Who is Behind the Name? A Story of Violence, Loss, and Melancholic Survival in Post-Revolutionary Iran
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WHO IS BEHIND THE NAME?
A STORY OF VIOLENCE, LOSS, AND MELANCHOLIC SURVIVAL IN POST-REVOLUTIONARY IRAN

Shahla Talebi

ABSTRACT

This paper journeys along the theoretical and historical trajectories of the early stage of post-revolutionary Iran, marked by an external war with Iraq and internal political suppression. Specifically, it grapples with the intricacies of loss, mourning, and survival in the meanders of the life of a woman, a former leftist political prisoner, named Mahtab. Striving to unravel the pathos and aporias of Mahtab's life, this paper ponders the limits of the laws of polity and of kinship, and the "limit of reflexivity" (a phrase introduced by Judith Butler) that may have led to her suicide. Based on Mahtab's story and my ethnographic work with some of the surviving former women inmates, this paper engages with Sigmund Freud's notions of survival, mourning, and melancholia in light of their intertwined relationship to the reformation of the subject. I argue for the centrality of mourning and its limits and illustrate how historically shaped political ideals and gendered subjectivities are implicated and influential in determining the impossibility of survival.

Her suicide, which occurred only two years after her release, shocked her former inmate friends. Her "self-imposed" death rekindled the memories of all those years in prison and compelled them to contemplate their own losses and survival. In 1991, Mahtab,[1] a leftist political prisoner finally submitted to the Iranian government's conditions of release, after having resisted for nine years in prison. She was released to find herself

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a stranger to herself, her family, and her fourteen-year-old son. Cut off from her political and familial roots, in 1993 Mahtab slit her wrists and died in the bathtub of a hotel room in a city one hundred miles from Tehran, her hometown and place of residence. Her body was found by the housekeepers for whom, indeed only for whom, she had left some money and a note of apology for imposing upon them the encounter with this "gruesome scene" (her corpse) and the task of cleaning up "the mess" (the blood).[2]

INTRODUCTION

Traversing the thorny routes of Mahtab's life, this paper envisages the conditions that might have driven her to her final resting place.[3] It ponders the limits of the laws of polity and of kinship that led to her ultimate estrangement—lying in the bathtub of a strange hotel in a strange city, awash in her own blood, awaiting death, and perhaps imagining the next morning's scene when her corpse would be discovered and buried by strangers. This paper grows in and out of the aftermath of this loss and its mourning. As a form of mourning and a reflection from the place of survival, it is inevitably characterized by the "limit of reflexivity" on the kind of loss that threatens the very possibility of surviving (Butler 1997, 23).

This paper journeys along theoretical and historical trajectories to grapple with the intricacies of loss, mourning, survival, and subjectivity. It engages Sigmund Freud's views on mourning and melancholia, highlighting not only those ideas that he explicitly articulates but also the potentialities that palpitate beneath his words. It illustrates how his theory tends to overlook the social and historical shaping of, and relationship between, subjectivities and "melancholic survival," or the constantly fluctuating boundaries of mourning and melancholia,[4] and yet simultaneously opens up the space to ponder such possibilities. The paper emphasizes not only the socioculturally and historically specific meanings that are assigned to violence, loss, and survival, but the particular communities and hegemonic discourses in relation to which one's sense of the self is configured.[5]

Drawing on Judith Butler's view of melancholia as the condition of subject formation renders it possible to speak of Mahtab's survival

without pathologizing it. Butler's (2000, 2) meditation on Antigone's story as an opening of a kind of "political possibility that emerges when the limits to representation and representability are exposed" offers an invaluable analytical tool for contemplating Mahtab's suicide. I apply Butler's notion of the "limit of reflexivity" to Mahtab's loss, arguing that, while mourning is vital to one's survival, this survival requires some degree of obscurity in reflecting on the loss.[6] This means that mourning is always already melancholic.

Mahtab's suicide, I argue, is an indication of a melancholic survival rendered impossible because it has surpassed the limits of the recognition of the loss. The gravity of the losses that result from multiple forms of violence, including her society's gendered expectations and judgments, prevents her from redefining her subjectivity under the current conditions of her life and beyond the loss.[7] Mahtab's decision to end her life both exposes this limit and suggests an attempt to seek a radical redefinition of subjectivity. In reflecting on Mahtab's suicide, I wish to examine survival, mourning, and melancholia in their intertwined relationship to the re-formation of the subject and the ways in which historically shaped political ideals and gendered subjectivities are implicated and influential in determining mourning and melancholia.[8] I suggest that retaining a delicate balance between reflecting on and recognizing the loss and avoiding too close a scrutiny of the abyss within the self is essential for mourning and survival. To this paradoxical reality of survival, former inmates have responded in multiple ways: Some have remained within and yet stretched the boundaries of their reflections on loss; others have evaded or even resisted its recognition; still others have delved too deeply into the "gaping wound" within themselves (Abraham and Torok 1994). Thus, Mahtab's suicide can neither be generalized as the response of any former political prisoner nor read in accordance with a cause and effect logic, as an inevitable outcome of an empirically defined or definable condition. Rather, her re-action is bounded to her sense of subjectivity in a particular historical moment, albeit anchored in the deeply rooted socio-political and religio-cultural realities. The responses of the survivors of Iranian prisons of the 1980s are as diverse as the particularities of the condition of their survival; they are as subjective, multifaceted, and complex as their perception of these realities.

To explore the melancholic survival of Iranian women leftist pris-

oners, particularly that of Mahtab, this paper meanders through their lived experiences, focusing on the period of extreme upheaval between the 1980s and early 1990s. This phase in Iranian history is marked by a sudden shift from the uprisings, which led to the Islamic Revolution of 1979 and to the era of war with Iraq and political persecution within the country. If the external war aimed to secure Iran's geographical borders, the annihilation of dissidents sought to fortify the leadership's political power. Because it is impossible to address the entirety of this period, I offer just a glimpse into certain moments in Iranian history that involved and affected Mahtab's life.

Although I cannot attend to its details, I remain cognizant of the life that goes on after Mahtab or is lived by survivors in light of her death. While suicide attempts continue after Mahtab's death and while some individuals fall into a space of oblivion or madness during their imprisonment or after their release, those who have risen from the ashes of this violence are not rarities. This does not mean that they do not struggle to bear painful memories, injured bodies, and scared souls. However, I do not wish to glorify or romanticize the deadly resilience of their survival. Indeed, my extensive encounters with these survivors have shown me that the injuries of the violence have permeated these victims' every cell. It is as though their bodies and souls are covered with thousands of pieces of broken glass that cut deeper each time a new violent incident, or even a joyous moment, touches them. It is not rare for the ghosts of the untimely dead of these violent events to haunt the smiles of these survivors. On such occasions, their laugher turns into silence or is accompanied by silent tears. Thus, if I suggest that some of these survivors have "risen from the ashes," I do not imply their invulnerability, but a simultaneous fragility and resilience. They are not like plants shielded in a greenhouse but like trees that are exposed to storm, rain, or disease. The trees could lose their branches or even partially die, but if their roots survive, they may once again be rejuvenated and reborn. While trying to explore why this rejuvenation becomes impossible for Mahtab, I nevertheless choose to read her death as a gesture toward a different kind of political possibility that exists beyond the confines of her own life and death.

