



Madness as Response-Ability Against State Terror: A Case Study from Iranian Revolution

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This chapter is dedicated to the memory of Darya.

Contents

Chapter Overview	4
Theoretical/Critical Constructs	4
Fetishization	4
Bodymind	5
Dialectical Historical Materialism	5
Transnational Disability Model	6
Enigmas and Aporias of Maddening Torture	7
Madness as Response-Ability: The Case of Darya	10
Raindrop in a Swamp	15
Madness Is Intersectional, Political, and Historical	16
References	18

Abstract

In this chapter, we engage with different forms of atrocities committed against imprisoned dissidents in post-revolutionary Iran. This is just a sample of state violence at large against its own people, from whom it seeks legitimacy and validation. This time, legitimacy is sort by a theocratic state. Through a case study, we demonstrate how madness can be both a product of and a response to state violence, namely, imprisonment and torture. Kazemi interviewed more than 30 former political prisoners who survived torture and imprisonment in the 1980s in Iran, and, now, live in exile, as part of the Iranian diaspora. Their testimonies demonstrate how human resilience can overcome the harshest of circumstances,

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sustain psychological harm, witness the madness and death of friends, and yet manage to carry it all to a harbor. By a harbor, we mean their own memoirs, silence, suicide, drawings, and even witnessing via “madness.” We investigate the processes and social relations involved in how some prisoners went “mad” and some remained “sane.” Using the Transnational Disability Model (Kazemi, *Critical Disability Discourse Journal*, 31–63: 2017), we defetishize their disability by demonstrating how madness and sanity can be deliberately created (i.e., socially organized and imposed) from within extremely brutal institutions. Also, we ponder the ways in which madness could be the bodymind’s “response” (Sakhi, *Ethics and the resistant subject* Levinas, Foucault, Marx. York University. Toronto: 2014) to power/violence or a “survival strategy” in the context of asymmetrical power relations (e.g., patriarchy, theocracy). As racialized activists-scholars from the global south, we strive in this chapter to re-articulate disabled-dissident subject’s “response-abilities” in the form of “madness.”

Keywords

Madness · theocracy · response-ability · political prisoner · Iran · Bodymind · witness · Iranian revolution · transnational disability model · Defetishizing disability

State violence is universal, and its ripple effects on individual lives and communities across societies vary significantly. After the eighteenth century and the arrival of modernity and the constitution of humans as subjects with rights, rights-based discourses legitimately condemn state violence. Equally, political philosophers such as Michel Foucault who are concerned about the state’s power to influence its subjects by way of governmentality also gather evidence for indelible markers of torture and violence on broken “bodyminds” of the subaltern. Although these are useful methods to approach and quantify state violence, they do not capture the “madness” inherent to dissidents, especially of the kind that transpires within prisons as highly politicized institutions. Neither are these methods “intersectional,” meaning they do not fully foreground inseparable dimensions of social justice struggles at the margins, where gender cannot be fully extricated from race, or race from class, or class from sexuality. In this chapter, we aim at transnationalizing and decolonizing disability (madness) as dissidence while theorizing the state as the embodiment of ableist social relations that injures its subjects. Documenting dissidence this way may come in handy for providing an intersectional locus for expanding the notion of experience within the fields of Transnational Disability Studies (DS) and Mad Studies.

Our interventions stem from Kazemi’s decade-long ethnographic research with prison survivors. She interviewed several former political prisoners who survived torture and imprisonment in the 1980s in Iran and now live in exile as part of the Iranian diaspora. This is not to suggest that political torture has ceased after the 1980s in Iran. In fact, since its inception in 1979, the Islamic Republic regime has never stopped imprisoning, torturing, and executing its dissidents and infringing the rights of minorities and women. These claims are well substantiated by international

human rights organizations, activists, and a plethora of evidence. For this chapter, however, we focus on the first decade after the revolution. The interviews were conducted in Farsi/Persian and were later translated into English by Kazemi.

Herein, we tell a story of a mad woman political dissident who fought the entire ideological and patriarchal apparatus of the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) with her bodymind. We theorize madness as a response-ability against retributive streaks of power and discuss how madness has always been a historical materialist construct, mediated by power relations. Focusing on the story of one “mad” prisoner, Darya, we examine how madness can be both a product of and a response to state violence, namely, imprisonment and torture. Kazemi gathered Darya’s life story, reading other prisoners’ memoirs and reports which mention Darya, listening to Darya’s former comrades and cellmates’ testimonies (in Farsi/Persian) firsthand, and reading some notes written (in Farsi/Persian) by Darya herself and collected by a family member. Unfortunately, Darya died not long after being released from prison in 1988, and therefore, Kazemi did not get a chance to interview her. Darya is a pseudonym. So are the rest of the names we use for the participants. The names of the former political prisoners who have written a memoir are cited as is. If they have written a memoir using an alias, we have mentioned the alias in citing their works. If they have used their own names, we too have cited them using their real names.

Following the Transnational Disability Model (TDM) (Kazemi, 2017), rooted in Dialectical Historical Materialism (DHM), we theorize disability (madness) in a transnational context at the intersections of gender, race, sexuality, and non-/citizenship within the theocratic nation-state. In contributing to intersectional and transnational approaches to madness and disability, we move away from mainstream DS content emerging from the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia. We retheorize disability by trying to unveil the ways in which discursive and artistic representations of the global northern disabled subjects in disability rights and culture movements in the West have eclipsed our focus on disability caused by violence (e.g., war, theocracy, nationalism, gender-based violence, and torture). In other words, rights-based discourses from the global north can be overdeterministic and essentializing. Consequently, they obscure frameworks such as those deployed by Darya during her uneventful everyday life.

