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Literature as a tribunal: the modern Iranian prose of incarceration

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ABSTRACT

This essay examines the development of prison memoirs in modern Iranian prose. It constructs from the prison memoirs of the dissident writers ‘Ali Dashti, Bozorg ‘Alavi, and Reza Baraheni a genealogy of the emergence of prison consciousness in Iranian modernity, across both the Pahlavi and post-revolutionary periods. The modern Iranian prose of incarceration is situated within an account of the prison as a site where the modern technologies of the state are refined. As I trace resonances between the long history of prison writing across the Islamic world and the prison literature of modern Iran, I consider how we can better understand the relation between prose and literary representation in modern Middle Eastern literatures.

KEYWORDS

Incarceration; imprisonment; memoir; testimony; aesthetics and politics; prose; modernity; Iran; Pahlavi; Islamic revolution

For as long as prisons have existed, prisoners have documented their incarceration. From Boethius to Gramsci, incarcerated writers have regularly linked the act of writing to the quest for freedom. They have rendered the uniqueness of their experience in words, and linked their subjective suffering to wider political themes. Whether through polished autobiography or fragmented notes, imprisoned writers typically use what they witness in the prison cell to make broader claims through language about the regime that has incarcerated them. Their piecing together of the fragments of experience through language is part of a process of overcoming the trauma of confinement and of critiquing the conditions of their incarceration. As one observer of Iran’s carceral system observes, “I depend on language to see what I cannot see, to conjure up ... the physical site on which torture takes place” (Darius Rejali 3). It is through language, and the aesthetic deployment of language in literary form, that prisons are made real to the world outside. As Gerald Hauser notes in engaging the writings of political prisoners such as Bobby Sands, Nelson Mandela, and Irina Ratushinskaya, “the interaction between political prisoner and prison has a distinctive rhetorical function in that

it constitutes the prisoners' identity, [and] gives sustained meaning to the struggle" (Hauser xiii). The distinctive rhetorical function of prison literature makes the literary text into a tribunal.

This article explores the work of prose narrative in developing a critical consciousness around imprisonment, and in creating a place for incarceration within modern Iranian literature. It focuses on the prison memoirs and other documentary forms of prose produced under the reigns of Reza Shah (1925–1941) and his son Mohammad Reza Shah (1941–1979), who pioneered the use of political imprisonment as a tactic for silencing dissidents, to the Islamic Republic (1979–), where this practice has continued to flourish up to the present. By examining the prose genres generated by these different carceral regimes side-by-side, I show how the Islamic Republic in many respects continued the policies and practices first developed by the Pahlavi Shahs, notwithstanding its disavowal of the latter.

The modern carceral state

Historically, the task of raising consciousness of the experience of imprisonment within Persian literature has been the burden of poetry. The situation changed during the Pahlavi era, with the systematic targeting of leftist political activists and the consequent emergence of political prisoners as a demographic with a "specific class background," a tradition that was continued and intensified by the Islamic revolution of 1979 (Matin-Asgari 689). Although some aspects of Iran's modern prison system are continuous with premodern practices, the specific targeting of leftist activists begins with the Pahlavis.¹ To note just one statistic, when Tehran's infamous Qasr prison opened in 1929–30, only 18 of its 300 prisoners could be classified as political. By 1940, this number rose to 200 out of a total of 2000 prisoners (Abrahamian 25–28).

As other scholars of modern Iran have argued, the persistent targeting of Iran's leftist intellectuals through imprisonment links the otherwise antagonistic regimes of Iranian modernity; notwithstanding their overall conflicting political agendas, Pahlavi rulers shared in common with the rulers of post-revolutionary Iran a perception of leftist radicals as their common enemy. Although this perception developed gradually over time and faded once an entire generation of leftist intellectuals had been annihilated, this targeting laid the foundations for the political repression of both secular activists and of Muslims within Islamic Iran.

Being targeted as a group made it easier for Iranian political prisoners to organize themselves collectively, through hunger strikes and other forms of organized political action (Pishevari 70–87). In the earliest stages of this targeting of leftist activists, under Reza Shah, the forms of incarceration were less brutal than they were to become in subsequent decades. As Matin-Asgari notes, "the earliest memoirs describing 'prison culture' in modern Iran depict a world wherein "boredom and monotony" is the primary torment (Matin-Asgari 693). In this respect, prison in early Pahlavi era Iran bears similarities with the contemporaneous

incarceration of political prisoners elsewhere in the Islamic world, including in Turkey. The communist poet Orhan Kemal, whose memoir chronicling three years of imprisonment with Nazım Hikmet is a landmark contribution to the prison memoir genre, writes of the Turkish carceral system as one marked by camaraderie between the warders and the prisoners. Although such propitious circumstances may have been rare, they were not entirely foreign to the Iranian experience of incarceration. While it was increasingly a death sentence, political imprisonment could also involve an induction into a higher cultural life, and a chance to meet and collaborate with like-minded people.

These relatively mild prison conditions in early Pahlavi Iran were soon replaced by a greater intensity of repression, as the left came to progressively be regarded as the primary enemy of the Pahlavi state. In 1931, a new law made any form of Communist agitation subject to imprisonment, even in the absence of evidence of action against the state. Following the passage of this law, any expression of leftist political ideology could land a writer in prison. When imprisonment became the state's default method for dealing with dissidents, and thought itself was criminalized, the forms of writing associated with incarceration flourished. A new literature of incarceration flourished, and for the first time, it was primarily in prose. Malik al-Shu'ara Bahar (1884–1951), who rose to fame during the Qajar era, choose poetry as the medium in which to chronicle his own experience of incarceration.² Yet, Bahar was the last major poet to choose poetry over prose. Subsequent imprisoned writers either combined poetry with prose or abandoned prose altogether. Hence, the twentieth century Iranian literature of incarceration is overwhelmingly in prose.