I venture to construe Mahtab's death not as an end, a defeat, or a silent and silencing act, but as a gesture of protest against imposed roles,

an assertion of other possible ways of being, even at the expense of her life. As a performative deed, Mahtab's death exceeds language and thus remains an everlasting potentiality. Her decision to end her life exposes the limits of mourning and the predicaments of survival. It also brings to light a different kind of political possibility opened up by her act of *shahadat*, not in the conventional interpretation as martyrdom, but as an ever-present witnessing, testament, and testimony to that which was precluded in her life. It hints at much deeper losses, of the communities and traditions, the intergenerational memories and "secrets" (Abraham and Torok 1994). Mahtab's suicide stands as a reminder of the limits and injustices that write her off from her community, thus from her life. It communicates a desire and a vision of a different sociality that neither excludes her from the polity nor shackles her to conventional subjectivities. In negating the condition of the present, her shahadat urges survivors to seek a different future.

"REVOLT… AGAINST MOURNING" AND MELANCHOLIA

In his essay, "On Transience," published in the midst of World War I, Sigmund Freud (1959b, 79) recounts a summer walk in the company of two friends who "admired the beauty of the scene…but felt no joy in it." They were rather "disturbed by the thought that all this beauty was fated to extinction, that it would vanish when winter came, like all human beauty and all the beauty and splendour that men have created…" (79). As "incontestable" as it appears to him, Freud's logic that "neither the transient quality of the objects, nor the mortality of our lives, should preclude our even greater appreciation for them" makes an impression upon his friends (80). He interprets his friends' reaction as an indication of their fear of loss and of the painful process of detachment from the lost love object. He thus concludes that what "spoilt their enjoyment of beauty must have been a revolt in their minds against mourning" (80).

A year after this conversation, Freud tells us, "[World War I] broke out and robbed the world of its beauties. It destroyed not only the beauty of the countryside… but it also shattered our pride in the achievements of our civilization" (81). His friend's anxiety about the demise of the beauty of the countryside becomes actualized not by winter but by a horrific violence launched by humans.[9] "On Transience" is thus written,

retrospectively, about and in mourning. It is a reflection on loss and the struggle for survival, of which Freud writes:

> But why it is that this detachment of libido from its objects should be such a painful process is a mystery to us…. We only see that libido clings to its objects and will not renounce those that are lost even when a substitute lies ready to hand. Such then is mourning. (81)

Freud's abrupt and semi-verdict conclusion, "Such then is mourning," reflects his difficulty to come to grips with the question of mourning and survival and accentuates the illusive assumption of an end to mourning.[10] Freud compares the temporary withdrawal from the outside world in mourning to the elongated withdrawal in melancholia; he suggests that, in melancholia, the ego's introjection into the lost object or ideal disallows its liberation and ultimately leads to its loss. It is the impossibility of reckoning with and mourning this loss that, in Freud's view, results in melancholia.

I argue that the revolt against mourning and melancholia are flip sides of the same coin. By depriving oneself from loving ephemeral objects, which includes nearly everything, one is unknowingly always already mourning. This covert form of elongated mourning entails a double or a triple loss. For in refusing to love, one not only loses the love-object, but also the possibility of survival since in this detachment from love, the subject avoids an intimate relationship with others and the world, which is the very condition for subject re-formation. Thus, in rejecting love one also loses life and oneself to life. Mourning itself becomes lost in this revolt against loss-love. As melancholia, the revolt against mourning is also characterized by a never-ceasing unrecognized mourning. Turned into a constant state of being, mourning becomes normalized hence lost to itself, to the self, and to life.

Freud (81) ascertains that in mourning "the libido clings to its objects and will not renounce those that are lost even when a substitute lies ready to hand." He suggests, however, that suddenly, for no clear reason, the ego begins to feel liberated from the lost object and returns to the world and to love. One may assume a similar dynamic in Freud's disenchanted voice reflecting on the war that "tramples in blind fury on all that comes in its way, as though there were to be no future" (Freud 1959c, 293) and in his exhortatory tone in the end of the text of "On

Transience" when, all of a sudden, he proclaims: "We shall build up again all that war has destroyed, and perhaps on firmer ground and more lastingly than before" (1959b, 82). But note how this intricately he phrases this optimism:

> Mourning, as we know, however painful as it may be, comes to a spontaneous end. When it has renounced everything that has been lost, then it has consumed itself, and our libido is once more free (in so far as we are still young and active) to replace the lost objects by fresh ones equally or still more precious. (82)

The phrase, "in so far as we are still young and active," restrains the scope of Freud's hope in replacing the lost objects due to the imminence of death. Freud's attitude towards the old age, which forecloses the possibility of a new beginning, resembles his friends' "revolt… against morning." He mourns not only that which is already lost but that which will never come, the time that is "out of joint" (Shakespeare 2005, 39) and the time that is no more. How does one mourn the loss of tomorrow and the loss of oneself in tomorrow?

"WE SHALL BUILD UP AGAIN"

One paradox of survival concerns the loss of the re-formation of the subject and the fact that the very recognition of this loss could prove terminal. The threshold of the reflection on the loss is a hazardously thin line between two precariously floating domains; collapsing into oblivion is a haunting possibility on either side. A subject becomes a subject primarily by recognizing its relationship to and separation from others and the surrounding world, hence through loss and its essentially unconscious recognition. Loss emerges as a twin of the subject, rendering subjectivity always already melancholic.[11] The ability to simultaneously mourn and reflect upon the loss while distancing oneself from the lost object, or to restrain oneself from looking too deep into and at death, makes it possible to live, or to survive. To survive, one must at once realize the presence of death, even feel its touch, yet embrace one's role as a survivor-mourner.[12]

Seen in this light, Freud's self illusion in proclaiming, "We shall build up again," is not entirely futile. Surviving profound losses seems

to require a certain degree of preclusion. Thus, Freud's optimism overlooks the injuries of bodies and minds that remain incurable or the perished lives that cannot be regenerated.[13] Similarly, his promise, "We shall build up again," places greater attention on buildings, such as museums, monuments, and institutions, almost forsaking the irretrievable lives, memories, emotional attachments, and human bounds that were created in those places. This remains the case even when Freud writes, as if to convince himself:

> But have those other possessions, which we have now lost, really ceased to have any worth for us because they have proved so perishable and so unresistant? To many of us this seems to be so, but once more wrongly, in my view. I believe that those who think thus, and seem ready to make a permanent renunciation because what was precious has proved not to be lasting, are simply in a state of mourning for what is lost. (Freud 1959b, 82)

Earlier, Freud argues that the renunciation of the lost love object is imperative for mourning to end and reckons the attitude of those who do not renounce the lost object as melancholic while that of those who refuse to be attached to the "perishable" objects as a "revolt… against mourning." But, in the above passage, he suggests that those who permanently renounce the lost love object "are simply in the state of mourning." These inconsistencies are indicative of the intricacies of mourning, the fuzzy boundaries between these categories, and Freud's struggle to mourn-survive.