Fully aware of the risk of perpetuating the existing racist discourse of orientalism, which has been described by Edward Said (1978) as a plague that portrays regions outside the West as backward, nondemocratic, and not fully civilized, our intention here is to shed light on the forms of disabling-maddening state violence in Iran, where theocracy rules. Our work demonstrates the agency and politicized identity and subjectivity of Iranian women who participated in the 1979 revolution and resisted the Islamic State that was born out of that revolution. Following Saidiya Hartman’s (1997) work – *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* – where she refuses to render the slave body as “spectacular” suffering for the consumption of the reader, we also refuse to reproduce political prisoners’ sufferings as commodity for the readers’ appetite. Instead, we focus on them for the following reasons:

1. To contextualize an individual's experience and illuminate prisoners' living conditions. In order to "see" the prisoners' resistance, we need to know what they were resisting against.
2. To theorize violence not in and of itself, but how it constitutes the subject at the axes of multiple and intersecting social locations, that is, through an intersectionality lens. When we say "intersectionality," we are talking about the intersection not just of identities but of social struggles.
3. To propose the possibility of bearing witness to oppression as a research avenue. Following DHM, we define witnessing as an act that involves politically conscious human beings who can analyze their own roles in the story and also provide the critical context for understanding power relations in order to change them.
4. To rehabilitate the notion of readership shaped by "orientalist" leanings, fetishism, and commodification. Torture narratives tend to get such responses from readers. We offer an alternative account of readership shaped by acts of "witnessing."

Chapter Overview

First, we present our theoretical framework. Then we define state violence and discuss how it operated as a disabling power under the theocratic state in Iran. In order to contextualize the case study, we describe the prisoners' living conditions in the 1980s in Iran including the methods of tortures they endured and how they responded to the ways in which state violence was exercised on their bodyminds. Subsequently, by presenting and analyzing the case of Darya, we theorize madness as a response-ability against crude power.

Theoretical/Critical Constructs

Fetishization

According to Erevelles (2011), when historical and social relations that create disability are overlooked, disability gets fetishized. For instance, one way in which DS (as a field of knowledge and as a discourse) fetishizes disability is by mostly focusing on the contemporary attitudes and barriers that turn impairment into disability and often ignoring the historical, political, and economic conditions that produce disability in global contexts (2011). Erevelles argues that the romanticization of DS in general has prevented us from seeing the roots of the ableist tradition. It seems that understanding disability as a local issue only satisfies the dominant powers in the social relations prevalent in the world. Erevelles argues that "the very category of disability operates as a commodity fetish that occludes the violence of the socio-economic system" (2011, p. 67).

Here, we take this further by arguing that it also occludes the violence of other exploitative social relations and processes, such as theocracy, incarceration, fascism, patriarchy, and political torture. By defetishizing, we mean carrying out a thorough analysis of these categories, in order to unveil the social relations behind their creation and to name the processes that render people disabled through violence. This unveiling process is equivalent to a defetishizing process, which we argue has a revolutionary capacity to produce non-ideological knowledge and praxis. For instance, in the case of the torture survivors' disability/madness, the process of defetishization can take place by listening to what the survivors have to say about their dissidence and encounter with political suppression and by refusing to believe the official narrative that the nation-states impose on us and on those who die and become disabled through state violence. If we aim at producing a form of knowledge based on the material reality under which disabled/mad 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, clerical fascism (Kalantari, 2016), theocracy, capitalism economy, and class society, contextualized within transnational political consciousness and activism.

Bodymind

Rooted in Buddhist philosophy, pioneered by traumatologist Babette Rothschild (2000), and further developed by Margaret Price (2014), Elie Clare (2017), and Sami Schalk (2018), "bodymind" is an approach to fathom the relationship between the human body and mind where they are perceived as a single integrated unit. Both terminology and the notion of bodymind attempt to tackle the duality of body (and) mind and resist the traditions of their separability. The term bodymind is typically encountered in Mad Studies and DS, referring to the intricate and often inseparable relationship between the body and the mind and how these two units cannot be dissected. By "bodymind," Margaret Price means "a sociopolitically constituted and material entity that emerges through both structural (power- and violence-laden) contexts and also individual (specific) experience" (2014, p. 4). Throughout this chapter, we follow Price's conceptualization of bodymind as it pertains to the physical and mental disabilities discussed in the case study. Our goal is to underline the fully integrated nature of the body and mind and the inseparability of the two in the harshest of circumstances such as torture.

Dialectical Historical Materialism

In *The German Ideology* (Marx & Engels, 1932/1998), the foundational conception of DHM was set and constituted as a new method of social inquiry and of recording history. Marx defined historical materialism as a way to understand the material conditions of humans through history. By understanding the material conditions of humans through history, Marx argued, human beings can come to understand their

current social and political conditions. He developed DHM as a way to de-mystify human relations and understand history as a result of “sensuous activity of [hu]man [s]” (p. 25). Marx, as he argues in the *Theses on Feuerbach*, believed that knowledge is not separate/separable from the physical body and therefore not separate/separable from the material world. Marx according to his own words was out to change the world, not just interpret it. In formulating the approach of DHM, he developed a new knowledge adequate for creating change “with a centrally-situated agent or subject, without whom no transformative politics would be possible” (Bannerji, 1995, p. 19). From the standpoint of Marxist disability theory, the task is to use DHM to present a dialectical and reflexive understanding of disability, difference, subjectivity, and agency. The key to understanding DHM, and using it, is to understand everything as it relates to history, ideology, and social structures, such as class.