One year before the 1979 revolution that turned Iran from a monarchy into an Islamic Republic, the dissident writer Bozorg 'Alavi (1904–1997), considered by some as the “founder of [Persian] prison literature” (Abrahamian 50), was asked to recollect his first initiation into literature. How, his interlocutor, the novelist and critic Donné Raffat wanted to know, does an apolitical writer become politicized? The answer was simple:

Alavi: (Patiently.) In prison. In prison.

Raffat: In prison.

Alavi: In prison, yes. There one was involved in politics whether one liked it or not.
(Raffat 66, 67)

Unsatisfied by 'Alavi's answer and hoping for a fuller account of his life from his prison cell, Raffat repeated the question days later into their conversation:

Raffat: I would still like to know what happened in prison that turned you into a politicized man [...]

Alavi: (Softly cutting in.) Mr. Raffat.

Raffat: Yes.

Alavi: They threw us into a tub full of scalding water, so that we were thrashing around with our arms and legs. Do you follow? This thrashing around of the arms and legs was, in itself, a political act. (Raffat 95)

Although he was imprisoned under Reza Shah, 'Alavi's account of his incarceration applies in many respects to the prison system of post-revolutionary Islamic Iran. For Iran, as for the many countries that witnessed the violent establishment of new political regimes on their territory, the twentieth century may broadly be described as the century of incarceration. It is not for nothing that the Iranian social theorist Darius Rejali has entitled his study of this topic *Torture and Modernity*. Although Rejali does not regard the prevalence of incarceration as unique to modern Iran, he does view this country as a test case for a broader global condition. Adapting Marx, Rejali notes that "the colonies mirror what the metropole refuses to see" (Rejali 5). While there are numerous continuities with premodern carceral practices, the experience of incarceration under the Pahlavis and within the Islamic Republic is irrevocably marked by modernity. 'Alavi's prose reveals how Iranian literary modernity was politicized through incarceration. His experience was both collective and coercive; in the Foucauldian sense, it was linked to various technologies of the state. As he thrashed in a tub of scalding water, 'Alavi's political consciousness was born. This political consciousness made him into a writer.

Of course, it is not only in Iran that the prison initiates the writer into politics. Across the spectrum of modern literature, from Malcolm X to Ngugi Wa Thiong'o and Sayyid Qutb, incarceration has stimulated literary creation, especially in the form of memoirs and other forms of documentary writing.³ The intersection of literature and imprisonment has intensified the relationship between literature and the state. While many genres are inflected by this relation, in modernity, it is in prose above all, and specifically in the memoir, that prison writing is most fully realized as a discursive form.

'Alavi's main contribution to the prison memoir genre is *Scrap Papers from Prison* (1941). As the title indicates, the contents of this book was "scribbled on old sugar and cigarette packets or on small scraps of paper the author could lay hands on while in prison" (Kamshad 116). The image of words inscribed on transitory objects dominates prison literature from its earliest iterations, including the graffiti on the walls of the Tower of London, for which more than three hundred inscriptions have been recorded, (Ahnert 33), to the notebooks of Gramsci. The imprisoned writer in modernity who writes in fragments joins a tradition that has gestated for centuries.

The same year that 'Alavi meditated on the circumstances of his own incarceration, Michel Foucault, who had recently published what was to become the most influential study of the modern carceral system, described Iran's Islamic revolution as "a return to what Islam was at the time of the Prophet, but also of advancing towards a luminous and distant point where it would be possible to renew fidelity rather than maintain obedience."⁴ In Foucault's reading, incarceration should have

disappeared from the Iranian landscape along with the other abuses of power that characterized the shah's regime. But, as noted by Afary and Anderson, Foucault did not wholly foresee "the birth of yet another modern state where old religious technologies of domination could be refashioned and institutionalized" (Afary and Anderson 5). Particularly with respect to incarceration, post-revolutionary Iran bore much in common with its pre-revolutionary counterpart. Both fulfilled the Foucauldian criteria for the disciplinary state: "modern technologies of organization, surveillance, warfare, and propaganda" (Afary and Anderson 5). In light of these parallels between Pahlavi Iran and the Islamic Republic, the task is to consider how these shared strategies for repression shaped public consciousness. Was the state's targeting of dissidents successful in the sense of marginlising its opposition? Or did persecution lend an aura of legitimacy to agents whose actions and words might otherwise not have been so effectively politicised?

One great prison cell

"The Arab world," according to the dissident Egyptian journalist and historian Salah 'Isa, is one great prison containing "all tendencies and opinions" which "confines in huge numbers divided ideas and their contradictions" ('Isa 28). 'Isa goes on to point out that Arab countries have "opened their prisons to the Muslim brotherhood, Communists, nationalists, radicals, liberals, supporters of imperialism and the opponents of imperialism ... all at one time and for years on end." Meanwhile the Syrian playwright Mamduh 'Adwan (d. 2004), points to the interface between the worlds within and outside the prison cell when he states that "prison narratives reflect our daily life."⁵ In his book-length study of the experience of exile in modern Arab fiction, the Jordan-born Saudi writer 'Abd al-Rahman Munif (1933–2004) also described the prison as a synecdoche for the state's persecution of the individual dissident (Munif 255).