In his essay, "Mourning and Melancholia," Freud (1959a, 156) asserts that the self-degradation of melancholic individuals stems from their "keener eye for the truth."[14] As if against his own keen eyes, Freud (1959b, 79) seems to forget that the "decay" of nature does not necessarily "shatter our pride in the achievements of our civilization" (81), as has World War I. But if, for mourning to end, the renunciation of the lost object is paramount, as Freud suggests, what is there "ready to hand" to replace his fellows' loss of trust in the "centuries of continuous education by the noblest minds" or in the possibility of "the evil spirits" being "tamed" (81)? What does it mean to impermanently denounce the loss of trust in one's ideals and to embrace them, yet again, despite the "discovery of their fragility" if not by an unconscious obscuring of the

depth of the loss (82)? How are Freud's fellows to survive the loss of trust in humanity and the loss of their humanity? These questions and their answers return to the threshold of mourning-melancholia, the limits of reflectivity on the loss, and the affirmation that survival is always already melancholic.

LOST IN AND TO THE WORLD

Freud considers the turning of the ego against itself, or indeed against the introjected lost object in melancholia, as narcissistic. The incorporation of the love object into the ego, he suggests, is a return to, or a residue of the early state of, childhood; the ego identifies with and absorbs the lost object as infants see everything as extensions of themselves.[15] Freud argues that with the loss of the love object the ego turns the anger towards itself. Hence, in Freud's view, the target of the subject's shameless self-belittling is not the ego per se, but the ego that has identified with the love-object, that is belittled, attacked, or even killed in the sadistic suicide.[16] What remains absent in Freud's identification of the "narcissistic" type of object-choice as the reason for succumbing to melancholia, is adequate attention to the world that lies outside the ego (1959a, 164). Absent in his analysis is also any reflection on the dialectical relationship between these choices and the volatile, transformative, and constantly transforming world within which the ego is formed and reformed.[17] I argue that it is not merely the world that becomes lost to the survivors of violent events, but these survivors who often become unrecognizable to themselves and continue to live without knowing what or who is left behind in their name.

This, I believe, is what happens to Mahtab. From the loss of her father, husband, two brothers, and several close friends to her own arrest, torture, nine-year imprisonment, separation from her only son and family, survival of the massive executions of early 1980s and the political massacre of 1988, Mahtab weathered a series of traumatic events that piled upon and fueled one another.[18] Yet, what awaited her outside prison tested the limits of her tolerance.[19] Not only did Mahtab lose her sense of ideals and herself to those ideals by finally submitting to the government's conditions of her release after nine years of resistance, but she also lost her family and herself to them. Torn apart from the world,

Mahtab suffered from a void within her in which her stranger ghost came to reside. It was against this unrecognizable ghost who invaded her body and assumed her name that she turned by committing suicide.

WHAT IS BEHIND THE NAME?

> Nothing belongs to us any more.... They will even take away our name: and if we want to keep it, we will have to find ourselves the strength to do so, to manage somehow so that behind the name something of us, of us as we were, still remains. (Levi 1996, 27)

Born into a relatively modest family, Mahtab was encouraged by her father to pursue an education along with her two brothers and her only sister. The family was not particularly religious; her father was a leftist leaning nationalist like many urban Iranian men of his time who supported Mohammad Mossadegh and later became disillusioned by the U.S.-sponsored coup of 1953 that toppled him and returned Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi to power. Yet, by no means did her father's leftist inclination, which later translated to her and her two brothers, offer them immunity from the deeply engrained gender and social norms that shaped their subjective senses of self and subjectivity. As the oldest child, Mahtab was a great help to her mother in caring for her siblings. She followed her father's advice and studied hard to become a physician, later marrying another physician, with whom she had her son. The road to her social success finally seemed paved.

Yet, Mahtab grew sensitive to the harsh conditions of the lives of marginalized social groups to which she became further exposed when, as a young physician, she was assigned to conduct her residency in public hospitals in poor neighborhoods and remote areas. Her ears absorbed any whisper that desired and sought change in society, especially that which was advocated in the underground leftist texts that emphasized class struggle and social justice. Her kind soul could not tolerate living a comfortable life amidst the suffering of others. She thus embraced the revolutionary movement in its first harbinger and threw herself into its rising tides, though her nurturing character made her less of a radical revolutionary. She seemed to feel more fulfilled when providing tangible assistance to people. As a young physician, she found solace in treating the ill who could not afford to pay for it. Both in scope and in depth,

the injustice she witnessed was greater than the remedy provided by her professional devotion. Like many young intellectuals of her time, including her brothers, Mahtab sought the solution in a radical sociopolitical change in the system for which Marxism seemed to offer an alternative. With passion and excitement, she joined the revolutionary movement, hoping for a better future for her people. With millions of Iranians, Mahtab experienced the elation of the victory of the 1979 revolution, which seemed to have opened Iran to a world of opportunity and potential.

Yet, in a blink of an eye, everything changed. The euphoric revolutionary mode was soon replaced by the suffocating air of political suppression. In 1979, after two years of intense protests, the shah's despotic regime was defeated by one of that century's most popular and populated revolutions, Ruhollah Khomeini, who emerged as its victorious leader and immediately commanded that the new regime be titled the "Islamic Republic of Iran," "not one word less, not one word more,"[20] thereby mapping out the limits of the terrains within which Iranians were to maneuver (Jahanbakhash 2001, 135). Those who continued to voice their divergent views crowded the jails and cemeteries. Mahtab was soon arrested and imprisoned for supporting a leftist organization and for holding Marxist views, but not before her two brothers were arrested, executed, and buried in unmarked graves.

Not even a year into the inception of the new regime, Iraq, supported by the United States, invaded Iran and instigated eight years of bloody war between the two countries. The war allowed the new regime to justify the massive crushing of what it saw as its opponents within the country. Hundreds of arrests and executions occurred daily. The jails were so overpopulated that individuals were occasionally mistakenly tortured or even executed due to mix-ups like similarity in names.[21] Eventually, it became evident that resistance alone would not suffice. Defection became so common that the regime coined the term *tavvab* (repenter) to refer to collaborators. Through these collaborators, the state was able to penetrate into nearly every aspect of inmates' lives; even the most trivial activities were not invisible under their watchful eyes. The metamorphosis of these former comrades or friends into collaborators who reported on the inmates was extremely painful. These collaborators projected and transferred their suppressed hatred and anger toward their

interrogators and themselves onto the non-tavvab inmates.[22]

But by 1984, almost all the opposition organizations were crushed, and most of their affiliates who did not flee the country were either killed or jailed. The regime's goal to silence any voice of dissent was temporarily achieved. Thus, the intensity of interrogations and the number of executions decreased; the wards were raided by the guards less frequently, although the collaborators continued to feed inmates into the fires of hell that precede death. The regime too continued with its tactics of breaking the inmates' spirit of resistance. One of these tactics was to single out an individual or a small group of inmates and beat them while forcing other inmates to witness, not only to humiliate and crush the spirit of the one or the ones subjected to the beatings but to intimidate and set an example for others. Coercing inmates to watch these lashings was intended to degrade them and demolish their sense of dignity. Those who refused to witness these ceremonial tortures were also subjected to beatings. Not surprisingly, collaboration, suicidal attempts, and descent into insanity ensued.