Ebert (1996) describes historical materialism as:

a mode of knowing that inquires into what is not said, into the silences and the suppressed or missing, in order to uncover the concealed operations of power and the socio-economic relations connecting the myriad details and representation of our lives . . . [historical materialism] . . . disrupts “what is” to explain how social differences – specifically gender, race, sexuality, and class [and to which Erevelles (2011) adds disability] – have been systematically produced and continue to operate within regimes of exploitation, so that we can change them. It is the means for producing *transformative knowledge* (Ebert, 1996, p. 7)

In this project, we do not just look for causality or correlations. Instead, we go beyond what is apparent and examine the case study dialectically. Marx believed that phenomena are “processes” rather than discreet “things” and that every phenomenon is mediated by relations and forms of consciousness in extended circumstances from the past. We adopt this way of thinking, dialectically examining what constitutes reality at any given time and space, and throughout the chapter, we want you to shift from binary, oppositional, and linear thinking to dialectical thinking and historical materialist understandings of contemporary social relations. According to DHM, the dialectical relationship between labor and capital leads to a relation called class. The state, on the other hand, is an organized structure made up of people that serves the interest of the ruling class, meaning the capitalist, nationalist, and in this case theocratic power. Ideology refers to a set of beliefs rooted in a particular social order, held by a certain group of people, to serve the interest of the ruling class while concealing material reality.

Transnational Disability Model

The existing theories in DS are not typically modelled on injury, as a socially caused disability. Although the existing models have much to say about disabilities after they are created, they have said little about why and how disabilities are created or the material conditions and historical processes surrounding their creation. In other words, DS is mostly interested in celebrating disability, embracing difference (Kafer, 2013; Kupperts, 2009; McRuer, 2006), and imagining radical possibilities, including

intersubjectivity and interdependence (Fritsch, 2010; Shildrick, 2009) as necessary pillars for a just world, particularly in the global north. This approach is capable of radical possibilities. However, if mere power imbalance causes people to *become* disabled at the hands of the other, how can we just celebrate that as difference and not mark it as a social wound? Besides, the celebratory politics of DS are very much Western-oriented, bourgeois, and not applicable to other parts of the world where people become disabled on a larger scale due to poverty, war, domestic violence, etc. Unfortunately, in the Western academy, one looks at these social practices as a form of violence in certain “cultures” but not necessarily as a *disabling* process.

We argue that an intersectional disability perspective should be deployed that not only engages with disability but also takes into account its close tie with race, gender, ethnicity, class, history, and geographical location within the material context of post/neo-colonial, imperialist, and theocratic states. Such a perspective is radical and anti-ableist because it is neither compliant to normative demands/standards (e.g., white, European, English-speaking, bourgeois, heterosexual, and non-disabled) nor is it complicit in bourgeois democratic agendas. This is what we mean by “transnational”: engaging the local and global politics that render racialized bodies disabled by pure power imbalance and violence.

Besides being rooted in the material world, a transnational model means a) we can imagine a world with no borders and avoid trying to impose a universal disability identity upon all disabled people; b) we can resist what dominant DS has been teaching us, which centers “whiteness” and the “West” as its inseparable norms (Chen, 2012; Dossa, 2008; Erevelles, 2011; Meekosha, 2011; Bell, 2006; Gorman, 2016); and c) we can start imagining an organized and diverse group of people with intersectional and community-oriented response-abilities beyond nation-states’ borders. d) Relying on Marx’s dialectics, TDM can reveal the social relations of disability beyond the instantaneous narrative that the subject conjures, one which can attend to both the social organization of disablement and the situated consciousness/knowledges of, and resistance to, these social relations and power structures. The “what” we try to demonstrate here is how state violence *causes* disability and/or madness on a systemic level, and, equally, the capacity of dissidents in deploying madness as a way to respond to state power, a mode of resistance in all its myriad forms and shapes.

Enigmas and Aporias of Maddening Torture

The following section includes graphic references to topics such as physical, psychological, and sexual abuse and torture.

We are committed to enabling a trueful act of witnessing on the parts of the readers in whatever circumstance they are (e.g., in prisons, in psychiatric wards, in the global south, etc.). Not all forms of state violence are of the same style or degree. For example, in liberal democratic societies, state violence occurs in less direct ways, though still with the same purpose as that of the global southern states: preserving power and disciplining the masses (Blakeley, 2010). State violence targets sex

workers, poor people, homeless people, queer, trans, black, Indigenous, people of color, and im-/migrants by hindering their access to humane treatment by law enforcement, health services, and educational institutions. Sometimes, denying access to those essentials could result in death, disablement, injury, deportation, or lifelong trauma. Additionally, transnational capitalism produces social inequalities in employment and access to financial resources, as its inherent logic is exploitation and not “equality” of access to the means and modes of production.