The statements of these Egyptian, Syrian, and Saudi writers have been paradigmatic for the study of incarceration in the modern Islamic world. In one of the first studies of modern Arabic prison prose, Abou Shariefteh argued that the "Arabic political novel is a byproduct of the political situation in the Arab world" (Shariefteh 229).⁶ While similarly engaging with the prison as a microcosm of contemporary Arab society, other critics focus on the political effects of the carceral practices of the state. Literary critic Samar Ruhi al-Faysal identifies two closely related effects of imprisonment: the denial of individual rights and the objectification of the prisoner's body. Having been turned into an object by his torturers, the political prisoner in al-Faysal's account is subject to two kinds of torture: indirect torture, which involves shackling and solitary confinement, and direct torture, which takes place outside the prison cell, and involves beating and electric shocks (Faysal 41, 42). Samah Idris nuances this perspective on the interface between dissent and incarceration. Rather than eradicating the dissident, imprisonment in Idris' account transforms the incarcerated into someone else,

who is willing to perpetuate the atrocities of his interrogators (Idris 187). This pattern is also evident in the transition from Pahlavi rule to the Islamic Republic of Iran. Many of those imprisoned under the first regime became prison warders under the second.⁷ Public performances recapitulating this transformation were the preferred means available to the state for showcasing the success of its methods, until the public learned to doubt the authenticity of such performances. In Iran, these “conversions” took the form of public confessions, letters of regret (*nedamat nameh*), and televised show trials.⁸

These literary and scholarly commentaries on incarceration in Arabic modernity resonate with the reflections of Iranian intellectuals with whom I discussed the classical Persian prison poem, a topic I researched from 2008–2013.⁹ One Iranian interlocutor, a doctor from Qum who was as well read in classical Persian poetry as in medical science, became animated when I mentioned my interest in prison poetry. Declaring that existence itself was a prison for all Iranians, he recited and later inscribed for me on stray cigarette papers several verses from Hafez. Although it was unintentional, I was struck by the resonance with ‘Alavi’s reliance on scrap paper as a medium for the prose of incarceration. The verse inscribed by my interlocutor was from a *qita’* (fragment) said to have been composed by Hafez. This verse describes the blinding and imprisonment of the Mozaffarid ruler Amir Mobarez al-Din in 1363, by his son Shah Shuja’, who placed a hot iron on his eyes¹⁰:

چون مسخر گشت وقتش در رسید
میل در چشم جهان بینش کشید

عاقبت شیراز و تبریز و عراق
آنکه روشن بد جهان بینش بدو

At last, when he conquered Shiraz and Tabriz and Iraq, death seized him.

The one who made his eyes bright rubbed a hot bar on his eyes.

In these verses, seeing becomes a metaphor for access to the world; deprived of vision (*jahanbin*), the king is stripped of freedom. In the preceding verse, Hafez invokes prison topoi when he states that Shah Shuja’ “put the lords in jail [*kard habs*] for no reason/ [and] beheaded the rebels in cold blood.” This verse doubtless prompted the memory of the poem in the mind of my Iranian interlocutor. As throughout the Persian literature of incarceration, Hafez links imprisonment here to the illegitimate use of sovereign power. The fact that Amir Mobarez al-Din had earlier executed Hafez’s beloved patron, Abu Eshaq Inju (1321–57) reinforces the link between political machination and the literature of incarceration. For almost the entirety of Iranian history, imprisoned writers composed their verse in precarious proximity to those in power.¹¹ The Iranian doctor cited Hafez to demonstrate that, for much of their history, Iranians have perceived themselves to dwell within material and spiritual prisons, some of which have been constructed by their poetic tradition and others by the state.

The vision of contemporary Arab and Iranian society as one big prison can be explained with reference to the arbitrary forms of incarceration that prevail

in these contexts. While the Islamic world is not unique in implementing wide scale incarceration, Iran and Egypt are at the forefront of linking the practice of incarceration to state policy. Genres such as the dictator novel, best known to Latin American literature, have more recently flourished across the Arab countries, partly due to these states' increasing reliance on imprisonment as a method for punishing and silencing dissidents.¹² The greater the prevalence of incarceration in popular culture as a means for dealing with non-violent protest against the state, the greater the likelihood that imprisonment will be politicized.

The proportion of political detainees relative to the rest of the prison population has always been high in modern Iran, both under the secular Pahlavis and within the Islamic Republic. As noted above, in 1940, the year preceding 'Alavi's incarceration, political detainees in Tehran's Qasr prison made up "about 10 per cent of the total of two thousand inmates" (Abrahamian 27–9). The detainees were mostly communists whose short sentences had been extended after the passage of the 1931 Black Law that prescribed solitary confinement for anyone who belonged to an organization that propagated "collectivist ideology." Thus, the politicization of Iran's prison population was effected at an early moment in the history of Iran as a nation-state, and was closely linked to this broader consolidation of the state's sovereignty.

Even when incarceration is an arbitrary punishment, the prison experience itself can confer meaning. Prison in modernity has functioned as the preeminent location wherein many writers, from the Middle East and beyond, become initiated into politics. For the Iranian poet Ahmad Shamlu (1925–2000), imprisonment in Qasr inducted him into politics while also transforming his political ideals (Shamlu 23, 24). In his memoir of incarceration in 1967, *The Fifth Dimension* (1987), Egyptian playwright and historian of the Muslim Brotherhood Ahmad Ra'if praised "the intellectually stimulating atmosphere in the cell, where daily discussions took place about literature, culture, politics, and religion" (Ra'if 45, 46).¹³ At the opposite end of the spectrum, historian Anthony Gorman notes that the "notoriously fragmented" Egyptian communist movement was most united when its members were imprisoned en masse during the 1940s and 1950s (Gorman 136).