Another tactic was to declare public recantation as the condition for the release of political prisoners, even when they were not found guilty. Nobody was to leave prison before denouncing herself or himself and all that for which she or he once stood. Public renunciations were also reinforced as a condition for attaining a lighter sentence or for avoiding execution. Inmates could be executed simply for refusing to recant. Sometimes, they were killed if the officials were not satisfied with the recantation. Some inmates, who had not been convicted at all or whose light sentence had been completed, remained imprisoned because they refused to submit to this degrading condition of their release. Among these was Mahtab, whose hope of release evaporated due to her refusal to recant.

A major reason for Mahtab's desired freedom was her wish to be reunited with her son, Farhad, who was five years old at the time of her arrest.[23] Having already lost his grandfather and father to illness and his two uncles to execution in the same year, Farhad was particularly attached to his mother who seemed to be the only consistent presence in his life. But his trust was shattered upon her arrest. When, months later, Mahtab's mother and Farhad were finally able to see her, Farhad appeared extremely agitated. He kept asking why she had left him alone.

Mahtab's answers did not seem to resonate with him. He complained about his living arrangement with his aunt, Mahtab's sister, and her husband.

Having been told by his grandmother and his aunt that it was up to Mahtab simply to accept the condition of her release to join him, he argued with her, imploring her to choose him over jail. He accused her of not loving him enough and agonized over being abandoned. Mahtab tried to explain why she was unable to surrender to the release conditions, yet Farhad remained unconvinced. Thus, Mahtab used all her energy and wits to create a close bond between Farhad and her sister, and, gradually, his complaints subsided. He seemed to have found comfort in his aunt. Although relieved, Mahtab was pained by her separation from her son and troubled by the palpable yet undefinable shift in their relationship.

THE ABYSS

In 1983, a group of leftist women inmates were taken to an unprecedented punishment ward in Ghezel Hesar Prison, near Tehran. From six o'clock in the morning until eleven o'clock at night prisoners were forced to sit, blindfolded and motionless, in small wooden cubicles, to which they were later referred as *tabootha* (coffins or graves). The head of this prison called it *karkhaneh-ye-adamsazi* (a human manufacturing factory). Covered in chador, with no movement permitted—the space was so tiny that there was no room to move anyway—while any sound, even coughing or sneezing, was punished by beatings, the inmates felt frozen in an eternal time. The overwhelming silence was broken only by the sounds of beatings and the recantations, religious hymns, or recitations of Qur'an broadcasted from the loudspeakers. Only a small minority of these inmates survived insanity, death by suicide, or falling into the abyss of collaboration as tavvabs.[24] Even inmates who were not subjected to this particular punishment were devastated by its disheartening result. The number of those remaining defiant further shrank, yet among them was Mahtab.

In 1984, due mainly to the pressure of the families on the regime, Ayatollah Hussein-Ali Montazeri, then substitute Supreme Religious Leader, sent a group of inspectors to investigate prisons conditions. Sub-

sequently, prisoners were allowed increased access to more books and regular outdoor time. The guards and tavvabs were relatively restrained in harassing inmates. Public renunciation was no longer mandatory, although inmates were still required to sign a paper in which, in less vilifying terms, they denounced their past and oppositional organizations. Accepting this new condition, many inmates were released, including nearly all tavvabs and some inmates who were pardoned before their sentences were completed. Yet, many leftist inmates, including Mahtab, refused to accept the conditions of release and remained imprisoned.

The lighter the conditions of release, the harsher grew Mahtab's mother's criticism of her. Mahtab's mother felt that Mahtab was prioritizing her political ideas over her family, thus failing to be a good mother, daughter, and sister. Mahtab's attempts to make her mother or her son comprehend her reasons for refusing what they saw as her path to freedom bore no fruit. While Mahtab maintained that denying her beliefs would undermine her dignity and leave nothing for or by which she could live, her mother remained unconvinced.[25] Mahtab was unable to convince her son that she was making the right decision, that, in denouncing her beliefs, she would only abandon herself and fail to set a good example for him. The more she withdrew and fell silent, the louder grew the conflicting voices within her.

Then came the summer of 1988. Shortly after Khomeini's acceptance of the 598 Convention of the United Nations to end the Iran-Iraq War, the Iranian militant organization, Mojahedin-e Khalgh-e Iran (the Iranian people's warriors), then based in and supported by Iraq, attacked the southwestern borders of Iran. Although the offense was immediately defeated, it led to hundreds of deaths on both sides and presented Iran with a "blessed" opportunity[26] to carry out its longtime plan to put an end to the problem of political prisoners. With the end of the war, Iranian President Hashemi Akbar Rafsanjani launched a new era of *baz sazi* (reconstruction), which necessitated the creation of a welcoming and secure environment for Western investors. Political prisons were a major hindrance towards achieving this goal. Prisons were to be emptied, but not before the elimination of inmates considered to be potential future dissidents. No one was to be released without feeling defeated and undignified.

Immediately following the Mojahedin's offense, all contacts be-

tween prisoners and the outside world were cut off. In large groups men inmates and Mojahedin women were retried in trials that lasted just a minute or two. They were asked: Are you a Muslim? Do you pray? Do you support the Islamic Republic? A negative answer sent them straight to execution. Over the course of two months, about five thousand prisoners were killed. Among them were inmates serving sentences, others whose time was already up, and still others who had never been convicted. Men who survived by responding in the affirmative were subjected to more torture in signing the release form. Some endured further humiliation by participating in a rally in front of the United Nations office in Tehran. They chanted their support for the Islamic Republic and denied the existence of torture and execution in Iran, while their aching bodies and injured souls screamed otherwise.

Leftist women survived mainly as the result of a conflict between two ayatollahs, Khomeini and Hussein-Ali Montazeri.[27] Montazeri opposed the execution of women, basing his argument on a certain interpretation of shari'a that asserts that a Muslim woman is not permitted to marry a non-Muslim man while a Muslim man is permitted, though not encouraged, to marry a non-Muslim woman.[28] Montazeri argued that, based on this reading, women are to follow their husbands' religious beliefs; thus a non-Muslim woman who marries a Muslim man should and often does convert to Islam, but a Muslim woman who marries a non-Muslim man would convert from Islam to the religion of her husband. From this, Montazeri deduces that women, including leftist women, are not entirely independent and accountable subjects and, thus, should not be killed for their beliefs. Khomeini disagrees. Referring instead to the Qur'anic verses, he argues that women and men are spiritually equal in God's eyes; hence women are equally responsible for their beliefs and should be killed for their heretic tendencies.[29]

News of the conflict between the two religious leaders leaked out. Pressure from some European countries combined with conflict within the regime forced the government to stop executing women. However, by then, many women affiliated with the Mojahedin had already been executed. In small groups, leftist women instead were taken to courts and sentenced to lashes five times a day, during prayer times, either to pledge their allegiance to Islam and accept to pray or to die. Placed in solitary confinement, these inmates' days and nights were spent being whipped

or anticipating the next round. Some announced a hunger strike, but the lashing continued. The few who tried to commit suicide were "saved" only to return to the lashing. The inmates who were waiting for their turn to be tried and whipped heard their friends' cries of shame with crushed souls and injured bodies. These cries kept them awake while the dread of a similar fate haunted them. In the face of madness and indignity, death often appeared as a glorious dream.