The IRI interrogated, tortured, and executed thousands of people in the immediate years following the 1979 revolution whose hallmark is the 1988 massacre in which approximately 5000 people were executed, most of whom had already served their prison sentences and should have technically been released (Iranian People’s Tribunal, 2012; Abrahamian, 2008; Akhavan, 2017). According to numerous accounts, prison memoirs (see Agah et al., 2007; Talebi, 2011; Mesdaghi, 2006; Parvaz, 2002; Parsipour, 1995; Baradaran, 2000), witness testimonies (see Sakhi, 2009), interviews, and the finding of the Iranian People’s Tribunal’s Truth Commissions, prisoners were held under extremely inhuman conditions, and the torture methods comprised of beatings, sleep deprivation, standing still for up to 72 hours, bastinado, flagellation, and ghapani. Furthermore, “Other forms of torture included: the squeezing of testicles, the infliction of burns with lighters, cigarettes or hot irons, deliberate mutilation, the tying of prisoners to gallows for long durations in winter and summer, and the violent thrusting of a ballpoint pen up a prisoner’s nose” (Iranian People’s Tribunal, 2012, p. 21). Monireh Baradaran (2001), an Iranian dissident who spent 9 years behind bars as a political prisoner under the Islamic regime in Iran, argues that torture does not stay in prison, but leaks outside and affects every layer of society through what she calls “torture’s ripple effect,” which fosters fear and anxiety in the masses.

The Iranian People’s Tribunal’s Truth Commission found that during the 1980s, “political prisoners in Iran, besides getting beaten and abused on a regular basis, were also kept in grossly unhygienic conditions. They were denied soap and the right to showers. The prisons were overcrowded, leading to cases of skin diseases. Cells were teeming with rats; clothes, with lice. One survivor reported that a clergyman came to inspect her cell but would not enter because the smell was so ghastly” (2012, p. 24). Bastinado destroyed many prisoners’ feet. One prisoner, Hassan (a pseudonym for one of the former prisoners who was interviewed by Kazemi) mentioned a prisoner whose feet were flogged with an electric cord/cable to the degree that it had turned black, which led to double amputation of his legs. Kidney failure as a result of bastinado was prevalent. There were people with disfigured feet or with a hole on the bottom of their feet caused by bastinado. Tiny toes were a target in some instances. Beatings with electric cables caused injuries including those that of brain. Hassan informed Kazemi about a prisoner who had had a concussion after being hit by an electric cable in the head repeatedly during an interrogation. After that incident, the prisoner showed sign of psychological “disorders,” although only in the wintertime.

Mad/disabled people inside the IRI prisons were the living proof of the violence that was committed against the prisoners. The IRI regime, as a young state in the

modern era, is an amalgamation of a hardliner religious fundamentalist ideology, carceral statehood, and commitment to corporal punishment. This regime arrested its political dissidents on a massive scale in the 1980s and incarcerated and tortured them for years (Abrahamian, 1999; Makaremi, 2015; Mesdaghi, 2006; Talebi, 2011). However, once people showed “non-normative” behavior or psychological distress, the regime did not commit them right away to psychiatric treatment or any kind of psychological therapy. Instead, it kept them for a long time either in solitary confinement or in a close proximity to other prisoners for two reasons, as we have learned from our conversations with the former prisoners of the regime: 1. to use those prisoners’ bodymind as a “mirror” to frighten and threaten the others that this is what you could *become* and 2. to objectify the distressed prisoners’ bodymind and turning them into scary objects in order to put extreme psychological pressure on others to recant, repent, submit, and write a letter to condemn their past political activity (read everything they ever stood for as political dissidents).

Prisoners’ memoirs are the windows through which we witness what really happened in the IRI’s prisons during the 1980s. A few names kept repeating themselves in our perusal of Iranian prison literature from the post-revolutionary era as much in conversations with prison survivors. Many were just names. This meant that we could not always match a name against living evidence such as memoir. Some were executed and some institutionalized in a psychiatric ward and/or ended their own lives after dealing with severe physical and/or mental health concerns. Besides, the Iranian People’s Tribunal’s Truth Commission (2012, p. 188) found that “Some people went mad in prison; everybody suffered either physical or psychological damage. In Evin and Ghezel Hesar prisons, it was possible to hear people being tortured and their bones broken at night; the witness’s jaw was broken during torture.” These people had entered the IRI prisons with a non-disabled bodymind and exited it (if at all) with shattered ones. What had happened to them? Who were they? We call them “mad” prisoners.

We use the word “mad” to refer to political prisoners who showed “non-normative” behavior. Non-normative behavior included not speaking with anyone for long periods of time, going nude in public, staying under really cold or hot showers with their clothes on for a long time, becoming incontinent, not caring about personal hygiene, going periodically catatonic and not moving for long periods of time, refusing to eat for days, hoarding food and other things, masturbating in public, cursing guards and regime officials, imitating animals [e.g., jumping like a kangaroo], going against the ward’s regulations, being delusional, and being actively suicidal. These behaviors are ones often described by the fellow prisoners Kazemi has spoken with and, in rare cases, by family members. However, madness played out in many shapes and forms. For instance, prisoners perceived their cellmate as mad if she/he gazed into oblivion and remained silent for a long time. Or, one who was engaged in washing themselves too much or was obsessed with cleaning was perceived as someone with “obsessive-compulsive disorder.” If someone refused to use the bathroom and, therefore, became smelly and unbearable, she/he was perceived as mad. Finally, one with unrealistic hopes would come across as “delusional.”