Solidarities were forged through incarceration across a range of social demographics and classes. The flourishing of social bonding practices such as tattooing during the 1920s (Figure 1) is one sign of how life in prison fostered unique forms of community. A similarly vibrant intellectual atmosphere is discernable in the illustrations that accompany *The Prison Papers of Bozorg Alavi* (Figure 3). By 'Alavi's own admission, prison schooled him into literature. It follows that his writing would have been less compelling had he not experienced incarceration.

Literature as a Tribunal

The first modern Iranian prison memoir belongs to 'Ali Dashti (1894–1982), whose *Prison Days* appeared in 1921, following the coup of Reza Khan against

Figure 1. Tattoos worn by Egyptian prisoners in the early twentieth century. In M. Caloyanni, "Étude des tatouages sur les criminels d'Égypte," *Bulletin de l'Institut d'Égypte*, V (1923), plate VII. Public domain image.

the Qajars.¹⁴ While the 1921 coup lacked the drama of the Islamic Revolution of 1979, many public figures were arrested and imprisoned, including Dashti.¹⁵ Although Dashti's memoir was contemporaneous with Bahar's lengthy prison poem, *Prison Days* was the first work to introduce the prison as a site of reflection to modern Persian prose. Dashti's precedent was repeated decades later in *The Crowned Cannibals* (1977), the prison memoir of Reza Baraheni (b. 1935). While the experience of incarceration inspired poets to compose prose memoirs about their time in prison, the Persian poetry of imprisonment followed a different, quieter, path. Its lineage begins in the twelfth century with Mas'ud Sa'd Salman of Lahore (in present-day Pakistan) and culminates in the prison poetry of Bahar, but it remained alive in the poetry of Shamlu and Mahdi Akhavan Salis (1928–1990).¹⁶ Each of these writers, whether they worked in poetry or prose or in both mediums, share in common an endeavor to turn incarceration into literature, and to give suffering literary form.

When they choose prose, these writers' specific objectives come into even clearer focus. Prose chroniclers of imprisonment draw on a long history of links between testimony and prose that in turn relies on a specific theory of the authorial subject. They follow in the tradition of Gramsci, who wrote from prison in 1932, "After much suffering ... one becomes used to being an object without subjectivity vis-à-vis the administrative machine that at any moment can ship you off in any direction, force you to change habit" (Gramsci 2:133). It is in protest against such objectification that Gramsci seeks to retrieve the witness-bearing subject as the author of his experience. When he insists to his sister-in-law that "I did everything to give you a precise idea of both my physical and psychic conditions. If you thought that this was just literature you were wrong" (2:306), Gramsci is giving voice "to the crucial idea of being a witness, being an active part of the historical process, as opposed to being simply a writer acting in a literary mode" (Lollini 521). Dashti, Baraheni, and 'Alavi share Gramsci's rejection of the literary mode that turns away from "il mondo grande e terribile [the vast and terrible world]" while retreating into the writer's prison cell. This mode, closely associated with Persian prison poetry's transmutation of the experience of imprisonment into literary form, is a tradition that the Iranian prose of incarceration rejects.

Baraheni is the only author among those mentioned here still alive today.¹⁷ Like ‘Alavi, who died in exile in Berlin, Baraheni’s prison narrative attests to his belief that political dissent, as captured in literary form, can effectively contest despotism. While in prison, Baraheni was asked by his interrogator in Evin – the famous Tehran prison that replaced the Shah’s Qasr as the paradigmatic symbol of political persecution after the Islamic revolution – what he would do if he had the power to punish his jailer in the way he himself was being punished. Baraheni responded: “I would give you a thousand sharp pencils and thousands of pages of blank paper and let you write your version of the story of this prison, the prisoners and the torture chambers, and I would publish it in millions of copies so that everyone would know what our nation passed through when you had power” (Baraheni, *Crowned Cannibals* 138).¹⁸ When his interrogator interjected that Baraheni might use such an exposé to justify executing him, Baraheni insisted that the testimony of itself would provide sufficient evidence: “Your testimony would be your catharsis, and that catharsis would be the end of your days as the head of the torturers in this prison” (139). These words echo Gramsci’s insistence on prison writing as a means of bearing witness. At the same time, this dialogue, which reads like a staged play, has surely been refashioned for literary ends. As with any other genre of memoir writing, fictionalization is a key strategy in the Iranian prose of incarceration.

‘Alavi’s experience of prison made him into a political writer. Yet the experience of imprisonment was more of an end than a beginning, for ‘Alavi ceased to write fiction after he moved to Germany. For Baraheni, as for Gramsci, literature is its own tribunal, and writing is a means of speaking the truth to power, with all the risks that involves. It is not for nothing that Baraheni’s dictum “Nineteen seventy-three was the mirror of 1937,” was cited as the epigraph to the first section of *The Prison Papers of Bozorg Alavi*. Baraheni was imprisoned in 1973; ‘Alavi was imprisoned from 1937 to 1941. During these years, in the nearby Soviet Union, thousands of writers were systematically executed for their dissident views under Stalin’s rule. Baraheni’s words frame Raffat’s narrative, suggesting a cyclical pattern to the modern Iranian prose of incarceration.

