rights Network, 2011). These settings often claim that they provide a “transition opportunity” for disabled people to become rehabilitated and prepared for the general, more competitive labor market. However, in the best of these situations, not only do they fail in providing a meaningful experience for workers with disabilities, but also the jobs are often menial, tedious, and repetitive (ibid). The

sheltered workshops are isolating and segregated, as they only employ disabled people and pay them below the federal minimum wage, although “legally,” through *the Section 14(c) of the Fair Labour Standards Act* (ibid). The National Disability Rights Network conducted a study about isolation and exploitation (i.e., sub-minimum wage compensation) of people with disabilities in the American labor force. “[S]ection 14(c) of the Fair Labour Standards Act allows employers to pay individuals less than the minimum wage if they have a physical or mental disability that impairs their earning or productive capacity” (The National Disability Rights Network, 2011, p. 6). The study reported that:

Sub-minimum Wage Reinforces a Life of Poverty for People with Disabilities. Labor law exemptions for employers of people with disabilities have created jobs that pay as little as 10% of the minimum wage with most workers earning only 50%. Reports on sheltered workshops often show that workers take home about \$175 each month, while those working in traditional jobs take home about \$456 each week. Few workers receive health or other employment benefits typical for the average American worker, and since workers do not have a voice, there is little opportunity to improve their conditions. Yet their employers are reaping the benefits of their labors.

These examples clearly indicate that the capitalist system produces disability by exploiting disabled bodies as laborers *for less exchange value* and more profit. Another example of fetishization of race and/or disability is how the global northern countries outsource their mass production and manufacturing. Most large manufacturing corporations outsource their production processes, meaning they prefer to produce in “third world” or global southern countries where the minimum wage is much less than that of their own countries. The residents of the “third world” accept work in sweatshops to survive

financially. Thus, corporations (e.g., Nike, GAP, H&M, Apple, etc.) *buy racialized labor for less* and profit greatly by exploiting them much more than white workers in the “first world.” Furthermore, many racialized workers in the “third world” become disabled due to injury and unsafe working conditions (Abberly, 1987; Erevelles, 2011; Da Silveira Gorman, 2005, 2016; Meekosha, 2011).

Silent Global and Oppressive Local

One way in which DS, per se, as a field of knowledge and as a discourse, fetishizes disability is by focusing primarily on the contemporary attitudes and barriers that turn impairment into disability, often ignoring the historical, political, and economic conditions that produce disability in the global contexts. However, in the past few years, activists and scholars have begun to go beyond⁵ the “rights-based” approach to disability and refused to understand its meaning, unless locating it in a complex matrix of other sociopolitical struggles, axes of oppression, historical discontinuities, and identities.

Erevelles argues that the romanticization of DS, in general, has prevented us from seeing the roots of the ableist tradition in the global context, especially the global south. It seems that understanding disability as a local issue only satisfies the dominant powers in the social relations currently prevailing in the world. She argues, “the very category of disability operates as a commodity fetish that occludes the violence of the socio-economic system” (2011, p. 67). The truth is that we rarely talk about “global southern” residents’ disabilities because their misery has become so “naturalized” that we do not even notice it as a

⁵ Those leading this major shift are grassroots disability justice movements, such as the Disability Justice movement (Sins Invalid, 2015), dreamed into being by writers, performers, poets, and activists such as Mia Mingus, Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, Patricia Berne, Leroy Moore, Eli Clare, and Aurora Levins Morales, among others. Additionally, in the past decade, incredible contributions have been made to the DS field as it intersects with state violence, especially by BIPOC and transnational feminists, such as Nirmala Erevelles, Rachel da Silveira Gorman, Sami Schalk, Julie Avril Minich, Lezlie Frye, Liat Ben-Moshe, Cynthia Wu, Jasbir Puar, Eunjung Kim, Robert McRuer, and Theri Pickens. Postcolonial DS scholars, such as Helen Meekosha, Shaun Grech, and Karen Soldatic have also made meaningful contributions to what they have most recently called, “Southern DS⁵”.

“disablement” problem rising from poverty and exploitation.

Both Puar (2017) and Da Silveira Gorman (2016), among others, have observed that only in the global north have people been permitted to claim their disabled identity as a “disabled subject,” while the disability of the people in the global south appears as a “natural” state of affairs. In an article published at *Somatechnics*, discussing the “naturalization” of injury in the Middle East, Gorman (2016, p. 9) argues:

Despite the fact that all of these violations [in the Middle East] are about disablement, political claims are [only] made in the context of the UN General Assembly, the International Court of Justice, and the International Criminal Court, *not the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* [my emphasis].

Now that I have briefly defined fetishization in relation to the state, political economy, and nation, I will present a case study of how disabled bodies became fetishized in the longest war of the twentieth century, the Iran-Iraq war, which, I, myself, survived as a child. My point here is to show that not only disability and race can be fetishized, but also the body itself, which I have come to call soma-fetishization.

Iran-Iraq War and Its “Already-Dead” Living

How can they compare what we did [in the war] to a few numbers/digits [disability percentage]? — Seyyed Hadi Kasaeizadeh, a disabled veteran

The Iran-Iraq war produced hundreds of thousands of disabled veterans. Generally, the Iranian state estimates that about four percent of the population is disabled (Moore & Kornblet, 2011; WHO, 2011), although the most recent report issued by the Human Rights Watch states that the number is likely between 11 and 14 percent of the population, or about 9 to 11 million people (Human Rights Watch, 2018). There are 800,000 disabled Iranian survivors of the war with visible burns, blindness, chronic fatigue, sexual dysfunction, mood

disorders, and severe bleeding problems (Ahmadi, et al., 2006; Najafi Mehr, et al., 2012; Wright, 2014) who have received no acknowledgment from the international community whatsoever (Bajoghli, 2015; Wright, 2014).

In Iran, like many other societies, disability is associated with a sense of tragedy and shame. In other words, the disabled person and his/her family are expected by society to experience grief and shame (Goodrich, 2013). In the public's view, having acquired a disability through war is different from other kinds of disability, such as congenital or acquired through natural causes or accidents. This is largely due to ideological perceptions that people uphold, such as "patriotism" or "martyrdom," concerning the justness of the fight in which disablement occurred. Therefore, veterans receive a certain amount of respect that non-veteran disabled people rarely do. Kashani-Sabet (2010) points out that the relationship between disability and the state can vary drastically based on possible causes of disability. This is definitely the case in Iran. However, this does not mean that veterans necessarily receive special attention from the state.