One of Kazemi's interviewee survivors, Souri, mentioned that what the state terror needed to perform effectively in order to subdue people was to keep them in limbo, a place where contradictions intersected, overlapped, and were reinforced. For example, Souri reported that the regime demanded that they spied on their fellow prisoner, to somehow demonstrate their collaboration with the prison system, and "to participate in the slippery slope of the rational strategic action of survivalism" (Sakhi, 2017, p. 6), if they wanted their own torture to stop. Fledman (1991) argues that discipline divides the prisoner into a body and a self; the self becomes a part of the panoptic machine that applies discipline to its own body. As such, you are stuck between wanting to stop your own suffering and having the power to make your friend suffer. This contradiction, Souri says, is traumatic, *per se*, because it drives you to a point of confusion and suffering where you might not be able to make an ethical decision after all. The psychological pressure caused by these imposed contradictions, jig-sawing between resistance and submission, sanity and madness, and self and the "Other," was tremendous. Many could not put up with this pressure and gave in to the regime's demands, accepted the conditions, and sometimes even collaborated with their own oppressors in apprehending those who were once comrades. Some responded to this pressure by embracing "madness." Ceasing to exist in a certain form and metamorphosing into something else was a *response* to the non-normative conditions they had encountered.

After more than 30 years since their release, some survivors continued to have nightmares and sleep terrors. Some developed new phobias that they never had before. One prisoner, Nastaran (a pseudonym for one of the former prisoners who was interviewed by Kazemi), for instance, mentioned that she developed a fear of heights that she never had before going to prison. Some became claustrophobic. Some sit on the edge of their seat after 40 years since the days that they had to live in an extremely overcrowded cells packed like sardines. Many developed physical conditions and/or permanent damage, such as spider veins, varicocele, backache, extreme pain in legs and feet, and seizures after going through mandatory standing for up to 36 to 72 or more hours at the time. The psychological effects were also devastating. Some started hallucinating after remaining sleepless for few hours or days at the time. As is self-evident from these accounts, "becoming mad" is a historical materialist process and category – not a pathology. Madness is also a locally created human condition as much as an alternative state of existence, so as to handle extreme forms of dehumanizing torture and prolonged incarceration.

Madness as Response-Ability: The Case of Darya

No doubt, I have, perhaps, gone mad. ~ found in Darya's personal notes (To preserve Darya's anonymity, we refrain from referencing the source, which was given to Kazemi by a member of Darya's family.)

Where there is power, there is also resistance. However, when mass atrocities are narrated in criminal courts, the "victim" is supposed to testify about how power was exercised on his/her bodymind, rather than how she/he *responded* to that power. By

“response,” we mean resistance, submission, breaking, collaboration, silence, etc. The word “broken” in here as well as the Iranian prison literature refers to breaking inside, submission, and “converting” to what the totalizing system wants from you, Islam in the case of this chapter, and not “psychological breakdown” or a “psychotic break.”

One form of torture that produced many mad people was the so-called Resurrection/boxes/graves/machines, the human-making factory” (*kārkhāneh-ye-ādam sāzi*), or the human-making machine (*dastgah-e-ādam sāzi*) that was experimented in Ghezel Hesar prison from the summer of 1983 to the fall of 1984. “Prisoners were forced to squat for hours in boxes in the form of coffins (‘the Grave’, also known as ‘Resurrection’), with Quranic incantations sometimes blared loudly at them, during which they were intermittently beaten and whipped on their heads and faces” (Iranian People’s Tribunal, 2012, p. 34).

Shokoufeh Sakhi, a former Leftist political prisoner, who spent 8 years in the IRI’s prisons (9 months of which was in the “coffins”) and later became the Tribunal’s Executive Director, problematized a purely legal approach to justice-seeking. Sakhi argued that the survivors should not be reduced to helpless victims, bearers of the perpetrators’ power, inscribed on their bodyminds. Instead, she argued, people, who have resisted the IRI’s power in one way or another, should be allowed to say how *they* responded to power. The point, Sakhi (2014) argued, is to acknowledge the “response-ability” of the survivors, however tormented their sense of agency, subjectivity, and autonomy may be. This shift from perpetrator’s power to the survivor’s response to power is what distinguishes a legal approach to justice-seeking from an ethical approach, argues Sakhi (2017). Therefore, to adopt the ethical approach instead of a purely legal approach, we conceptualize mad behavior of the mad prisoners as a *response* to the forms of power (including ideological components) exercised in political prison. We refrain from pathologizing those behaviors from a biomedical perspective, which usually discount the historical and socio-cultural context in which the behavior occurs. Instead, we strive to unpack those non-normative actions and expressions as a way to understand them, not to diagnose, label, or judge them with a pitiful eye and ear.

We narrate Darya’s story, although it is incredibly difficult to pick and choose only one story to tell when there are so many people who perished in the brutal suppression of dissidents in post-revolutionary Iran. We picked Darya’s story because it is a representative of many young people’s stories who gave up their comfortable lives in the Western countries to join the masses, to participate in the revolution against monarchy, and to make their own history, including Kazemi’s father. Coming back to Darya, she was a member of a secular-leftist organization during and after the 1979 revolution in Iran. Darya was a double-major graduate student at a top university in the United States. During the revolution, while in her 20s, she gave up her graduate studies and went back to Iran to participate in the revolution like many other Iranian university students across the world did.