“No political prisoners in Iran”

Ten days after Khomeini’s return to Iran and in the heady years preceding the Islamic revolution, what US media called “history’s largest recorded jailbreak” occurred in Iran.¹⁹ Eleven thousand prisoners in Qasr, the state prison where ‘Alavi had composed all five of the stories in his *Scrap Papers*, broke free from their cells. They jumped to freedom from their windows, wrenching the bars apart. In the words of Raffat, the entire prison “reflected all the rage, violence, bedlam, and euphoria of the revolution” (Raffat 227). Photographs of Qasr prison during this period (Figures 2 and 3) present prisoners in crowded and cramped conditions, forging solidarities that were to alter the future of Iranian literature.

Figure 2. Prisoners inside Qasr Prison. (*Iran Times International*, reprinted in *The Prison Papers of Bozorg Alavi*, 228.)

Figure 3. A communal cell inside Qasr Prison. (*Iran Times International*, reprinted in *The Prison Papers of Bozorg Alavi*, 229.)

On the day of the Qasr prison break, with the end of the Pahlavi regime and the dawn of a new era following a popular revolution, it may have seemed like the age of incarceration was reaching its end. The opposite however was the case: in Iran, the age of the prison had begun. Qasr, known to “two generations of Pahlavi rule as ‘the house of remorse,’ had given way to Evin, an equally dreaded abode of misery, torture, and execution” (Raffat 242). Constructed in 1972 during the reign of Mohammad Reza Shah, Evin became the preeminent symbol of incarceration after the Islamic revolution, a status it retains to this day.

In 1998, Riza Ghaffari’s *Memoirs from One Prison Among the Prisons of the Islamic Republic of Iran* was published in Germany. This was followed in 2001 by

Muhammad Ja'fari's *Evin: A Sociology of Prison and Prisoners*, also published in Germany. In 2006, Iraj Mirdaqi published an anthology of anonymous prison poems, *On Stalks of Twisted Hemp: Prison Songs* (2006), in Sweden. As during the Pahlavi era, the Iranian literature of incarceration following the Islamic revolution was dominated by prose. Prison memoirs authored by women, including Shahrnush Parsipur, Zhila Bani Yaqub, and others, have in more recent years supplemented works by male prisoners.²⁰ Collectively, this rich literature, told in the first person voice, comprises a body of work "that did not exist in the 1980s, when UN human rights reports were alleging flagrant violations and government officials and diplomats were adamantly denying their occurrence" (Afshari xviii).

This literature contradicts the claim of Asadollah Lajevardi, warden of Evin from 1981–1985 and director of Iran's prison system until his assassination in 1998, that "there are no political prisoners in Iran." As for the many warm bodies that were filling Iran's prisons, Lajevardi maintained that they were simply criminals. According to Lajevardi, everyone convicted within Iran's justice system is merely a criminal, and there are no false or arbitrary convictions. Lajevardi's popularity with the Iranian leadership, and by extension the broader support given to his rhetoric, is attested by the photos from his funeral published by the semi-official Iranian media agency, *Fars News*, with the caption "Funeral services for the martyr (*shahid*), Sayyid Asadollah Lajevardi."²¹ In denying the existence of political prisoners in Iran, the director of Iran's prison system conjured an image of rebellion without a cause, of action "with no political goal, [that] cannot be read politically," to adapt Judith Butler's account of the Guantanamo Bay detention camp (Butler 88). Whereas the Iranian government denies that incarceration is political, the prison memoirist conceives of literature as a tribunal in order to redefine the terms of his or her incarceration.

Soon after Lajevardi denied the existence of political prisoners in Iran, Ayatollah Shahrudi, Head of Iran's Supreme Judicial System until 2009, issued a similar statement. In a judiciary ruling that sought to overturn President Khatami's admission that Iran did indeed have political prisoners, he announced: "we have no political prisoners in Iran...the world may consider certain cases, by their nature, political crimes, but because we do not have a law in this regard, these are considered ordinary offenses."²² (Soon after Shahrudi made this statement, the Iranian Parliament passed the Political Crime Act (*qanun-i jarm-i siyasi*) in 2010, which formally criminalized political dissent.²³) According to this logic, a prisoner can only be classified as political when he or she violates a specific law. But what about situations – of which there are many in Iran – wherein repressive norms are implied but not made explicit? In such circumstances, a pretext will need to be identified, so that a political act can be reclassified as a political crime (*jarm-i siyasi*). Within such a system, the absence of specific laws forbidding certain kinds of political discourse favors the status quo, because it is difficult to change a normative code that has no formal legal status. Shahrudi and Lajevardi subordinate the judiciary to their vision of a carceral state when they deny the

existence of political prisoners within Iran. Foucault reflected on this endeavor to erase the prisoner's subjectivity and agency when he reasoned that "population now represents more the end of government than the power of the sovereign; the population is the subject of needs, of aspirations, but it is also the object in the hands of the government, aware ... of what it wants, but ignorant of what is being done to it" (Foucault, "La gouvernementalité" 652). Stated simply, control, rather than top-down regulation, is the primary mechanism of modern governance. Following the Islamic revolution, and arguably even earlier, the Iranian state learned to suppress dissidence through such mechanisms of control: it refused to recognize a legitimate and autonomous politics for those who dissent from governmental policy.

One of the most significant critiques of the contemporary Iranian carceral system has been articulated by one of the architects of what is arguably the most important doctrine of the post-revolutionary Islamic state, the "rule of the jurists" (*vilayat-i faqih*), Ayatollah Montazeri (1922–2009). Selected to be Khomeini's successor in 1985, Montazeri experienced political imprisonment under the Shah. He was descended from a poor peasant family that, unusually for the exalted post that he held, claimed no direct connection to the Prophet. Montazeri's sympathy for the oppressed was also to prove his undoing, for, as noted by Baqer Moin, his "down-to-earth style, constant criticism of injustices, corruption, red-tape and drug abuse, as well as his tolerant approach to moderate opposition leaders such as Bazargan were signs of an independence of mind which angered his foes and did not necessarily please his friends or allies" (Moin 262).