In fact most Iranian veterans live with poverty and inadequate care and are often institutionalized in psychiatric wards and nursing homes. Iranian veterans in particular, and Iranian people with a disability in general, complain about inaccessible buildings, streets, curbs, and pavements (Hallajarani, 2014). They cannot go outside their homes because they cannot get around due to inaccessible buildings and the lack of ramps⁶. If there is a ramp, they often lead to a body of water without a bridge (Goodrich, 2013). Unfortunately, many disabled war veterans are afraid to voice their discontent with the economic and social

⁶ Negin Goodrich (2013) reveals that in Iran, there is legislation in place to protect the rights of people with disability, such as *The Comprehensive Law to Protect Disability Right*, which was ratified by the Iranian parliament in 2004. Such legislation is supposed to benefit both the population with disabilities in general, and disabled war veterans, in particular. However, these regulations are often not enforceable because there is no proper system in place for their execution as planned on paper (Goodrich, 2013). There is a gap between legislation and the everyday experiences of disabled people. The veterans' requests are legitimate and have been predicted in the law, but most of those laws are never enforced. And no person or organ is ever punished for violating them.

conditions that they are forced to endure, because the Iranian state immediately silences them by cutting their minimum social welfare benefits and often imprisoning them even before they voice their complaints publicly. There have even been veterans who have committed suicide as a result of extreme poverty (see e.g., Fashnew, 2016; Ir.voa.com, 2017; Namehnews.ir, 2013; Nasr, 2014; Soleiman nia, 2012).

Furthermore, after analyzing veteran accounts, testimonies, online political commentary and blogs, I discovered that they are usually struggling to raise their designated “disability percentage⁷” in order to obtain more or better care. For instance, the veterans whose disability percentage has been determined by the Disabled Veterans and Martyrs Foundation (DVMF), as less than 25%, usually complain, because few of their needs are ever met. A percentage below 25% qualifies a veteran only for basic medical insurance (Alef.ir, 2010). According to the veterans’ own words, veterans whose disability percentage is 49% or below can use the university entrance quota only once for their children, but children of veterans with a percentage of 50% or above can use the quota as many times as they want with no restrictions. 50% and above can also qualify to receive a car (Fashnews, 2016; Kaleme.com, 2016; Mehrnews, 2014).

Many veterans believe that the “percentage system,” or what I call “soma-technologies of disability measurement,” is a discriminatory one because it divides them into groups with drastically different benefits (see their own words in Alef.ir, 2010). I call them “soma-technologies” because they measure the veterans’ disabilities by numerous biomedical tests, bureaucratic policies and rules ratified by the state. The medical commissions at the DVMF assign a “disability percentage” to the injured veterans based on those technologies, mediated by political and ideological bureaucracies. One veteran, Ali Kordlou, wrote in a

⁷ I have extensively discussed this dysfunctional measurement system based on percentage elsewhere. See Kazemi, 2019.

digital comment (cited in Fashnews, 2016):

Are right and left hands related to each other or not? Last week, I went to the [DVMF or the foundation's] medical commission, and I explained to the doctors that I have serious problem in both hands and can't move any of them any longer. My neck also has serious arthritis. They told me that my problems have nothing to do with the war, and therefore, I shall receive no disability percentage for these issues. I told them that since I have lost my right hand in the war, I have put all the pressure on my left hand and my neck. Now, I have arthritis in my neck and my left hand. How can you say that this is irrelevant to the war?

An anonymous group of mentally disabled veterans with brain injuries who are institutionalized, along with the on-site psychologist, talk about their living conditions in a video footage that was uploaded to YouTube (see Soleimania, 2012). The institutionalized veterans tell the cameraman that the feeling of worthlessness hurts them. They say, "We are useless, and everyone has forgotten us." They say that their addresses change very frequently, or they go homeless, because their landlords kick them out of their homes. Their stress makes them very irritable, and they accelerate swiftly to the point of screaming and swearing for no apparent reason. The on-site psychologist states that if people were only aware of their condition, then they wouldn't take it personally and would try to understand the veterans' trauma and stress and act accordingly (Soleimania, 2012).

A veteran, Seyyed Hadi Kasaeizadeh (2015), wrote in an online comment: "For those who deny us, I will give you three addresses to attend and witness our pain with your own eyes: Nesar Dire [town], Sardshat [town], Zarde [village], and Sasan Hospital in Tehran." He tells us that another veteran's father died in a lineup in a pharmacy while waiting to receive his medication. Kasaeizadeh adds:

I think the medical staff at the foundation work like robots who have been brainwashed and just manage to make us feel worse. I myself never go to the hospital as long as I am conscious, unless I faint or have a seizure, then my children take me. How can they compare what we did [in the war] to a few numbers/digits [disability percentage]? I have given up on them in this life, but in the afterlife, I will make sure that justice is served.

Another (anonymous) veteran writes:

I've been belittled and humiliated by the foundation so much that I cannot even begin to describe the things I've been told by the authorities. During the war, my best friend died in my arms. Today, I'm very traumatized. I keep bursting into tears. I've witnessed so many scenes that I can never talk about them to others who haven't been there. The foundation doesn't recognize me as a veteran, even though I went to them after 30 years when I really needed help (cited Kasaiezadeh, 2016).

An anonymous (5% veteran) with a direct bullet injury in the right ankle and post-traumatic stress states:

I have had a series of hospitalizations in psychiatric institutions. Am I a mentally disabled veteran or not? The foundation says you don't have a proof for your injury in the war; you need to show us a proof of treatment right after injury in a war zone field hospital or clinic (*soorat-e-saneheye-hamzaman*) [simultaneous accident memo]. This is absurd, because I couldn't possibly have had someone taking my photo, as I got injured in the frontline (cited in shohadayeiran.ir, 2015).

