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Dialogues with the Dead: Necropoetics of Zahra's Paradise

What can the poetry chosen for epitaphs on graves tell us about the political and cultural development of post-revolutionary Iran and the politics of death and dying under the Islamic Republic? This article explores contemporary Persian epitaph poetry as a valuable medium for understanding the socio-political dynamics of Iranian society. By analyzing the epitaphs of the Iran–Iraq war martyrs, who are buried in Zahra's Paradise public cemetery in Tehran (Behesht-e Zahra), a new nomenclature can be established for the religious, political and socio-cultural ideas underpinning death and the afterlife.

Keywords: Behesht-e Zahra Cemetery; Iran–Iraq War; Necropolitics; Necropoetics

Behind the walls of *Behesht-e Zahra*,¹ or Zahra's Paradise, in Tehran, symmetrical rows of neat, grey graves stretch as far as the eye can see, punctuated by flags, trees and decorative shrines. One of the biggest cemeteries in the world, it is the resting place of over 1.6 million Iranians. All of society can be found here: from leaders and politicians to artists and writers, from war heroes to political dissidents. Music drifts on the breeze from the martyrs' graves, where speakers blast out heroic elegies and laments. Visitors queue amid tight security to see the most famous tomb that

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¹One of the largest cemeteries in the world, *Behesht-e Zahra* was opened in 1970 and named after the daughter of the Prophet Muhammad, Fatemeh (al-Zahra), revered by the Shi'ites as one of the Fourteen Infallibles (*Ma'sums*), descendants of the prophet.

is located right outside the cemetery, that of Ruhollah Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic Republic.²

In the summers of 2006 to 2008 and the spring of 2009, I spent most afternoons among these graves, reading the epitaphs and poetry inscriptions carved into each headstone. Some lines are well-known, others more personal and esoteric; some come with a poet's byline, others are anonymous. Some graves do not display any text at all. During my three years there, I collected epitaph poetry from a cross-section of nearly 1,500 graves. From the analysis of these epitaphs, I was able to extrapolate a new nomenclature for the religious, political and socio-cultural ideas that underpin the concepts of death and the afterlife in post-revolutionary Iran.

The words chosen for a person's final farewell raise important questions and generate meaningful dialogues with the dead. Persian headstones from the past have been the subject of previous anthropological, historical and sociological inquiries;³ however, contemporary epitaph poems, as found in the Martyrs' Section of Zahra's Paradise, have not yet been fully explored as a source of socio-literary analysis that can deepen our understanding of life, death and power in Iran.⁴ In 2013, Pedram Khosronejad published an edited volume entitled *Unburied Memories: The Politics of Bodies of Sacred Defense Martyrs in Iran*, in which a number of scholars tackled the question of martyrs' representations in Iran.⁵ In the same edited volume, Ingvild Flaskerud explores the practice of placing martyrs' photographs on tombstones.⁶ What remains lacking in relation to the analysis of the martyrs' epitaphs, however, is a thorough analysis of the poems that have been carved onto their graves. This article attempts to bring to light a body of these undocumented epitaph poems that are in dialogue with the political arena of the living world.

Of course, the use of epitaph poetry is not unique to *Behesht-e Zahra*; most grave sites across the world offer up a petri dish of history and cultural belief. It is important to note that this article relates solely to the cross-section of graves at Zahra's Paradise where I conducted my research, although there are many significant cemeteries, both inside Iran's borders and beyond, that could be included in future comparative studies; for example, the Persian Baha'i graves in the US,⁷ war cemeteries in Europe,⁸ genocide memorials in Rwanda and other significant sites elsewhere.⁹ The data collected and

²For an analysis of Khomeini's mausoleum, see Rizvi, "Religious Icon and National Symbol."

³For historical accounts on old Persian headstones in Yazd, see Afshar, *Yadegarha-ye Yazd*; Kalkhoran and Khabiri, "Barrasi-ye sang-nebeshtehha-ye tarikhi-ye shahrestan-e yazd." Safikhani Ahmadpanah, and Khodadadi, "Neshaneh-shenasi-ye noghush-e qabrestan-e Takht-e Fulad-e Isfahan."

⁴*Behesht-e zahra's* gravestones have so far been subject of a number of academic papers published in Iran. For example, see Purnaserani and Soleimani, "Tahlil va moqayeseh-ye sangneveshteha-ye."

⁵Khosronejad, *Unburied Memories*. In the same edited volume, see Fromanger, "Variations in the Martyrs' Representations."

⁶Flaskerud, "Redemptive Memories."

⁷Baha'i cemeteries exist in the US and UK with Persian inscriptions. For a study of the Baha'is killed by the Islamic Republic or by mobs in Iran, see Taheri Bethel, *A Psychological Theory of Martyrdom*.

⁸For example, see Taaffe, "Commemorating the Fallen"; Ware, "Building and Decoration of the War Cemeteries"; Robin, 'A Foothold in Europe.'

⁹Sodaro, *Exhibiting Atrocity*

analyzed for this article can be taken in many different directions, and future articles will explore different segments and areas of applied study. This article will focus solely on the poetry etched onto graves where the cause of death relates to the state: namely, the section devoted to soldiers killed in the Iran–Iraq war (1980–88).

The Martyrs' Section: Music, Billboards and Martyr Glorification

The Martyrs' Section of Zahra's Paradise is unlike a typical cemetery. Rather than the usual quiet, sanctified space, the state has created here an immersive, experiential space that offers a sensory experience to evoke an emotional response. Countless flags tower over the graves, accompanied by other war imagery and paraphernalia displayed in temporary and permanent exhibitions. In the spring, areas are bursting with tulips (a symbol of martyrdom) and bordered by trees, whose welcome shade encourages visitors to stay longer. War eulogies and Quran recitations play constantly through large speakers that pump out songs in praise of Karbala and the martyrs of war.