Although Montazeri had privately criticized the abrogation of human rights in Iran following the Islamic revolution, a dramatic climax to his critiques came in 1988, when, soon after accepting the humiliating terms of a ceasefire with Iraq, Khomeini issued a *fatwa* (legal opinion), empowering a special commission to decide whether the remaining political prisoners within Iran's prison system would be allowed to live or summarily executed. The commission opted for the latter. The mass execution of Iranian intellectuals and leftist dissidents associated with the People's Mujahedin, the Tudeh (Communist) party, Fedaiyan, and other political factions followed directly from Khomeini's order.²⁴ Disturbed by the scale of these executions, which resulted in the deaths of many thousands of Iranians, as well as by the lack of due process given to those selected for execution Montazari composed two public letters to Khomeini, in which he condemned the executions.²⁵ Soon afterwards, Montazari stated in an interview with the conservative newspaper *Keyhan* that "The denial of people's rights, injustice, and disregard for the revolution's true values have delivered the most severe blows against the revolution. Before any reconstruction [takes place], there must first be a political and ideological reconstruction."²⁶ In an angry response composed in February 1989, four months prior to his death, Khomeini denounced Montazari, whom he had formerly regarded as his successor to the role of Ayatollah, a position of spiritual preeminence within the Islamic Republic. "It has become clear to me,"

Khomeini wrote in his open letter to Montazeri, “that after me you are going to to hand over this country, our dear Islamic revolution, and the Muslim people of Iran to the liberals, and through them to the hypocrites. You are no longer eligible to succeed me as the legitimate leader of the state.”²⁷

Montazeri became a prisoner in his own home from 1997 until 2003. In a 2007 interview he powerfully indicted Iran’s prison system. Referencing the case of the human rights activist Akbar Ganji (b. 1960), who was imprisoned in Evin from 2001 to 2006 for his journalism, Montazeri noted that “There were no political prisoners during the reign of our prophet.”²⁸ Ganji was imprisoned following his coverage of the serial murders of Iranian dissidents within as well as outside Iran from 1996 to 1998.²⁹ Linking as he did the murder of political dissidents to senior officials in the Iranian administration, Ganji’s muckraking did much to illuminate the series of events that came to be known as the “chain murders [*qatlhayi zanjir’i*].” For his part, Montazeri was removed from his formerly influential position in the clerical hierarchy when he protested the mass execution of 1988. Alongside his courage, Montazeri was also known for his piety, and attracted many followers in Qum while he was under house arrest. Like Ghaffari, ‘Alavi, Baraheni, and Dashti, Montazeri contributed to the prose of incarceration with his memoirs documenting his experience of confinement, composed while under house arrest.³⁰ As with many recent contributions to the Iranian prose of incarceration, this work was published in Sweden.

Carceral networks and modernity

Just as there are premodern precedents for contemporary methods of torture and incarceration, so too are there classical precedents for contemporary Iranian prison literature. At the same time, the ubiquity of the modern prison system distinguishes it qualitatively from its premodern counterparts. Prisons have entered into the very architecture of Iranian modernity, predetermining the content of its literary production and inflecting its anthropology, and bringing writing and incarceration into increasing proximity. From the perspective of the Iranian prose of incarceration, literature has become a tribunal that delivers a form of justice that the courts actively subvert. This conjuncture, evident in Iran and elsewhere in the modern Middle East, substantiates Foucault’s account of the prison as the constitutive site where modern governmentality – which can provisionally be grasped as the mechanism that transform the subject into a citizen – is most fully realized (Foucault, *Surveiller et punir*). While the agency of the prisoner is suppressed in the process of incarceration, the prose of incarceration gives this agency political and aesthetic form.

The Foucauldian paradigm needs to be modified if it is to be used to illuminate the practice and experience of incarceration in modern Iran. In contrast to the Foucauldian genealogy based on European carceral systems, wherein prisons became modern towards the end of the eighteenth century, the modernization of

the Iranian carceral system was initiated in the beginning of the twentieth century. Prior to the development of the modern prison system, the Iranian literature of imprisonment was mostly in verse.³¹ Modern Iranian prisons gave birth to the Iranian prose of incarceration.

At the same time, it would be a mistake to overstate the newness of the prison as a site for Persian literary production. Prisons predate Islam, as evidenced by a continuous tradition of Arabic prison poetry older than the Quran itself. Following its early florescence in Baghdad and al-Andalus, the genre was rapidly revived, in Persian rather than Arabic, in medieval Lahore. Mas'ud Sa'd, the poet who singlehandedly introduced the prison poem to Persian literature, was imprisoned on multiple occasions, totaling more than eighteen years.³² Mas'ud Sa'd's name became synonymous with a new genre of prison poetry, the *habsiyyat*, which acquired a consistency and coherence in its literary form as well as in the motifs deployed, that guaranteed the genre a long life within Persian literature. Most literary production in the premodern Persianate world was classified according to form (*qasida*, *ghazal*, *qita'*) rather than theme; the prison poem was relatively unique in being classified by the thematic content that also dictated its form. Prison poems could be long, short, fragmented, grandiose, or lyrical; if they dealt with the experience of incarceration, whether fictively or based on historical evidence, they were ipso facto prison poems (*habsiyyat*).