Yet, like execution, the lashing too suddenly stopped. Of those subjected to this punishment, just a very small number returned "unbroken." Less than one-third of the prisoners "survived" the massacre. Among them was Mahtab.[30] In the vacancy left in the wards and in inmates' hearts, despair grew deeper while hope became more fragile than ever. Still, the state relentlessly attempted to squeeze the last breath of resistance out of inmates before releasing them. It pressured inmates and their families to request a temporary, one- to two-week *morakhasi* (leave), telling them to "go out and see how your leaders live in luxury in the West without giving a damn about you."[31] The state assumed that, while home, the prisoners would cave to the emotional pressure from their families and their own conflicting feelings and would be forced to sign the release form.

Outside, inmates found themselves in a draining battle with their families and themselves. There are stories of parents who had heart attacks, strokes, or nervous breakdowns for having had to return their loved ones to jail. A small minority of inmates held on to its convictions until the regime gave up and sent them out without forcing them to sign the form. They were not legally released, but neither were they returned to prison. But for most inmates, including Mahtab, the pain of fighting their families and their own doubts proved to be too overwhelming. Signing the release form after years of resistance rendered their survival particularly melancholic.

Almost immediately after her release from prison in 1991, Mahtab resumed her career as a physician. No longer allowed to work in public hospitals, she opened two small offices, one in a poor neighborhood, where she treated most of her patients for free. After Mahtab's death, her funeral procession was crowded with patients who spoke highly of her to me, expressing great regret and disbelief at her death. They emphasized her invaluable role in their lives, not only for treating their physical ill-

ness but for attending to their emotional problems. Related one of her patients to me, "She was like a family counselor to us; she intervened in and mediated our conflicts, with so much humility." He continued, "But why? Why? How could such a skilled physician and incredible human being think of herself as worthless?" This question cannot be answered with such cliché medicalized diagnoses as depression or post traumatic stress disorder. Although these diagnoses may be correct, they fail to offer us insight into either the complexities of her life or the particular sociopolitical ambiance within which her peculiar subjectivities were formed. While it is impossible to offer a conclusive reason for her final decision, any attempt to understand it must be attentive to the interplay of her life and to the myriad factors, including but not limited to the particular sociopolitical, economic, cultural, historical, gender, and ethnic realities, that determined her being in this world.

THE VEXING SURVIVAL

Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok (1994, 136) portray the image of a "gaping wound" as that which the melancholic person attempts to hide but which remains as a source of agony. In Mahtab's case, the locus of this gaping wound is found in the loss of Mahtab's self-validity and her connection to the world. The image of this gaping wound is perhaps more daunting for Mahtab because she submitted to the government's conditions of release.

Yet, the most decisive blow to her already injured ego awaited her outside prison, within her own family. Mahtab returned to a son who no longer related to her as his mother and who had virtually replaced her with his aunt. Mahtab's efforts to draw closer to her son and to negotiate with her sister, who had willingly accepted the role of Farhad's caretaker, remained futile. With an already seemingly belittled political subjectivity, she was denied her familial roles as a mother, daughter, sister, and wife (widow).[32] These enormous and existential losses turned her body into a shell that concealed the gigantic abyss within her from others but arrested her gaze. The note of apology she left behind for the room cleaners conveyed the projection of her own sense of "disgust" and "horror" at the sight of this spectacle, this hollowed walking corpse.

But contrary to Freud's reflections in "Mourning and Melancholia,"

Mahtab's values, aspirations, and her sense of worthlessness are not produced within an isolated ego or by a fictive "autonomous" and adrift "I." Both the "I" and its perception are rather produced in and shaped by different collectives, including the family, the political community, the nation, and the world at large.[33] Her subjectivities, views, and ideals came out of the internalization, adaptation, contestations, and subversions of many sociopolitical discourses and practices. They emerged from and in relation to different collectives that informed and even confronted one another, for, as Michael Bakhtin (1981) reminds us, one's perceptions are never entirely one's own.[34]

Mahtab's decision to end her life must be understood in terms of criteria for a sense of dignity and self-worth drawn from different, sometimes overlapping and conflicting, collectives and discourses. She is the subject of a particular era in Iranian history, under the shah's regime, in which being a human was nearly synonymous with being modern. Modernity, at its core, entails believing in humanity's centrality in the world and history and emphasizing individual autonomy, which includes the ability to think, speak, and act consciously and independently. In this humanistic view, thinking and its expression in language are believed to be vital elements that differentiate humans from animals.

The capacity to think burdens the modern subject with a heavy sense of responsibility. As thinking individuals who believe that "people make their own history," as Karl Marx suggests, the Iranian leftists of that era assumed upon themselves the responsibility to fight tyranny and to educate people about the injustices inflicted on them (Cowling and Martin 2002, 19). Living and, if necessary, dying for justice was seen as tantamount to humanity. These activists saw themselves as heirs to both the gift and the burden of historical knowledge; they aimed to work toward what they saw as its destined direction: justice for all. As activists of this political cultural era, they assumed uncompromising convictions and were willing to sacrifice for them. This explains why inmates who compromised their beliefs were often left with a sense of crippled subjectivity, humiliated dignity, and even lost humanity. It is this sense of loss of humanity that cannot be acknowledged; indeed it must remain unrecognized, or repressed, especially within the vicious tavvabs.

Contrary to Freud's reading of melancholia as the "illness"[35] of the narcissistic types, and the suicide of a melancholic person as the sadis-

tic act of killing the other within, I suggest that it is the subject's keen gaze at the loss of the world within the self and of the self to the world that causes melancholia and later the killing of the stranger within. In looking too closely at one's death, one crosses the threshold into a world from which one cannot return. In exceeding the limits of reflectivity on this loss, survival is rendered impossible. It is the recognition of the loss of her political community and her kinship relation that cuts Mahtab's life cord. Severed from her familial and social roots, she not only loses herself as a political activist, a woman, and a mother but as a subject.

As modern political subjects in Iran, women bear a doubly onerous burden. They are usually caught between two impossible situations. On one hand, their worth is still judged, by society at large, in terms of their fulfillment of domestic and familial roles. As activists, they are often stigmatized as loose women and unfit mothers. To their families and society, they must prove that their familial roles are not compromised by their activism. On the other hand, to many of their comrades, they must show a simultaneous commitment to the political struggle and a readiness to leave all that behind whenever the cause demands. While on the conscious level most leftist activists resist conforming to these hegemonic gender roles, their judgments and perceptions are not entirely immune to the force of deeply rooted social norms and values.