Shortly after the revolution, in June 1981, the newly established theocratic state, which was reluctant to share power with other political parties, cracked down on its opposition on a massive scale. The members, and even sympathizers, of the leftist

political organizations, who got arrested, went through unimaginable physical and psychological torture. Darya was arrested in March 1982 and tortured for approximately 7 months, before being tried in a 15-minute-long “court” with no attorney, which sentenced her to 5 years of imprisonment. Darya spent the next 5 years in several prisons in and around Tehran, three of which was spent in solitary confinement. According to one of her cellmates, in the first prison she was at, after her 7-month-long initial interrogation period, which involved physical and psychological torture, she started showing “non-normative” behavior. She would walk for long hours in the tiny cell, speak with herself, refuse to eat or drink, stay awake at night, and go under a very cold shower with her clothes on.

Darya attempted to take her own life four times but failed. Once, she even swallowed a needle, hoping it would kill her, but it did not. M.G. (Kazemi interviewed M.G. to hear about Darya), who was Darya’s cellmate during the first 7 months of her imprisonment, told us that their cell was so tiny that three people could not even lie down comfortably in it. She stated:

Darya was interrogated constantly while bleeding due to her hemorrhoid problem. In her good days, she would teach us French language. On her bad days, she would not fall asleep sometimes for four or five days in a row; She would scream at night. As soon as she would get a little better, they would take her again for interrogation. They may have done terrible things to her. Darya was swearing at everyone. She looked at them from above. She would get kind suddenly. She was incontinent and bleeding constantly. She swore at the guards all the time. She would walk all day and tap her fingers on the wall, as if she was talking to someone. She was moody. She would stare at things for a long time. She was very anxious and stressed. Darya could not sleep. She would jump up and down. If her clothes got wet in blood, she would knock on the door violently and scream.

M.G. also mentioned that they did not have any access to clean clothes or even a spare underwear, never mind a sanitary napkin which is a necessity for women. Kazemi asked M.G. what she thought the first signs of madness were. M.G. who is a nurse responded that the first signs of “madness” were aggression, separation from others, the way the mad prisoners’ eyes looked, vanity (*chap ravi* or being too radical), sleeplessness, praying all day and night, forgetfulness, and memory problems.

Darya and many other political activists at the time carried a cyanide capsule under their tongue. This was meant to protect their dignity, their information (e.g., names, organizational ranks, addresses), and therefore their comrades, in case they got arrested and landed in the regime’s torture chambers. Because the regime was determined to crush people with torture and break them at any cost, many political activists were prepared to die but not break (i.e., respond to the state by submission). Swallowing a cyanide capsule was not aimed at just ending one’s life, although that was the inevitable consequence. It was instead meant to deprive the state of subjugation, torture, extraction of information, and endangerment of other dissidents with that information. Keeping a cyanide capsule under their tongues was a deliberate act of “response-ability” because this was not an act of self-annihilation but a way to

protect the dignity of comrades. This was meant to protect comradeship beyond their corporeal boundaries. They prioritized their collective will over individual survival.

The TDM lens that we use here to examine this case is a helpful lens as it does acknowledge the possibility and necessity of people's participation in making their own history. The TDM approach does not end at the exercise of power on the prisoners' bodymind but extends to politically conscious human beings who can analyze their own roles in the story and respond to that power. As such, using a TDM lens rooted in DHM, we argue that it is not just the state that uses the prisoners' bodymind to exercise its power but also the prisoner who utilizes her bodymind to resist the state apparatus. Thus, prisoners such as Darya use their corporeal will to protect the larger cartography of their commitment and mission. This is where responsibility becomes the Transnational Disability Praxis in a collective sense. Darya's response, which is beyond protection of the self who is in pain, is the will to die protecting the community will.

After unbearable torture during interrogation for 7 months, she tried four times to die by suicide which was unsuccessful. The necessity of resistance was encapsulated in her decision to live a life with agency and dignity, rather than living a life with submission which would have reduced her to what Sakhi calls "the survival ego," a self who lives for herself in herself. Sakhi (2014, p. 2), who resisted for 8 years in prison, defines "resistance" as an indication of the prisoner's ability to respond to power, or response-ability. She states:

resistance is a process, an event, aroused as a response on the part of human beings to something and for something. In this sense, resistance as a response evoked by a human condition, a response to and for, is the manifestation of human's response-ability, a human capacity to respond.

Therefore, as long as the prisoner does not allow the totalizing system to replace him/her with a "system-compatible identity of the given system," that prisoner has resisted that totalizing system. It is at this crucial moment that "madness" should be interpreted as dissent and resistance, because it, in and itself, prevents the totalizing system to metamorphosize the prisoner from Other-of-the-state to Same-as-the-state.

In 1984, Darya was transferred to solitary in Gohardasht, which was known for its horrific solitary cells, absolute silence, and maddening isolation. Darya immediately demanded to get out of the solitary, but the guards just ignored her. Therefore, she went on hunger strike and refused to eat, but that did not change anything in her treatment by the regime. Refusing to eat is an act of resistance and defiance as we have seen in Irish, Turkish, and Indian prisoners who have gone on hunger strikes to resist state suppression or to protest their living conditions in prison. One survivor, M.Z. (We refrain from referencing the source to this blog to protect Darya's anonymity), wrote in her blog that the regime frequently force-fed Darya by putting a funnel inside her mouth while uttering the most malicious and dirty sexual slurs and insults at her. She was never silent. Instead, she was loud and clear and always shouted her demands.