H. Bruce Franklin has recently compared the contribution of nineteenth century African-American slave narratives to ending slavery in America with the potential of twentieth century prison literature to intervene in the prison-industrial complex. Franklin notes that the prison literature of the 1960s and 1970s "led by *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, George Jackson's writings, and the poetry of Black convicts ... helped blaze the path to the rediscovery of African American slave literature" (Franklin 239–40). In parallel fashion, it might be worth pondering whether the prison prose of modern Iran might eventually lead readers to the earlier tradition that stimulated it: the prison poetry of the wider Persianate world, including Central and South Asia and the Caucasus.

The most salient difference between the modern Iranian prose of incarceration and the classical Persian poetry of imprisonment is the media in which they were expressed: poetry in the second instance and prose in the first. When they turned away from the poetry of imprisonment, Dashti, 'Alavi, and Baraheni chose to render their experiences of incarceration in a discourse that had hitherto been seen as having an expressive capacity inferior to that of poetry. The Arabo-Persian literary-theoretical tradition is largely responsible for the persistent tendency within Islamic culture to treat verse as a privileged medium of literary expression while leaving prose to perform the more mundane work of exegesis and explication. This view is classically expressed in the words of the Arabic poet 'Abd Allah al-Salami (948–1003), who complained that "prose does not reach the lofty peak and that high summit [of poetry], and so it has become an everyday garment [*bidla*] for all speakers alike, for the elite and the masses, for women and children."³³

Al-Salami's objected to prose due to its accessibility to all speech registers. On his view, the democratic resonance of prose distinguishes it from poetry, and interferes with its aesthetic appreciation. In choosing prose over poetry, Iran's prison memoirists engage more directly with their immediate social worlds than their poetic predecessors had done. With Gramsci, they would say, "If you thought that this was just literature you were wrong," for what they have produced is not only, or even primarily, literary. Yet, insofar as it develops a new language for describing the incarcerated self, the rich corpus that is the Iranian prose of incarceration cannot be separated from the literary production of modern Iran, even when it occupies only one end of the political and aesthetic spectrum.

Prison memoirists who rely on their experience to testify to the injustice of their incarceration tend to prioritize documenting their condition over generating a new literary form. Persian prison poetry concerning the experience of incarceration continues to be composed, particularly by writers in exile. But it is beyond dispute apparent that prisons have exerted a special claim on the Iranian prosaic imagination. Informed by a specific conceptualisation of the subject and of the text's relation to the world it references, these works of documentary prose have also enabled specific forms of political critique. In becoming prosaic, Iranian prison literature has inspired new social justice agendas. It has learned to oppose class hegemony, often through Marxist forms of critique, to contest social inequality, and to reject the modes of dominance that impede the realization of a just society for everyone.

Notes

1. For differences between Qajar and Pahlavi carceral practices (see Rejali 4).
2. Bahar's poem, "Karnamaye-i zindān" has been discussed in the PhD dissertation of Matthew Chaffee Smith.
3. For the prison writings of these and other writers, see Ioan Davies, and the contributions to A.M. Babbi and Tobia Zanon.
4. Michel Foucault, in Afary and Anderson, 203–206.
5. Quoted by miram cooke, 4; also see 130.
6. For more recent work on this subject, see Geula Elimelekh, *Arabic prison literature: resistance, torture, alienation, and freedom*.
7. See Reza Afshari, *Human Rights in Iran: The Abuse of Cultural Relativism*, 59–61, 93–5.
8. Some of these methods are described in J. Mojabi, *Shenakhtnameh-i Gholam-Hosein Sa'edi*. Alavi has written about one group of dissidents that was famously subjected to a show trial in *Panjah va sih nafar*.
9. This research appeared *inter alia* as Rebecca Gould, "The Political Aesthetic of the Medieval Persian Prison Poem, 1100–1200" (PhD dissertation, Columbia University, 2013).
10. *Diwan-i Hafez*, ed. Parwiz Natil Khanlari (Tehran: Intisharat-i Khvarazmi, 1362/1983–4), 2: 18 (*qata* 'at). See the discussion of these verses in 'Abbās Iqbāl, *Tarikh-i mufasssal-i Iran az istila-yi Mughul ta i 'lan-i Mashrutiyyat* (Tabriz: Chap-i Khudkar-i Iran, 1962), 424, n1.