Seen in this light, the vexing aporias of survival for leftist women inmates make sense. The very view that saves them denies them those faculties they deem imperative to their humanity. They are saved because they are not seen as real subjects. The possibility of their holistic subjectivity[36] is undermined; they are implicitly defined as non-agentive. Against this vision, Mahtab and other leftist women have fought most of their lives. Yet, they now are to live, while stripped of from the very meaning of their existence. How are they to embrace this survival? How does one mourn the loss of humanity within and the loss of oneself to humanity?[37]

Deprived of her political subjectivity,[38] Mahtab's investment in her gendered subjectivity is amplified. Yet, in the male dominant eyes of the society, she has already failed to fulfill her gender role. As a widow, she is no longer a wife; her relationship to her mother and her sister is severed; worst of all, with child bearing considered an almost indispensable condition of womanhood, the loss of herself as a mother compromises her

womanhood. With this latter assault, death seems inevitable; it is indeed already upon her. She must have perceived her invaluable contribution to her patients as tiny sands thrown into a bottomless well, which remain invisible and inaudible. The burden of carrying the weight of this hollow shell fades compared to the petrifying sight of the stranger ghost that inhabits the abyss within her. To eliminate this horrific sight, the body must be destroyed.

THE END?

> Melancholia rifts the subject, marking a limit to what it can accommodate. Because the subject does not, cannot, *reflect* on that loss, that loss marks the limit of reflexivity, that which exceeds (and conditions) its circuitry. Understood as foreclosure, that loss inaugurates the subject and threatens it with dissolution. (Butler 1997, 23)

What does it really mean to speak of the inevitability of death if it has already overtaken the subject? Why this utter annihilation? I would argue that Mahtab's choice to commit suicide should be seen not as ending her life but as putting a stop to a survival that has already been lost to her. By reflecting too deeply on her loss, by looking too closely at that unseeable gaping wound, at the disillusioned subject within herself, Mahtab reaches a limit beyond which life meets death. With the Mahtab she knew already disillusioned and replaced by a stranger, she seems to have become witness to her own ghost; she seems to have become her own ghost. Would this sight not be too unnerving? Would she not have to exorcize the ghost, evacuate it from its habitat, from her body that has become a constant reminder of death, her death? Yet, how does one eliminate a ghost that has one's own name, that is one's own ghost? How does one take away the body from oneself except by destroying it?

Thus, I would argue that it is not melancholia, but its cessation, that leads to Mahtab's decision to kill herself. For in the recognition of the death within, melancholia supersedes its own boundaries. In overstretching their boundaries, melancholia, mourning, and survival meet at the nexus where the survivors are to survive and mourn their own deaths. Here at this point of impossible possibility, at the very moment that they are no more, mourning, melancholia and survival collapse into one another. In having crossed the threshold of life and death, in hav-

ing entered into the domain of loss that was not to, could not, and must not, be recognized or reflected upon, Mahtab's survival and mourning come to a halt. Like Medusa, whose forbidden gaze turns her into a stone, Mahtab's "poisonous knowledge" [39] of her death shuts the door of the world of living on her (Das 2007, 57). From this world, return is impossible.

Yet, the alternative reading of Mahtab's suicide does not construe her death as an end, a giving in, or a finishing of the job her torturers had left unfinished, as some of her former inmates suggested.[40] In killing herself, Mahtab may have been refusing to live with a diminished subjectivity. Choosing death over this demeaning survival might be interpreted as a rejection of the demand to live as a "mere" woman whose subjectivity is defined by and confined within a set of imposed roles. The target of her repugnance, as Freud suggests, might not really be herself as such but the certain self that is forced upon her. In killing herself, Mahtab might be killing those non-agentive fragmented subjectivities by which she was defined, all of which deemed her defeated and abject. Her choice to end her life can be read as her way of repelling the non-subject, non-human self and reclaiming her humanity.

That her holistic subjectivity can only be asserted by and at the moment of her death reveals the exclusive boundaries of the polity and the kinship. Precisely here rests the most significant aspect of the relationship between the subject and the world that is obscured in Freud's reading of the relationship between melancholia, self-degradation, and suicide. I turn this inward-oriented notion of the ego turning against itself, or against that which it has become after the loss, outward. Mahtab's decision to kill herself exposes the injustices of a world that has no place for her, that excludes her, that deprives her of her existence as a social being. Here, death becomes a resistance against isolation, an assertion that life is possible only in relation to others.[41] In this sense, her decision to bring death onto herself is reminiscent of Antigone's choice to embrace her death which, in Butler's reading, also exposes and denotes the limits of the law of the state and the kinship (Butler 2000). Both Mahtab and Antigone find no place within the polity and their family. For Antigone, it is the prohibition against burying her brother and publicly mourning him that delivers her to death; in Mahtab's case, this deprivation from attending and mourning her loved ones becomes

multiplied and compounded.

Not only is Mahtab unable to mourn the deaths of her father and brother, for as a mother and an activist she must remain strong, but Mahtab cannot not even react to the absence of burials and the banning of mourning for her two executed brothers because she herself is arrested. She also must suppress the pain of separation from her son and her grief for so many lost comrades, for as a resistant political inmate she must reflect an unbending image. But even more impossible is to mourn or survive the loss of her living son and herself and her relationship with her family. Thus, to Butler's suggestion that Antigone is dead even before she walks towards death because of her exclusion from the imposed familial and societal terrains, I add the burden of the impossibility of mourning her brothers. In not mourning their death, she cannot survive, for, in my view, mourning is the condition of possibility of life, which is always already a survival.

In Mahtab's suicide one might also envision that which exceeds both death and language and yet is a turn to life through and in language. As in Butler's reading of Antigone, Mahtab's death opens up a kind of political possibility, which does not pose itself against but beyond and outside the law (Butler 2000). Yet, this possibility emerges only at the moment of her death, which exposes the limits of her world and its imposed subjectivity. Conjured as a linguistic and a representational gesture, Mahtab's death can signify for others a desire for and an allusion to new possibilities beyond the limits of the law of the polity and hegemonic subjectivities. The killing of her crippled subjectivity may be conjured as a resurrection of her humanity, which survives her death and lives on for others. Her death might be surmised not as a departure, or a turn to death, but a return to life now as a *shahed-shahid* (ever-present witness) through an act of shahadat (witnessing, testifying, and being present) to injustices of her time and to the limits of the world and its exclusionary laws.

In this sense, Mahtab's suicide becomes an exemplary act, not in the act itself but in that which it represents beyond itself. It lives on as a constant reminder of injustice, an act of refusal to submit to hegemonic rules and their imposed diminished subjectivities. It is a gist of a political possibility that reaches beyond the confines of the representation and representability within the polity. Mahtab's killing does not necessarily

imply an act of revenge or anger by Mahtab, but a way to detach herself from the dead within her and to assert her new subjectivity, which is born at the moment she decides to kill herself. As such, this death hints at a utopian possibility for a kind of existence that one tirelessly seeks, but never entirely achieves. While I do not dismiss the destructive quality of her choice, I choose to read what remains of it in life and for the lives of its survivors.