In prison, Darya had a hemorrhoid problem, which got worse during her time in prison as the prison officials refused to provide her with the most basic treatments or even just her own medication. Many people remember her having bleeding problem without access to sanitary napkins, medication, and clean towels. Darya had bulging eyes, which could have been caused by hyperthyroidism or scurvy (caused by a lack of vitamin C). An inmate, who is a nurse, believes that Darya's psychological state must have been affected by her extreme lack of iron. Her blood pressure was often low; and her skin was at times yellowish, which could have been a sign of jaundice or a malfunctioning liver. Darya dealt with several physical and psychological concerns, which underscores the inseparability between the body and the mind. Also, the wounds caused by the state brutality seem as inseparable as the collective will and response-ability emanating from her wounds.

In Gohardasht prison's solitary cells, Darya would not communicate much with others. The prisoners mostly used Morse code. However, she would applaud inmates if they sang a song which infuriated the guards. All they wanted was the systemic breaking of the prisoners under maddening silence. They definitely did not appreciate prisoners building solidarity among themselves by a group song, punctuated with clapping. Darya talked with herself or her mother who was not there. She would also repeat her entire interrogation sessions. M.A. said that when Darya was brought back to Evin, she was completely mad, skinny, and with bulging eyes (cited in Sadr & Amin, 2012, [Page number is not provided to protect Darya's anonymity]). Many thought that Darya must have been raped, although there is no way to confirm or deny this assumption. She would perform the scenes that might have happened to her, such as unwanted sexual contact. We interpret these attempts as a way for Darya to communicate her pain and resistance to her comrades. Darya used dramaturgy as a rhetorical device aligned to madness. Dramaturgy aided Daria to go wholesomely non-normative in telling others what happened to her. This was much superior to a normative, and yet seemingly acceptable, statement. Darya appeared to have lost her hold on the here and now. Her face was just bones. M.A. pointed out that everyone realized that Darya "was not feeling well" (i.e., *hālesh khōb nabōd*), since her body language told her story loud and clear. M.A. said in her testimony that she was afraid of Darya. She avoided her. She believed that the reason they brought Darya back to the ward was to show what the ultimate resistance would do to someone. Going mad was a warning sign. She testified that looking at Darya one could understand what can actually be done to someone's bodymind (cited in Sadr & Amin, 2012).

F.A. was placed next to Darya in Gohardasht prison. F.A. said in a radio interview that Darya was taken out of her cell and tortured for a while (we refrain from giving reference to the interview to protect Darya's identity). When she was brought back, according to her cellmates, "she had lost her psychological balance" (i.e., *ta 'ādol e ravāniash rā az dast dāde bood*). This expression is used in Persian/Farsi to indicate the onset of "madness." She sang the famous socialist anthem, the "*L'Internationale*" in French in her cell, which has been a standard of the socialist movement since the late nineteenth century. It appears, as though, she was using her voice to resist the maddening silence and to declare herself alive. As soon as the guards heard her, she was taken away for more torture and interrogation. They

brought her back after a few days, while she was in a very bad psychological state. She screamed constantly and protested her living conditions. One day, Darya, persistently washing herself, had left the water tap on in her cell, and water had leaked outside, which enraged the guards, and they beat her up. They turned off the main water pipe to her cell, so she did not have access to water any longer. F.A. and her mates learned by experience that this type of obsession with cleaning and compulsion to self-wash characterized women prisoners who had been sexually abused by the guards. They had basically observed that usually inmates who were raped felt “unclean” and “dirty” and washed themselves compulsively. Darya was doing the same after coming back from an interrogation session. This is another indication that any behavior perceived as mad cannot be understood outside its social and historical context. We are never mad inside our bodies alone. Rather, we are perceived as mad by others who interpret our behavior as madness. In this case, if we contextualize Darya’s “obsessive-compulsive” behavior, which resulted in over-cleaning, we would start to see it as a response to the embodied experience of violence and not a pathology.

Monireh Baradaran (2000) wrote in her memoir that Darya was incontinent and semi-conscious as a result of the [perhaps psychiatric] medication that she was given by the guards. Note that medicating Darya was perhaps causing Darya’s mental health and physical issues rather than “fixing” them. One of the prisoners who happened to be a nurse frequently asked the guards to take Darya to the prison clinic, but they took her to the Gohardasht’s notorious solitary, instead, and kept her there for 2.5 years. She never got back to her former self. Monireh reports that she saw Darya years later in Ghezel Hesar prison where she thought she had become “better” with the help of the pills. According to Monireh, Darya was an extraordinary learner and teacher. On the days that she felt well, she would study or teach French to others. Those who had seen her there remembered that the guards constantly beat Darya because they thought that you could treat “mental illness” by physical beatings. In the contexts of total isolation, psychiatric symptoms emerge, even in prisoners with no history of mental health issues. There is extensive literature documenting the horrific effects of solitary on prisoners (see Kupers, 1999, 2006; Rhodes, 2004).