It is evident in the veterans' own words, the disability percentage system or the "soma-technologies of Disability Measurement" is problematic, because it is not geared towards rehabilitation and healing wounds; Instead, it incentivizes the exacerbation of veterans' health

issues (Soleiman nia, 2012). The material reality under this system is that those who are given higher percentages, receive slightly more services from the state, although the social welfare system for veterans is extremely corrupt and dysfunctional. As such, the system pushes veterans to believe that the worse they become, the higher percentage they are granted and the better care they can obtain.

Often, the idea of rehabilitation (or “cure”) after trauma is about helping the person feel better and getting them closer to their state before the trauma (e.g., natural disaster, war, car accidents, etc.). However, the percentage system acts as a counter-rehabilitation mechanism, “pushing veterans to never become rehabilitated or feel better. If they do, they risk losing the percentage they have already been given, which means losing already inadequate benefits” (Kazemi, 2019, p. 10).

Somatechnics of “Cure” and the “Sacred” State

Discourses about rehabilitation or cure inspire uncomfortable conversations within Mad Studies and DS. Eunjung Kim (2017) makes the polemical claim that cure is a form of violence. “Curative Violence,” according to Kim, “is when cure is what actually frames the presence of disability as a problem and ends up destroying the subject in the curative process . . . [becoming] at once remedy and poison” (14). In her foundational work, *Curative Violence*, Kim does the important theoretical work of introducing us to the complications of cure. It argues against the dominant narrative of cure as a final journey with a clear destination. Kim conceptualizes cure as a “transaction” or “negotiation” of potential risks, benefits, and harms taken on by bodies seeking transformation (10). The Iranian society, both within and outside its geographical borders, very much holds ableist attitudes toward disability, perceives it as “lack”, and craves cure at all costs. Since working with the Iranian survivors of violence (e.g., survivors of war, genocide, displacement, political torture, and

punitive limb amputation, and acid attacks), I have stretched myself between their needs and my discipline's politics. This has not been an easy task. I have often asked myself whether I can avoid apologizing for "cure seeking," while narrating its violent excesses.

In her analysis of the tensions pertaining to cure, Eunjung Kim (2017) enables us to imagine possibilities for disabled lives free from violence with cure seen "as a negotiation rather than a necessity" (back cover). On a personal level, I have lived most of my adult life in Canada, where universal healthcare, although with low quality with the "first world" standards, is available. My research, however, is situated in Iran where healthcare is expensive and access to it is not available to all, accompanied by an ableist and curative culture prevailing both inside the nation and Iranian diaspora. Kim (2017) argues for reimagining "cure" as "a set of political, moral, economic, emotional and ambivalent transactions that occur in social relations" (p. 41). This observation is accurate in many contexts including Iran. If the survivors lived in a society that didn't demand what McRuer (2010) calls, "compulsory able-bodiedness," they would not suffer as much as they do, encountering the ableist violence that doesn't "approve" of their injuries, such as blindness, mental disability, or disfigurement.

At first glance, the rationale behind the dysfunctional and counter-rehabilitative technologies of measurement deployed by the Islamic Republic of Iran, may appear reminiscent of Puar's (2017) argument in *The Right to Maim*, that the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) do not shoot the Palestinians to kill them but rather, to maim them. Their logic, as Puar (2017) argues is "will not let die." There is certainly a similarity between 'the IDF's logic to keep Palestinians alive, but let them live', and the Iranian state's logic to 'keep the disabled veterans alive by often providing a minimum, to keep them alive, but not to let them get better'. However, the IDF's logic is more comprehensible coming from a settler-colonial state

perspective with the intention to sustain itself at any cost, similar to other settler-colonial states, such as the United States, Australia, and Canada.

Similarly, as Salih Can Açiksöz (2019), demonstrates in *Sacrificial Limbs*, the Turkish state acts a settler-colonial state towards Turkey's Kurdish population and uses the Turkish soldiers' bodies in its internal conflicts with the Kurds to suppress and annihilate the Kurdish autonomous movement. Açiksöz demonstrates how the Turkish veterans' experiences of war and disability leads them ultimately to the embrace of ultranationalist right-wing politics, which fosters the state's colonial aggression. In turn, this fascist tendency then perpetrates more disabled bodies on both sides of the conflict in order to continue its colonial rule of Kurdistan and to crush Kurdish resistance.

Contrastingly, the Iranian state is not a settler-colonial state by definition, although it commits the same number of atrocities that the Turkish and Israeli states commit, if not more, by indiscriminately oppressing its own people. Some examples of this oppressions include imprisoning journalists and activists, public executions, torturing political dissidents, punitive limb amputation for petty theft, running a gender apartheid, and turning Iran into a huge prison for women, members of the LGBTTQI, and religious minorities like Baha'is, not to mention sustaining a corrupt economy which fosters extreme inequality between the social classes.

How do we explain this level of atrocity from a "legal" state? Usually, states need their masses to rule over them, to reign over their lives and properties, and to control them. Therefore, states usually need the masses to be there and be alive, although not necessarily living a quality life, but be there physically, so their labor can be tapped, and their taxes can be collected. However, with ideological/theocratic states things could be different, in the sense that the state could even benefit from its citizen's death, if it fits with their ideological

agenda, and if they could frame it as “martyrdom” in order to guarantee their own survival as a “legitimate” power.

The ideological state needs to cultivate the culture of “sacrificing” for the divine state, as a way to justify its legitimacy. It is in this context that veterans’ deaths become as valuable as their lives, if not more, because the state can take advantage of their dead bodies on the front line, or after the war, to show its enemies that the masses are ready to die for the survival of the state. Once someone goes to “jihad” to fight for God against the “Sacred State’s Enemies,” whether or not the person comes back alive or with/out injury, the state has gained its profit, since there is an extra soldier fighting the enemy. As such, the person’s life or death is immaterial to the state, which can be interpreted as the ultimate act of indifference. It is in this set of circumstances that the veterans’ life and death should be read against the ideological state’s tendency to soma-fetishize the veterans’ bodies, because the state will survive as long as someone goes to war for it. In other words, the veteran’s life and death are a mark against the ideological state’s tendency to soma-fetishize the veterans’ bodies.