11. For the murder of Abu Eshaq, see Abbas Amanat's masterful exegesis of Hafez's poetry in "Iranian Identity Boundaries, A Historical Overview," in *Iran Facing Others: Identity Boundaries in a Historical Perspective*, eds. Abbas Amanat and Farzin Vejdani, 8.
12. On the Arabic dictator novel, see Sami Alkayam, "Narrating dictatorship, reconstructing nations: The representation of dictators in the Arabic dictator novel" (PhD dissertation, The University of Wisconsin – Madison, 2016).
13. Also see the discussion of this text in Christian Szyska, "On Utopian Writing in Nasserist Prison and Laicist Turkey."
14. The fourth edition (1327/1948) of this work is the most comprehensive. Dashti's work is briefly discussed in Kamshad, *Modern Persian Prose*, 69–73, and is the subject of a monograph by J. E. Knörzer: *Ali Dashti's prison days: life under Reza Shah*.
15. For background regarding the 1921 coup, see Homa Katouzian, *State and Society in Iran: The Eclipse of the Qajars and the Emergence of the Pahlavis*, 242–67.
16. Shamlu's prison poems, including ones composed from Qasr and those which use the prison as a metaphor, include "Dar inja chahr zindan ast [In here are four prisons]"; "Shekoftan dar meh [Blooming in the Fog]"; and "Ke zindan-i mara baru mabad [I wish my prison had no walls]." For Mahdi Akhavan Salis' prison poetry, see *Pa'iz dar zindan: shi'r*. For Persian prison poetry between Mas'ud Sa'd and twentieth century prison literature, see *inter alia* Vali Allah Zafari, *Habsiyah dar adab-i farsi: az aghaz-i shi'r-i farsi ta payan-i zandiyah* and E. Akimushkina, *Zhanr Habsiyyat v persoiazychnyi poezii XI–XIV vv*.
17. In January 2017, I was informed by an Iranian intellectual (who wishes to remain anonymous) that Baraheni has been permitted to return to the Islamic Republic of Iran, where he currently resides in a state of illness.
18. Baraheni also has a volume of poems dealing with his experience in prison: *Zill Allah: shi'r'ha-yi zindan*.
19. This phrase comes from a report that was syndicated in many US newspapers during 1979. See for example "Woman Stumbles out of Nightmare," in *Columbia Missourian Newspaper* (16 February 1979), archived at <https://cdm.sos.mo.gov/cdm/ref/collection/colmo7/id/173012> (accessed 9 September 2017).
20. For example, Shahrnush Parsi'pur, *Khatirat-i zindan* (1996); *Zhila Bani Ya 'qub, Zanan-i dar band-i 209 Ivin*, ed. Bahman Ahmadi Umuyi (2011). Amid a voluminous body of Iranian women's prison literature in English, the most scholarly account of Shahla Talebi, *Ghosts of revolution: rekindled memories of imprisonment in Iran* is among the most valuable. For an anthology of Iranian women's prison writing in English, see *We lived to tell: political prison memoirs of Iranian women*, eds. Azadeh Agah, Sousan Mehr, and Shadi Parsi.
21. "Salruz-i shahadat-i Sayyid Asadullah Lajevardi" (6.3.1387) <https://www.farsnews.com/imgrep.php?nn=8706031306> (accessed 6 January 2017).
22. Originally reported by the official news agency of the Iranian government, the Islamic Republic News Agency (ISNA), this statement can now be located only *RFE/RL Newline*, 04-04-30, item 63. According to ISNA, Khatami had previously stated that "we certainly have political prisoners [in Iran] and ... people who are in prison for their ideas...I do not accept the conviction of any political or press activist unless tried in a free and fair tribunal."
23. "Matn-i kamel-i qanun-i jorm-i siyasi," *Tasnim* <https://bit.ly/2gDjws2> (accessed 14 October 2017).
24. For a good overview of these still understudied executions, see Kaveh Sharooz, "With Revolutionary Rage and Rancor: A Preliminary Report on the 1988 Massacre of Iran's Political Prisoners."

25. The text of these letters was published in *Cheshmandaz* 6 (Summer 1989), 35–7. See Abrahamian, *Tortured Confessions*, 219, 220, for further details. Estimates for the death toll from the executions of 1988 range from 2,000 to 12,000; the secretive nature of the event have made exact figures difficult to obtain.
26. Cited in Moin, *Khomeini*, 279.
27. For the original text of the letter Sayyid Ruhollah Musavi Khomeini, *Sahifeye Imam* (Tehran: Muassese-yi tanzim va nashr-i asar-i imam Khomeini, 2010), vol. 21, p. 330. Also available at <http://bit.ly/2zKGAqs>.
28. *Rebel Ayatollah – Iran, Journeyman Pictures*, 2007 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bzoV7PhX4ns>, accessed 6 September 2017), at 2 min and 53 s. For the journalism that led to Ganji's imprisonment, see the articles collected in '*Alijanab-i surkhpush va 'alijanaban-i khakistari: asib shinasi-i guzar bih dawlat-i dimokratik-i tawsi'ah gara*.'
29. For further Iranian reflection on the chain murders, see 'Ali Riza Nuri'zadah, *Az khun-i dil nivishtam--: guzidah-i maqalat-i 1362–1375*. For English sources on these events, see Günes Murat Tezcür, *Muslim Reformers in Iran and Turkey: The Paradox of Moderation*, 128; Mirjam Künkler, "The Special Court of the Clergy (Dādgāh-ye Vizheh-ye Ruhāniyat) and the Repression of Dissident Clergy in Iran," *Constitutionalism, the Rule of Law and the Politics of Administration in Egypt and Iran*, edited by Said Arjomand and Nathan Brown, 91 n70.
30. See Husayn 'Ali Mountaziri, *Matn-i kamil-i khatirat-i Ayatullah Husayn 'ali Montaziri: bah hamrah-i payvast'ha*.
31. For further details on the matters summarized here, see Rebecca Gould, "Wearing the Belt of Oppression: Khāqānī's Christian Qaṣīda and the Prison Poetry of Medieval Shirvān," *Journal of Persianate Studies* 9.1 (2016): 19–44, and idem, "Prisons Before Modernity: Incarceration in the Medieval Indo-Mediterranean," *al-Masāq* 24.2 (2012): 179–97, as well as book manuscript, *The Persian Genre of Incarceration: Prisons and the Literary Imagination*.
32. The now classic study of Mas'ud Sa'd's contribution to the prison poem genre is Sunil Sharma, *Persian Poetry at the Indian Frontier: Mas'ud Sa'd Salman of Lahore*.
33. Cited in Klaus Hachmeier, "Rating Adab: At-Tawhīdī on the Merits of Poetry and Prose. The 25th Night of the *Kitāb al-imtā' wa-al-mu'ānasah*, Translation and Commentary."

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