Undoubtedly no single formula can explain the diverse experiences of these former inmates in jail and after release. Upon their return, some of these inmates join families who indulge them with love and sensitivity and help them find new purpose in life, a process that helps heal their injured souls. Some disconnect themselves from everyone they knew in jail while others are there for each others' joyous and sorrowful moments.[42] Even among those who submitted and signed the release form, emotions vary depending on what happens in their lives after prison and how they come to interpret their act. In general, those who come to feel a sense of belonging to a community, including their family, seem to have a greater chance to redefine themselves and their relation to others and to the world.[43]

In lengthy conversations with these survivors, now scattered in Iran and throughout different parts of the Western world, such as Scandinavia, Canada, and the United States, I learned that some of these former inmates who had remained defiant in jail until the end express less concern about the reason for their survival. Even though they too were "saved" as non-agentive women, they seem convinced, or have convinced themselves, that their survival had more to do with their resistance and the pressure of the outside world on the regime than the conflict between the leaders. There are others so deeply disillusioned with their past and all that proved perishable that, like Freud's friends, they find no excitement in the present or future. They live, bereft of joy, with a lost past and a future that they do not await. Freud (1959b, 80) would have referred to their approach as a "revolt… against mourning."

Yet, there are still others who seek, and are able to find, a relative balance between a productive self-illusion and a safe, thus limited, recognition-reflection on their losses. The struggle to maintain this balance is endless, as is the never-ceasing work of mourning. They strive to come to terms with their loss in order to take on their roles as mourners-

survivors. To survive the world after their loss, they must redefine and recreate themselves in relation to the transformed and transforming others, including the dead. But since, in the death of a loved one something of the survivor dies too, the paradoxical work of mourning necessitates the reckoning of one's survival with a degree of reflection that leaves obscure to consciousness the very reality of the dead within. This means that survival does not merely demand a detachment from the dead but also from the dead within oneself. Yet neither form of detachment can be absolute. One's connection to the dead does not completely fade away but is transformed as the new self's relationship to the old self, which is not that of a complete rupture but a new configuration. Envisioning the possibility of creating new worlds and new selves can never be more than an aspiration, a utopian illusory hope, the pursuit of which makes life a possibility. In order to survive the kinds of radical losses of wars or political violence, it seems imperative, like Freud, to allow oneself naively to believe and convince oneself that "We shall build up again."

NOTES

1. That I have chosen the pseudonym, Mahtab, to speak of someone who is no longer with us may sound strange. Yet, I do not want to assume the liberty of telling her story while, due to her death, I have no way of acquiring permission to do so. Her story will be recognized by all those who knew her, including her former inmates. To others, she will be known as Mahtab. Mahtab is a female name that means moonlight. Like the moonlight, her story sheds light on the recent history of violence and dissent in Iran. Undoubtedly, many aspects of these histories remain obscured or mystified. Many more stories of such moonlights must be revealed for these precluded histories to come to light.

2. This text was found in a note that Mahtab wrote to the housekeepers just prior to her suicide. I translated these quote phrases from Persian to English.

3. I gathered this information about Mahtab's life from my own personal encounter with her and through conversations with her former inmates.

4. Subjectivities are not formed by autonomous isolated subjects. Rather, they are formed and performed in certain sociopolitical contexts. Values and ideals are shaped and reinforced not merely in and by language, law, and regimes of truths and knowledge, but also by their penetration and incorporation into our bodies and practices. These values and meanings are neither entirely free-floating nor stagnant and unchanging.

5. Whether one defines oneself in relation to a single solid subjectivity or to the constantly becoming multiple and multidimensional subjectivities impacts the ways in which one is affected by violence and loss. Furthermore, neither the

events nor the way individuals are affected by them are generically delineated or universally experienced. As Talal Asad (1997) argues, the pain that people exert on themselves—in religious rituals, in beautification, or for sexual satisfaction—is often neither seen as violence nor felt as traumatic.

6. Only after finishing this paper did I noticed that my appearance in it as an "I" occurs rather late. As though hiding behind the paper, I seem to allow it to speak on my behalf, offering a subjectivity of its own in the absence of that of my own. Thus appear such statements as "This paper journeys…." The structure of the paper too manifests my belated encounter with the reality of loss and survival. I embark upon Freud's writing on mourning and survival before directly engaging the story of Mahtab's life. In retrospect, I recognize my own struggle to come to grips with the loss and with my role as a mourner-survivor.

7. This rebirth becomes possible, I argue, by the very letting go of the old self without completely rupturing from it. This is analogous to the genealogical relationship wherein the genetic attributes of the new generation are the amalgamation of many traits of the previous generations, whom it resembles but with whom it is never identical.

8. In *Melancholic Freedom: Agency and the Spirit of Politics*, David Kyuman Kim (2008) employs Freud's notion of melancholia as that which we lose and yet to which we are so attached that we cannot recognize it. We have made such an enormous investment in that which was lost that we simply cannot live without it. Kim also draws on Judith Butler's notion of melancholia as constitutional condition of the subject to argue that while freedom is already lost to us, we still pursue it as the condition of our agentive subjectivity. I read Mahtab's suicide as an indication of the impossibility for her to live with a sense of loss of an agentive subjectivity in a post-Enlightenment world where the illusion of free and autonomous agent is so essential to the formation of the selfhood. This loss is even further complicated by the significance that is culturally assigned to a woman's ability to become, and perform the role of, a fitting mother, which leads to her assumption of a failed motherhood and hence her fragile gendered subjectivity.

9. Sigmund Freud (1959b, 80) recognizes this difference when he points out, "As regards the beauty of Nature, each time it is destroyed by winter it comes again next year."

10. Veena Das (2007), Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1983), Jacques Derrida (1992, 1994, 1995, 2001, 2007), Rosalind C. Morris (2000), and Stefania Pandolfo (1997) are only few examples of scholars who suggest that mourning and melancholia are not distinctly separable.

11. See Butler (1997 and 2000). But, in *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, Dominick LaCapra (2001) emphasizes the necessity of distinguishing between structural traumas and historical, particular ones. He argues that one must be wary of the consequences of confusing between an absence and a loss. Mourning for something that has never been, such as Freud's penis envy in women, differs from mourning a real loss. In the former case, mourning, he claims, will become an aporia, a never-ending grieving without a possibility to work through it. I add that it is erroneous to collapse the differences between the structural loss and hence the normalized melancholia and the melancholia that results from catastrophic losses

of traumatic events. No less problematic is it to compare mourning death of old age to mourning a devastating, untimely death of war or political violence or, like Freud, to utilize the metaphor of the seasonal decay of the beauty of the nature to speak of the losses of war, even though Freud is well aware that the losses of war are irreplaceable.

12. Of this impossible burden of survival, many scholars of trauma, including Giorgio Agamben (1999), Cathy Caruth (1996, 1997), and Jacque Derrida (1992, 1994, 1995, 2001, 2007) remind us.

13. No doubt Freud (1959c) is well aware that the losses of war are irreplaceable, but in his essay, "Thought For The Times on War And Death," he eloquently discusses the effective role of self-illusions, even though they are often followed by disillusionments.

14. Yet, Freud suggests that the shameless public expression of this self-criticism is a sign of the illness of melancholia.

15. Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok (1994) refer to the early stage of childhood, in which the ego seems to swallow everything in, as cannibalistic.