Somatechnics of Remaining Disabled: The “Living Martyrdom”

During and after every war, states are left with the crucial job of narrating and remembering violence in a such a way that the ideological legitimacy of state and the now-concluded war are not questioned. The Iranian state has been selling an “official public narrative of the war” since it started (Haghgou, 2014), and disabled survivors are a major part of it. Haghgou argues that the Iranian state has been involved in the project of “cultural nationalism” since the war started, in order to legitimize the war and the state’s necessary existence according to Shi’a ideology (2014). This project of cultural-nationalism is anchored in the process of “memorizing” and “remembering” the war, using it as a powerful tool in legitimizing the theocratic regime’s rule through its ideological cultural constructs, such as

the notion of the *ja nba z* /“Living Martyr,” a euphemism for a disabled veteran. In Farsi/Persian, *ja nba z* (literally, the one willing to sacrifice his/her life) is a disabled veteran who has come home after fighting for his faith (Ghamari-Tabrizi, 2009). This word did not exist in the Persian vocabulary until the Iranian state strategically invented it in accordance with its ideologies of “jihad” and “martyrdom.”

After the signing of the ceasefire, the war did not end for either the state or the people who had fought it. After 32 years, the state still uses “memorialization” or “commemoration of the war” in creating a culture of imaginary “struggle” against an invisible “enemy.”⁸ The Iranian state has strategically deployed the concept of “resisting” against “forgetting” the eight years of “sacred defense” in order to sustain its dominance and control over the nation. Hahghou (2014) argues that the Iranian state keeps the memory of the war alive “as a mechanism for ‘modeling’ of the past in the present moment” (p. 75).

Hahghou (2014) reveals that the Iranian state’s project of cultural nationalism is carried out through texts, memoirs, photography, museums, street art, memorial sites, cinema, theatre, and commemoration events. Oddly, to this long list of cultural production sites, I add both martyrs’ cemeteries, which the Iranian state calls the Rose Garden of Martyrs,⁹ as well as the nursing homes for disabled veterans, which the state calls *A sa yeshga h*¹⁰. This seems like a bizarre addition, but if we think about why my school staff would take us for mandatory visits to these sites, we start to see the same project in effect here. Schools were

⁸ This happens in the midst of a strategic public amnesia which has been forced upon the nation. Nobody is allowed to ask a question or even talk about the political prisoners, who have been executed and buried in anonymous mass graves in the outskirts of Tehran and other cities (Abrahamian, 2008). As such, the state has used “forgetting” certain things and “remembering” others as a tactic to (re)establish itself in the past 43 years after the revolution.

⁹ See Katouzian (2009).

¹⁰ آسایشگاه

not supposed to take us to nursing homes and cemeteries to make the veterans feel cared-for and loved. I argue that this was also part of the cultural nationalism project to prepare the next generation for the same “sacrifice” and “defense” against internal and external “enemies”, both present and future. The main agenda is the regime’s survival at any cost.

Bannerji (2005) argues that it is a mistake to think that cultural production sites, such as religion, text, art, or language, can exist in isolation from power relations embedded in the social. In fact, considering them as independent categories that can function outside the relations of power is an ideological construct itself. Therefore, it is important to take a holistic approach when thinking about cultural production, in relation with the material world, mediated by social relations. In other words, perceiving culture, theocracy, or religion as neutral and harmless *ideas*, conceals the oppression and exploitation that could be happening within them as routine *practices*. Along with Haghgou (2014), I contend that the Iranian state’s survival, achieved partially through the project of cultural nationalism, occurs at the price of silencing a myriad of war stories. This concealing of truth and concrete evidence once again reminds us that we are dealing with an ideological regime.

The state accounts and narratives of the war are deeply shadowed by invalidities and untruths, based on manufactured, ideological knowledge. Inspired by Haghgou’s work on the construction of “Muslim Women,” we can say that the proliferation of state-sponsored content on disabled veterans and the Iran-Iraq War, “is a well engrained component of the same ideological machinery in ‘protecting’ the status and sanctity of the [1979] revolution” (p. 35). The construction of “living martyrs” as a social category is not the only ideological category within the Iranian state’s cultural production projects. Haghgou reveals that the same project has been in effect since the war with Iraq to construct the category of “Muslim Women,” as opposed to just “women” or “Iranian Women”. This construct, she claims, is a

necessary part of the cultural nationalism project. The future generations matter tremendously to the state, not as human beings with free will, but only as pawns to be managed and ruled over. Educating the future generations with ideological, and therefore fragmented, knowledge is an insurance policy for the state to sustain itself without having to worry about potential dissidents.

According to Marx, ideology and ideological knowledge production operate as a process that separates the individual from material reality (Marx, 1845/1976). This is precisely why the Iranian state uses ideological knowledge, as its public war story, to indoctrinate the new generation of Iranians. If the younger generation ever has the opportunity to discover the real experiences of those who fought in the war and have come back, they might start questioning its legitimacy. Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi, the contemporary historian, argues that the Iran—Iraq war “transformed into a vehicle for the consolidation of the Islamic Republic’s power,” and the Iranian state managed to “exploit it as a state-building tool” (2009, p. 107). The war’s legitimacy is the foundation upon which the Iranian state has established itself. The state cannot afford any questioning; any kind of query invariably means questioning the legitimacy of the state.

Let us, in this context, consider this parallel example from India. India’s Hindu Nationalism, according to Bannerji, is a political and cultural project that equates “national” with Hindu, aiming at homogenizing the entire Indian polity. Hindu nationalism is a Hindu-nation building project carried out through mobilization of discourses such as essentialized Hinduism (*Hindutva*) and proliferation of ideological cultural productions such as state-run TV shows. Bannerji (2005) demonstrates that the process of cultivating “Hindu Nationalism” with a significant increase in Hindu right-wing movement in India is partly carried out via reference to manufactured evidence from imaginary glory days of the nation, a romanticized

past, authenticity, and “true” Hinduism.