Raindrop in a Swamp

Darya was released in 1988. She went to Europe, where she joined Amnesty International and also helped asylum seekers with their cases. According to a friend, who saw her in Europe after her release, Darya found the outside world very different from how she had left it. Her socialist dreams had turned into, what Esmaeil Khoei called, “a raindrop that fell into the swamp.” It seemed that what Darya and her comrades had stood for was not the people’s main concern any longer. People were living their lives as if the IRI was a legitimate state with popular support. The internal contradictions, inherent to every revolution and massive social change, were too much to handle for almost all political prisoners who were finally released. Few

months after her release, unfortunately, she passed away or committed suicide. There are several contradictory stories about how she died or, perhaps, ended her life.

Darya's story brings into sharp relief the non-linear workings of TDM. For one thing, TDM is not a sequential and linear narrative; and for another, it can transpire without externally verifiable traces. For example, Darya's story may invoke hitherto dormant sentiments that someone may have for his/her community which went unnoticed so far.

Madness Is Intersectional, Political, and Historical

Resistance is intersectional and multi-modal emerging from multiple narrative universes. It is also collective, coming from different conceptions of madness (e.g., madness as response-ability, madness as an alternative way of being in the world). Intersectionality also involves mutual learning and pedagogy among and within different groups of marginalized people in and beyond carceral spaces. And an act of witnessing is always intersectional depending on where we draw our lenses from. Consider the following ways in which madness has been stigmatized and institutionally framed.

History shows that mad people have been imprisoned for their non-normative behavior (read also self-expression, sexuality, gender, race, ethnicity, and class). Political dissidents have been imprisoned for their resistance against the hegemony of state power. They are both about social and political control of the “undesirable,” so power can remain in the hands of the elite and ruling class who decide who should be swept away to the corners of disciplining institutions and who is allowed to be included in the society.

Many nation-states incarcerate their political prisoners in psychiatric institutions by implicitly conflating political resistance with psychological “disorders.” This is to say that the authoritarian states (e.g., former Soviet Union, China) or even liberal states (e.g., the United States) engage in incarcerating their political dissidents in psychiatric wards. People labeled mad also underwent incarceration, segregation, and torture by electroconvulsive therapy, lobotomy, and other inhumane techniques. Women who did not “obey” their husbands, slaves who ran away from the mandatory labor at the plantations, and gay people have historically been harmed and labeled by the psy apparatus as mad (Burstow, 2015). “‘Psy’ refers to the set of professionals who aim to intervene in and modify the behavior of others, including, but not limited to, psychiatrists, psychologists, psychotherapists, social workers, and guidance counselors, as well as paraprofessionals such as peer support workers” (Tam, 2012, p. 10).

Many communities remain historically harmed and subsequently receive a psychiatric label for their *responses* and reactions to the sources of their oppression. We have, for instance, “Long Term Historical Identity Based Trauma (community/group) [such as], the Native soul wound/colonization including residential school legacy, slavery, the historical subjugation of women, two thousand years of persecution of Jewry by Christianity, the burning of the witches, the use of gay men as

‘faggots’ or kindling in the burning of the witches)” (Burstow, 2015, p. 239). Another example is the Indigenous peoples forcibly held at the “Canton Asylum for Insane Indians,” a federal psychiatric hospital in South Dakota, discussed in Susan Burch’s book, *Committed: Remembering Native Kinship In and Beyond Institutions* (Burch, 2021).

As Eric Fabris (2011) has shown us, the first implication of receiving a psychiatric diagnosis is chemical or physical incarceration, if not both. We know from Foucault that incarceration in any sense, whether for racism, sexism, classism, sexuality, dissent, or madness, is political (Foucault, 1964). It has long been argued by anti-psychiatry and critical psychiatry theorists that madness or “mental illness” is a myth and a socio-political construct with no biological and/or biomedical evidence to prove its existence. Although psychiatry is an official branch of medicine and the only apparatus beside the criminal justice system that can imprison people against their will, many critics believe that there is no concrete evidence whatsoever to prove the existence of mental illness as a biological defect or malfunction (Szaz 1987; Burstow, 2015; Whitaker, 2002; Foucault, 1964).

Using TDM, committed to intersectionality, materiality, and transnationality, we examined a historical case of a mad revolutionary woman from Iran at the intersections of torture, ideology, theocracy, patriarchy, state, gender, and disability. Drawing on the DHM, we defetishized Darya’s disability (madness) by demonstrating how madness and “sanity” can be socially organized and imposed by the violence of exploitative power relations (e.g., theocracy and patriarchy). We theorized disability (madness) as a historical materialist category and provided a dialectical reading of how the bodymind of political prisoners is rendered disabled by the state even as the disabled bodymind serves as an act of resistance against the state power. As racialized activists-scholars from the global south, we struggled in this chapter to re-articulate disabled-dissident subject’s response-abilities in the form of madness.

Bearing witness to the story of Darya, and others whose names we do not even know, the ways in which we understand disability/madness should be rethought. We should not pretend we already know what madness is/means after bearing witness to what happened to the Iranian dissidents who were forced to stare at Gorgon (Agamben, 2002), lost their capacity to speak, and ended their own lives. It is at this incomprehensible moment that we want to push the field to think anew and go beyond irresistible orientalist and neo-conservative traditions of reducing women from the global south to exotic objects, submissive wives, or cultural selves floating non-relationally in a socio-historical vacuum. The figure of a mad woman, a political dissident fighting an entire state apparatus with her bodymind, is what shatters the diverging boundaries of previously held ideas. Our project here was to go beyond the rights-bearing subject and to push the onto-epistemological boundaries of the humanities and social sciences to understand political violence as it injures the bodymind and as the bodymind responds to this power by dissent.

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