16. Abraham and Torok (1994) employ these terms, "introjection" and "incorporation," differently. In their definition, introjection suggests an opening up, a metamorphosis of the self as it undergoes an internal transformation, which they see as mourning and life. Incorporation, however, implies the impossibility of mourning or the intergeneration legacy of an interdiction of mourning. Their notion of incorporation thus seems to connote what Freud and other psychoanalysts identify as introjection. Referring to melancholia as the "illness of mourning," Torok suggests that the ego, which has introjected the lost love object within, puts out a whole drama of mourning as an act: "I stage and let everyone else see the full extent of my love object's grief over having lost me" (136). In this sense, the melancholics inflicting pain on themselves are doing nothing but lending their "flesh to their phantom object of love" (136 – 7).

17. Freud's notion of choice and its histories remains confined within an ego that seems to emerge in isolation or, at best, in relation to a nuclear family. Deleuze and Guattari (1983) suggest that this is a Victorian notion based on Oedipus; they refer to it as "the interior colony" (170). Freud's triad model of the individual as the id, ego, and superego mirrors and is mirrored by his nuclear family model and the society. In this framework, the father embodies the law and the superego, the child epitomizes the primitive lawless society and the id, and the adult serves as the civilized citizen who pursues a rational balance between obeying the law and his socially restrained desires and is characterized by the ego. To be fair, Freud neither assumes this balance to be fixed and unchallenged, nor is he oblivious to the problems of the modern world in shaping the characters of the individuals and families. Yet, as the mother seems to somewhat fade away in this equation or at is, at best, viewed as the source of lack and an impossible desire, the other kinds of collectivities or other nonwestern kinship models too escape his analysis.

18. The assumption that the perpetual occurrence of violence renders it habitual and less traumatic entails two profound fallacies. It ignores that in trauma temporality collapses. The traumatic experiences of the past permeate calamities

of the present and intensify anxiety about the future. It also neglects the fact that every traumatic event is experienced as a first-time occurrence even though its recognition is always belated. Each new traumatic event refreshes the old scars and awakens their memories.

19. I do not use the word "tolerance" as a capacity to bear hardship or to tolerate the other; rather, I use it in reference to the limits of the reflection on the loss when the loss targets what may be seen as the essence of one's humanity.

20. This phrase by Khomeini about the nature of the government that was to follow the victory of the 1979 revolution was widely broadcasted. For example, see the Iranian daily newspaper *Ettela'at* [Information], March 11, 1979.

21. A story of a certain Tahereh Samadi who was tortured in the place of another Tahereh Samadi is known to many woman inmates who witnessed the collapse of the "mistaken" one, only eighteen years old, into insanity.

22. See Rejali (1994), Sepehr (1997, 1998, 2000, 2001), Abrahamian (1999), Talebi (1999), and Agah, Mehr, and Parsi (2007). For a list of some of the books written about imprisonment in Iran under the Islamic Republic, see the Human Rights and Democracy Library Collection, a project of the Boroumand Foundation. See also "Memories, Memoirs and Arts: Women Political Prisoners of Iran," for selected articles and bibliography at http://www.utoronto.ca/prisonmemoirs/articles.htm. Readers of Persian will have access to a much larger body of literature.

23. Like Mahtab, Farhad is a pseudonym.

24. The word "tavvab" does not sufficiently convey what became of these inmates. Their tremendous hatred targeted anything and everything that reminded them of their past identities. In turning against the resistant inmates, these tavvabs sought to destroy any reminder of what they had lost in themselves. The unbearable weight of guilt and disgust was re-channeled against inmates who epitomized all that was lost to and in these collaborators. But it was not only the image of their past embodied in resistant inmates that they could not tolerate. Even more appalling perhaps was their vision of a future in which these now resistant inmates themselves became tavvabs. This is a hatred that crosses the frontiers of temporality. Its target is their lost past embodied in the unwavering inmates, the reality of their present state of being, and their reflection in the future of then-broken inmates. The inmates have no less resentment towards these tavvabs, for they too see in them the horrifying possibility of their own future. What each group hates in the other is its own potential reflection.

25. I am well aware that the reader might find it hard to make sense of Mahtab's refusal to submit to her release condition at the cost of losing her family. It is nearly impossible to relate to these women inmates' resistance without having lived in the particular political culture of the era or without sharing their notion of humanity.

26. The phrase alludes to Khomeini's reference to the Iran-Iraq War as *n'emat-e elahi* (God's blessing) as the war allowed the regime to release dissidents under the guise of external threat.

27. Ayatollah Montazeri was elected by Ayatollah Khomeini as his successor but was later expelled by Khomeini from his position.

28. These views were articulated in the columns of the daily newspapers, *Kayhan* [Galaxy] and *Ettela'at*, in 1988, and may also be found in Ayatollah Montazeri's letters and memoirs as well as the memoirs of prisoners.

29. To learn more about the difference between Montazeri's and Khomeini's views on the execution of women, see Behrooz (2005). See also Montazeri (2000, 309, 378).

30. Only after the inmates were sent home to visit their family were the enormity of the massacre and the scope of the brutality inflicted on the prisoners revealed.

31. This information was gleaned from interviews with former political prisoners. For more information, see the memoirs of former prisoners, including those of Nima Parvaresh (1995) and Monireh Baradaran (1994, 1996). For more information about prisons of this period, see Parsipour (1996) and Bathayee (1998).

32. Mahtab's husband died of cancer.

33. It is true though that Freud's reading of the ego is more complex and that Freud would not necessarily have suggested that Mahtab's sense of unworthiness was produced from within the isolated ego, but rather *produces* it as an (untenable) illusion, an alienation from the real that allows for the subject to live in relation to them, but contingently. Yet, I still suggest that Freud's Eurocentric approach diminishes the otherwise great potentials behind his complex ideas.

34. Nor is one's knowledge of the self, as Butler suggests, ever conclusive.

35. The term "illness" is used by Maria Torok in her discussion of melancholia as the "illness of mourning." See Abraham and Torok (1994, 107).

36. I do not use the word "holistic" to mean wholeness, which contradicts my argument that fragmentation is intrinsic to subjectivity that becomes reintroduced by their socio-cultural/political induction. I rather deploy the term against those hegemonic discourses that reduce women's subjectivity to a mere gendered subjectivity, to "mere" womanhood.

37. Only as one's ghost, as Freud suggests, might one envision one's death and become a spectator to one's own death. It is thus impossible to either imagine or mourn one's own death.

38. I am not speaking of politics or political subjectivity in a narrow sense of these terms. I rather invoke the notion of the political that, in Aristotle's definition, is inseparable from and essential to being human—for Aristotle, the human is essentially a political animal.

39. Veena Das uses this term to refer to the knowledge of the partition that Indian women hold inside.

40. This idea was mentioned frequently by former inmates in personal interviews and informal conversations.

41. Butler (1997, 190) suggests that melancholia is "a rebellion that has been put down, crushed. Yet it is not a static affair; it continues as a kind of 'work' that takes place by deflection." This I believe is the locus where the possibility and limitation of melancholia intersect.

42. In one case, a former inmate's child needed a bone marrow transplant and a costly operation in London. Networking among former inmates facilitated and

funded the trip and the procedure. Although the child did not survive, the funeral was attended by a large number of former inmates, some of whom showed up after years of absence from the circle.

43. Some former inmates were involved in helping the survivors of the Bam earthquake of 2003.

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