The same logic applies to the Iranian state as it fights to legitimize itself every day, as it has done since the 1979 revolution (Katouzian, 2009). This is an ongoing process in which the Islamic state struggles to cultivate its national narrative, deeply rooted in the manufactured glory days of the nation at the dawn of Shi’ism some 1,400 years ago (Haghgou, 2014). For instance, the ubiquitous referral and comparison of disabled veterans to a prominent historical Shi’a figure, Imam Hussein’s brother, Abolfazl, who was mutilated during the highly-grieved, yet celebrated, incident of Ashura,¹¹ is framed in a way to indicate that the Iran-Iraq war resembles previous wars fought in defense of and for the integrity of Shi’a Islam.

The cultural nationalism project is not easy to carry out, though, because it needs a constant struggle on behalf of the state to exploit the nation and oppress people’s individual and social liberties through a sophisticated and corrupt judiciary system (Haghgou, 2014). To make the process easier, the state manufactures the truth, in order to decrease the space between consent and coercion. Manufacturing the truth usually involves a missing link between what has actually taken place in the material world and what is being narrated in the here and now (Bannerji, 2005; Shahidian, 2002). Finally, this ideological concealment between material reality and ideology facilitates the soma-fetishization process. The concept of “living martyr” becomes an ideological construction that produces disability as a fetishized category of body, meaning, and being. This also involves the fetishization of social, political and economic relations, as well as the fetishization of ways of being, such as disablement (being disabled).

¹¹ The day that the battle of Karbala happened, and Imam Hussein was killed.

Free Labor of Dying

Given the elaborate lengths the state goes to in its construction and maintenance of the memory of the war, it is ironic that it does not actually care about the *real/material* remnants of the war, the disabled bodies of the wounded, both soldiers and civilians. What the state considers as a remnant is a “memory,” which it has been manipulating since the war ended. The Iranian state has assigned a special role (i.e., a form of free labor) to disabled veterans who have survived the war. The idea of “living martyrs” is an assignment or a form of free labor that the disabled veterans are supposed to perform/fulfill. This construction has been propagated through popular culture, poems, films, museums, and a myriad of events. This works as a form of soma-fetishizing that masks the reality of disablement in wounded soldiers. In fact, the state has managed to hide the inadequacy of care for the veterans’ disabled bodies under the concept of the “living martyr,” who is supposed to live and act like a Shia “saint,” and not like a disabled human being. The Islamic Republic of Iran is an amalgamation of class society, kleptocracy, carceral statehood, and Shia militarism, which uses disabled and dead bodies as a resource for cheap labor. This is what I mean by soma-fetishization, the fetishization of the dead and disabled bodies as sacrificial commodities for the state. The disabled bodies of “living martyrs” are used to ensure the survival of the state by performing crucial, free, and ideological labor for the state, while *remaining* disabled in the meantime.

The “living martyrs” (read disabled veterans) and the way the state deploys their bodies is an interesting fusion of the social and medical approaches to disability. They have medical conditions that allow society to understand them as disabled. Furthermore, the state uses medical institutions and a lack of care to keep them unwell. This proves that the state has a political stake in keeping them unwell, to ensure that they can perform their ideological

role/function. This is another layer of soma-fetishization that the state adds to their multilayered processes of producing and maintaining disabled bodies, as part of their capitalist-theocratic approach in which bodies of the masses are human shields during war and ideological objects in the aftermath of war.

The “living martyr” essentially exists as the “living dead,” fulfilling the obligatory, ideological role of the state, but not existing as a living, disabled human who wishes to live with adequate care and support. This contradiction is a traumatic experience, an extra layer of psychological pressure on the disabled veterans who are expected to occupy an impossible position of being and not being at the same time. Muhyi al- Din Ibn ‘Arabi (d. AH 638/1240 CE) had defined *barzakh* as “an imaginal border that joins by separating, such as an isthmus or a bridge, and that is the site of a passage for bodies and spirits; a partition, a screen, between two modalities of being, spiritual and corporeal, widening and delimiting, this world and the other; the site where the impossible can manifest itself in concrete form” (cited in Pandolfo, 2018, p.156). In this context, this *barzakh* is a space, an image, the eclipse of human presence, a purgatory that a “living martyr” is expected to occupy. This framed “image” is an imaginary status that rests at once in the material world of the experience of injury, trauma, and “almost dying” in its historical reality, and on the autonomous ontological status of the “images” itself as the state views it. This soma-fetishization process produces a “living dead” with no effect but ideology, and a “dead living” whose disability is stigmatized, glorified, and erased all at once.

This contradiction, once internalized by the veteran, becomes a commodity fetish, a part of reality concealing all of reality. Once the commodity fetish takes over the real person who is behind it, the exploitation process begins, and it sustains itself if the veteran doesn’t resist it. In other words, the soma-fetishization process relies on the veteran’s silence to

suppress his human agency behind the ideological role of a “living dead” to survive and receive the bare minimum services to scarcely live, or to remain living. Therefore, the theocratic-capitalist state produces disability as a problem in need of erasure (read solution), by suppressing the veterans’ humanity and agency as disabled persons, discriminating against them, and commodifying their scars. Furthermore, the “living martyr” is part of a bigger official state narrative, an ideological narrative, that is supposed to help the next generation understand history.

“Museumization” of Disablement as a Form of Soma-Fetishization

The instrumentality of commemoration sites, museums¹², holidays, texts, movies, and other art and cultural portrayals of the Iran-Iraq war, becomes significant once it is placed within the social, cultural, and political contexts of the Iranian state. Narges Bajoghli, an Iranian-American scholar reports her observations after visiting the Peace Museum in Iran. She ties her observations and interviews of the disabled veterans to the Iran Nuclear Deal. She reveals that disabled veterans were very influential in pressing the Iranian state to sign a deal with the Six World Powers.¹³ Bajoghli quotes a disabled veteran and peace activist, Ahmad, stating, “War is horrible. War is the most horrible thing in the world.” When asked if he would let his own son go to war, if Iran is ever attacked, he stated: “I hope there isn’t an attack. But I never want them to go through what I went through. That’s why we have to stop a war before it even starts” (Bajoghli, 2015). Bajoghli reveals that Iran has the largest population of disabled war veterans in the world. She states:

In addition to veterans who suffer from collapsing lungs, blinded eyes, and melted skin from those chemical bombs, tens of thousands of veterans have been confined to

¹² Sacred Defense Museum and Tehran Peace Museum

¹³ United States, Russia, China, United Kingdom, France, and Germany

wheelchairs since the war, legs blown off by bombs, limbs mangled by land mines, and spines crushed under tons of concrete.

Bajoghli informs us that, not long after the war, a group of veterans decided to launch a non-governmental organization (NGO) called The Society for Chemical Weapons Victims Support. Their objective was to promote a culture of peace and raise consciousness about the horrifying effects of chemical weapons. They also focused on the survivors' needs, especially the needs that are never met by the Iranian state. Bajoghli claims that they gradually organized themselves into a group capable of giving the world a message different from that of the Iranian state. After getting in touch and learning from several peace organizations across the globe, this group was given a space and funding by the state to launch a museum, called Peace Museum, in 2011. This place is an NGO, and it receives funding from the state, specifically from Tehran's former infamous corrupt head of the Islamic parliament, Mohammadbagher Ghalibaf, who the head of the Islamic parliament in Iran.

Bajoghli depicts the Tehran Peace Museum as “a stark reminder of the destruction of war. Its walls are covered with the horrors of armed conflicts around the world and the grave suffering that soldiers and civilians have endured for political means” (Bajoghli, 2015). She reveals that during her visit with veterans at the museum, they showed her pictures of their fellow soldiers who had been injured in the battlefield during the Iran-Iraq war. In her conversations with the veterans, she recounts that they all agreed war is the most terrifying phenomenon that anybody could ever experience and that every nation should avoid armed conflict. Bajoghli informs us that there are a small number of veterans who hold high political offices within the Iranian state, while many others do not even receive minimum care in nursing homes and hospitals. The veterans in the museum tell Bajoghli that their intention is to promote a culture of peace and to avoid armed conflict at all costs. Some of these veterans

in the Peace Museum engage in lobbying for peace with their fellow former soldiers who now hold high political posts. They try to remind them of the horrors of what they all went through not very long ago. One of the veterans tells her: “Those who champion war think it’s like sitting behind their television screens as they play video games. There is nothing glorious about war. Our population suffered enough in the 1980s. It doesn’t need to suffer again.” Bajoghli argues that the only group of people who can advocate for peace and get away with it are the disabled veterans. In my personal experience with the Iranian state and the regime’s 43-year report card, any non-veteran members of the society, openly condemning any future wars, can be accused of “acting against national security” and face a possible political prison sentence.

However, it would be naïve to simply view this museum as a commemoration site. This museum serves a significant political purpose. Sharon Macdonald, in her important book, *Politics of Display*, argues that historically, exhibitions and museums have not been neutral; instead, they have always been mediated by politics and social relations (Macdonald, 1998). Currently, she points out, the structure of museums and exhibitions is changing as they are becoming more reflexive and interactive with their audience. In the case of the Peace Museum in Tehran, we see disabled human beings as part of the display. This is a highly political exhibition. Here, the people’s pain and suffering are being displayed in order to provoke a feeling of hatred for chemical weapons, Saddam Hussein, and those who supported him, such as the American and Soviet governments. This museum is not a display to condemn war, because the latter is destructive, but rather, it exists to condemn, especially, the West, for arming Saddam. This site is not intended to give voice to disabled veterans’ experiences but is instead a propaganda site that uses disablement to convey its manufactured political message. This is another example of the fetishization of disability.

Additionally, according to the actual words of the disabled veterans, during the war, the state sent the wounded bodies hit by chemical and biological weapons to European countries such as Spain, Austria, and Germany for treatment. Even the veterans themselves suspected that perhaps this trip was just to “showcase their bodies” to the world to convince the world of the Iranian claim that Iraq was using unconventional weapons (Mohammadian, 2002). In his memoir, *Unfamiliar Odor*, Hossein Mohammadian (2002), a disabled veteran, reveals that, while he was in Spain in a military hospital for treatment, the Iranian embassy personnel closely monitored all aspects of his life. For example, they did not allow the Iranian patients in the European hospitals to watch TV while under treatment. Their rationale was protecting the veterans from the danger of what they called “cultural invasion” (2002, p. 203). They also exerted enormous control over the possibility of disabled veterans refusing to go back to Iran and seeking asylum in Europe (Mohammadian, 2002, p. 210). The problem of “museumization,” along with the lack of economic and medical attention, are certainly among the reasons that have perpetuated the disability of the survivors over the course of these many years.

In Their Own Words

In the following section, I review some of the veterans’ own words that they posted online in the form of digital comments.

Mohammad, a chemically injured 15%-disabled veteran in Shishdar region, states:

I got shell-shocked [acquired a brain injury] trying to rescue my fellow soldier. On the same day, they took me to Shahid Salimi combat field hospital and after a while I felt troubled mentally. I went under treatment for mental disability. I went to the Ilam province’s revolutionary guard’s station. Now, they say we have no record for the

Salimi hospital. When I go to the medical commission, they tell me that I have been injured in my lungs. Since you don't have your mental disability/injury incident memo (soorat-e-saanehe ye aasab)/[memo of a mental disability causing accident], you don't get more than 3% disability percentage (Afkarnews, 2013).

A veteran's brother said that his brother committed suicide, due to not being able to work, economic pressure, and the stress caused by unemployment. He attempted to obtain a disability percentage. Even though the application was complete, the foundation refused to acknowledge his disability. The veteran (Akbar Ghaeini) burnt himself alive before the eyes of the staff of the foundation in Qom city. The veteran killed himself because of the foundation's irresponsible and apathetic response to his needs. Mehdi Ghaeini, the veteran's older brother told everyone that his brother attended the war, just as a sign of his faith. He never applied for his disability support percentage as long as he could work, in spite of his serious chemical injuries. He applied for his disability support after he realized that being shell-shocked would prevent him from working. The lack of response from the foundation, along with his traumatized state, finally led to his suicide by burning himself alive (Tabnak.ir, 2009).

Another veteran, who was working as a blue-collar worker, burnt¹⁴ himself alive before the municipality building. There was a rumor that he couldn't afford to buy a proper dowry for his daughters. He was a 25%-disabled veteran who had purchased a cubical/table in the local farmers' market from the municipality. After four years, he was told to empty the table because they did not intend to renew his permit. He fought his right to keep the table for

¹⁴ Please note that self-immolation is not (just) a suicide attempt to end one's life; rather, it is a form of protest to resist the social, economic, cultural, and/or political relations exercised on the bodymind of the person. In other words, setting oneself on fire is weaponizing one's life as well as one's body to resist the unequal power exerting on the body from outside the body (Bargu, 2016). The source of this power could be the state or any other powerful actor.

a long time by going back and forth with the authorities, but they never paid any attention to his request. He even asked for a loan, which was also denied. After becoming completely hopeless, he burnt himself alive before the municipality building. After the news circulated, different organizations passed the ball without any accepting the responsibility for the veteran's problem – a veteran who just wanted a table in the local farmers' market (kaleme.com, 2016).

A veteran named Ahad commented on a news agency's website stating: "We are only important during *The Week of Holy Defense*¹⁵ and the global day of fighting chemical weapons. Why can't the authorities care about us during the rest of the year?" (Alef.ir, 2010). This comment demonstrates Ahad's political consciousness and his awareness that the cleric-fascist regime (Kalantari, 2016) of Islamic Republic only showcases/promotes certain (disabled) bodies like his to earn legitimacy while actively eliminating that of others, such as the regime's dissidents. Furthermore, it is not a secret that the regime has executed more than 38,000 political prisoners who had already served their sentences in the summer of 1988 – the same year that Ruhollah Khomeini had to accept the ceasefire with Iraq (Akhavan, 2017). This is how fascism operates, showcasing certain bodies under the guise of patriotism, religion, and nationalism, while actively eliminating their "Others" or "enemies" (Kalantari, 2007). Providing for Ahad as well as other disabled war victims is of no concern to the state with the exemption of two occasions, The Week of Holy Defense and the Global Day of Fighting Chemical Weapons, which are both necessary for the state's survival as a "victim."

Towards Non-Ideological Forms of Knowledge

¹⁵ The rhetoric that the Iranian state uses to refer to the Iran-Iraq war is ideological. For example, the Iran-Iraq war is referred to as "the imposed war" or "eight years of holy defense." The Week of the Holy Defense is a week in the national Iranian calendar that commemorates the Iran-Iraq war. During the holy defense week, the national media talk about the Iran-Iraq war and broadcast movies about the war.

Growing up in Iran, my classmates and I were taught that the war was about defending our nation, Islam, and the revolution against Saddam Hussein and the West. The Islamic Republic of Iran claims that it was defending its borders with Iraq for the entire eight years of the war, and even calls the war the “sacred defense.” This has been challenged by numerous scholars and historians, demonstrating through historical evidence that the state was only defending its borders for three years (1980-1983) and was on the offensive for the following five years until 1988 (Abrahamin, 2008; Ghamari-Tabrizi, 2009; Katouzian, 2009). Commanders ordered veterans to run in front of the enemy tanks and form a “human shield.”¹⁶ However, the official state narrative completely denies this, with many surviving veterans claiming otherwise. The reality is that the Iranian state has only fought one actual war, but it is always in the process of “defense and resistance” against imaginary wars waged upon its “revolutionary values”. The state calls this process “promoting the culture of martyrdom,” because it argues that the “enemy” is attacking us on every possible front. Therefore, the whole society is in need of protection.

Therefore, if veterans, researchers, historians, and scholars, who have studied the war, had the space and security to tell us what actually happened, the public will have access to what I call the “non-ideological” knowledge of the war, a knowledge that is based on truth and not manufactured narratives. We know that, if people have access to the truth their view of the state changes, which ultimately poses a threat to the state that rules by justifying its existence based on manufactured narratives of the war. This non-ideological knowledge and consciousness may also lead people to oppose the state in the form of protests, demonstrations, and possibly resulting in an overthrow of the authoritarian state.

¹⁶ See (Bastani, 2020) and (Bastani, 2019).

Haghgou (2014, p. 14) argues that the Iranian state through an orchestrated effort includes “Muslim” women’s experiences within its official war story to “curb the actual potentials of these experiences.” In other words, the Iranian state co-opts women’s experiences of the war, which by extension “severely impacts the history of women’s resistances, and as well presents a limited framework under which women can be active during times of conflict” (65). The Iranian State encourages women’s participation in society insofar as it is curtailed within the framework of the regime’s ideological apparatus committed to militarized antagonism towards the West, liberal democracy, feminism, gender equality, and secularism. Correspondingly, Iranian women’s representation in the cultural production of the war is framed within the imposed identity of “Muslim women” who “serve” the nation (read her husband, father, brother, son) and the *Ummah* (Islamic community), so they can fight the “sacred” war with the state’s enemies (Shahidian, 2002; Haghgou, 2014).

On similar grounds, the state is never interested in the real memories of those who have actually fought the war and have come back wounded/disabled, because it realizes the real potential of those stories. These stories, unlike the official public war story, are not ideological. This means that, neither do they mask the entire reality, nor are they fragmented. Instead, they could connect the dots and tell the next generation “why the war was fought and how”.

Haghgou (2014, p. 72) reveals that the official public war story is used “as an educational repository, where the experiences of those men and women are to be used as models for the current and future of state building”. Therefore, all this effort, on behalf of the state, is for producing ideological knowledge around the war as a process of “culturalization.” The archival materials of the Iranian state consist of several sources, such as the *Foundation for the Preservation and Publication of Values of the Sacred Defense* (Sāzmān hifz āsār nashr

arzeshhai defā' moqaddas), the *Foundation of Martyrs and Veterans Affairs* (Bonyād shahīd va omūr īsārgarān, Tehran Peace Museum, etc. In these sources, produced by the state, the category of “living martyr” is not limited to what it means literally, but what it means in relation to the “sacred” state’s futurity.

The Iranian state sustains itself by funding and empowering organizations like the Veterans’ Foundation that overlook the production of cultural content on the Iran-Iraq war and uses disability as a token, tool, or a propaganda technology, to construct that content.

Disabled veterans, or “living martyrs,” are constructed as part of the state ideology, in the forms of *embodied cultural icons*, rather than disabled persons in need of care. What is reflected in the cultural materials produced by different institutions is in fact a direct implementation and concretization of how “living martyrs” should be and behave¹⁷. This is an indirect way of ensuring how they make sense of their disability and injury, or how they behave as being more than ordinary human beings. “Living martyrs” are constructed as extremely gracious and patient people who are supposed to be “content”, if not euphoric, with what has happened to them. Note that “content”, in this instance, means apolitical, because claiming a disability identity inevitably constitutes a political relationship between the individual and the state, in which the state is expected to provide support, access, and accommodation for the disabled. The disabled veterans, however, are expected to perceive their disability as a blessing from Allah, who has been kind enough to have given them an opportunity to “give” something for their faith, country, and revolution. Sadly, we rarely hear

¹⁷ See myriad movies in this genre that the state calls the “sacred defense:” *The Scent of Joseph’s Shirt* by Ebrahim Hatamikia (1995), *From Karkheh to Rhein* by Ebrahim Hatamikia (1993), *In the Name of the Father* by Ebrahim Hatamikia (2006), *The Glass Agency* by Ebrahim Hatamikia (1998), *The Marriage of the Blessed* by Mohsen Makhmalbaf (1989), *The Third Day* by Mohammad Hossein Latifi (2007), *M for Mother* by Rasoul Mollagholipour (2006), *The Red Ribbon* by Ebrahim Hatamikia (1999), and *Chronicles of Victory* series (aired on national television) by Morteza Avini.

their actual voices.

Wounded veterans, who have come back from the war, have a particular form of consciousness arising from their concrete experience, which should serve as an entry-point to produce a non-ideological form of knowledge. I say non-ideological because it does not conceal the connection between the individual subjects and the material world. One example includes memoirs, or any other cultural production, written/produced by veterans. However, the veterans must be allowed the freedom of expression to narrate what actually happened in the battlefield and not repeat what the state wants them to. The state's official narrative of the war has been challenged by several historians such as Abrahamian (2008) and Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi (2009) as well as veterans themselves. Although a veteran challenging the state's official narrative, while inside Iran, could face arrest, torture, imprisonment, and deprivation of their small monthly disability support wage, some may subtly challenge the official version of events and get away with it. For instance, when Bajoghli (2014) had attempted to interview them, one of them had said to her: "Miss, do you want the official version that we have to tell the television crews every year?" (Bajoghli, 2014, p. 42)

Defetishizing the Body

Bannerji defines cultural nationalism as a nation building project often rooted in tensions and conflicts propagated by sexism, racism, castism, ethnicity, religion, imagined "enemies" of the nation, and an historical prototype (i.e., good old days of the nation). Through the project of cultural nationalism, Bannerji argues, the state is in a constant oscillation between consent and coercion. One way to manage this steady struggle is the invention of ideological categories such as "woman", "the glorious past", "and "culture". To this list, I add the category of "living martyr". These categories are disconnected from the

historical and material context in which they exist. When we look at the “Living Martyr” category within the official war story of the Iranian state and analyze it through Bannerji’s (2005) cultural nationalism lens, we can start to defetishize this concept.

The process of defetishization is necessary if we aim at seeing a real person with a disability behind the ideological construct of the “living dead.” Haghgou (2014) points out that the ideological content of the constructed categories can tell us a lot about those who created them and why they did so. As such, if we can carry out a thorough analysis of these categories, we will be able to unveil the social relations behind them. This unveiling process is equivalent to a defetishizing process, which has the revolutionary capacity to produce non-ideological knowledge and praxis.

One way in which the process of defetishization can take place is by listening to what the veterans have to say about the war and by refusing to believe the official narrative that the nation-states impose on us and on those who die and become disabled through wars. If we aim at producing a form of knowledge based on the material reality under which disabled people live, we need to shift our analysis and pave the way for a revolutionary understanding of disability and its relationship with the nation state, capitalism economy, and class society, contextualized within transnational political consciousness and activism. It’s as important to organize ourselves as disability-rights activists as it is to organize ourselves against disabling wars, and resist becoming, what Bannerji calls (2000, p. 42), “cultural sel[ves], floating non- relationally in a socio-historical vacuum.” Therefore, we need a new conceptualization of disability that can become a transnational form of collective political consciousness, a revolutionary response, stemming from lived-experiences of violence.

Helen Meekosha, Robert McRuer, Karen Soldatic, Shaun Grech, and other DS scholars have indicated that a process of intellectual de-colonization must take place if

millions of disabled war survivors, who reside in or escape from the global south and their forms of consciousness, are to be included in scholarly thinking, “official” DS knowledge, theoretical developments, and peace projects. As a disabled disability-rights activist and a war-survivor, I believe in the possibility of achieving feminist, non-ideological, and anti-racist revolutionary peace praxis through a new conceptualization of disability. This new conceptualization should be capable of unveiling the social relations behind disablement caused by many different transnational issues on a global scale. A decolonized and anti-imperialist conceptualization of disability should be geographically, historically, and economically sensitive. These features can help us to further understand disability as a raced, gendered, and classed power relation, rather than as a tragedy.

While conducting my doctoral research, I became acquainted with several disabled war-survivors, who are now actively involved in anti-war efforts and activism. Research suggests that an excellent example of a grassroots movement and organized effort toward peace is the involvement of disabled people in conflict resolution and peace-building efforts (World Institute on Disability, 2014). My research indicated that disabled survivors of war, wounded veterans and civilians, emerge from war with a particular form of consciousness (which I call revolutionary peace pedagogy), arising from their concrete experiences. I found that their political consciousness, having arisen from embodied experiences can result and have resulted in political action. My research also found that documenting the first-hand experiences of disabled/traumatized war survivors can become a point of departure that provides a powerful locale for expanding the notion of experience, within the field of DS, toward connecting disabled people’s resistances and struggles globally as an oppressed group.

As an extension of this study, I hope that future DS scholarship will engage more

deeply in deconstructing the economic, social, and political relations of power, especially in the invisible parts of the world that are rarely showcased in the media or academia. I also hope that future studies like this will awaken a desire in DS scholars to go to places that we never see on the news – so that they render visible the bodies and disabilities that have remained hidden.

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