The most visible memorial is a fabricated monumental boat that belongs to the Marine Force martyrs (*shohada-ye niru-ye darya'i*), carved with a famous prophetic *hadith* in praise of Imam Hossein, the third Shi'ite Imam.¹⁰ It commemorates those who were killed in the *Peykan* Marine during the "Pearl Operation" (*'Amaliyat-e morvarid*, 1981). Its tangible presence brings to mind the imposing public memorials erected for soldiers in America that, in Kirk Savage's view, are "meant to last, unchanged forever. While other things come and go, are lost and forgotten, the monument is supposed to remain a fixed point, stabilizing both the physical and the cognitive landscape."¹¹ Like many war memorials around the world, the Martyrs' Section of Zahra's Paradise acts as a symbolic extension of the state ideology of warfare, that continues to live on in this apparently private sphere,—decades after the ceasefire that ended the war in the public sphere.

Thirty years on, this sacred space is constantly updated by the state, as part of the ongoing project of immortalizing the war. To what extent has this immortalization project been made possible through the ergonomics of these martyrs' graves? How have the carefully designed epitaphs been co-opted into this political physicalization of death and loss? If we take these epitaph poems to be a dialogue between the living and the dead, what messages do we find?

Necropolitics, Disenchantment and the "Ungrievable Life"

As often happens in war-torn countries, Iran's war graves have been bestowed with deep political significance,¹² turning Zahra's Paradise into a political landscape

¹⁰"Hossein is the light of guidance and the ship of salvation". انّ الحسين مصباح الهدى وسفينة النّجاه.

¹¹Savage, *Standing Soldiers, Kneeling Slaves*, 4.

¹²The profound transformation of American cemeteries following the Civil War is a good parallel example. Abraham Lincoln's most important Civil War speech was delivered at the Gettysburg cemetery. Ruhollah Khomeini gave his first revolutionary speech upon his arrival from exile in Paris, next to the

within the Islamic Republic. In his groundbreaking Disenchantment Theory, the German sociologist Max Weber asserts that “*only* in war, can the individual *believe* that he knows he is dying “for” something.”¹³ As the literary scholar and critic Sara Cole suggests, these lines by Weber “codify the general premise of war enchantment: that in war, violent death, if transformed into something positive and communal, is perhaps even sacred.”¹⁴ Looking at the past three decades, one could characterize the policy of “death enchantment” which lies at the heart of the official approach to glorifying and consecrating the war in Zahra’s Paradise. The aesthetic environment, visual commemoration and, as we shall see, the epitaphs themselves, underpin a strategy of sublimation that transformed a gruesome, bloody conflict into a sacred, desirable aspiration for those who adhered to the state ideology of warfare.

Epitaph analysis in this context can be enfolded into the field of necropolitics—the role the state plays in determining who can live and who will die—as defined by the philosopher and political theorist, Achille Mbembé.¹⁵ Mbembé expands on the Foucauldian notions of biopower and *droit de glaive* (the right to kill) to analyze forms of social or civil death, such as slavery, colonialism and punitive autocratic regimes, as well as the exposure of citizens to the looming threat of death for themselves or others.

Scholars have drawn on Foucault’s notion of biopower and Mbembé’s necropolitics to tackle the dialectic of death and power in various socio-political contexts.¹⁶ In the present article, I use a similar framework to identify a range of necropolitical strategies at work in the Islamic Republic, from political executions to military martyrdom, in which the state exerts necropower to reduce citizens to precarious conditions of life. A more comprehensive discussion of this topic deserves to be tackled in another project; for the purpose of this article, the foundation of necropolitics allows us to glean valuable insights from the gravestones of the Iran–Iraq war martyrs, buried in *Behesht-e Zahra*.¹⁷ The burial of the dead soldiers in Zahra’s Paradise soon became a crucial component of the responsible state institutions’ program of martyr glorification throughout and after the war. A closer look at the graves and the structure of the Martyrs’ Section demonstrate how the government exercised and continues to exercise

grave of those who were killed in the 1978–79 protests. The land of the dead, and the graves of the revolution and war martyrs have has been one of the symbolic political platforms since the early days of the revolution.

¹³Cole, “Enchantment, Disenchantment, War, Literature,” 1634.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Mbembé, “Necropolitics.”

¹⁶R. Guy Emerson’s book, *Necropolitics: Living Death in Mexico* is particularly noteworthy for its emphasis on the control of life and death by the state. “Institutional power,” Emerson argues, “continues in its attempts to take command of life amid death or, more accurately, to take command of life through death.” See Emerson, *Necropolitics: Living Death in Mexico*, 4. For further reading, see Gražinić and Tatlić, *Necropolitics, Racialization and Global Capitalism*. Ferrándiz and Robben, *Necropolitics*.

¹⁷I have limited my research to the largest cemetery in Iran, as I am aware of the diverse range of death rituals and the use of epitaph poems across the country. I by no means intend to generalize the findings and analysis of the epitaph poems that I discuss in this paper to other cemeteries in various provinces of Iran. My hope is that this article provides the grounds for further scholarly investigation of this topic across various war graves in Iran.

sovereignty as a form of “control over mortality,”¹⁸ responsible for both the death, and the subsequent pageantry of loss.

Marine Fromanger explores such pageantry in her study of public and private visual depictions of martyrs in Iran, comparing the paintings and photographs used in public places (including *Behesht-e Zabra*) with those found on the walls and mantelpieces in the homes of grieving families. As Fromanger notes, “spurred on by Ayatollah Khomeini, martyr veneration was posited as one of the foundations of the Islamic Republic. A wide and abundant iconography, with the effigy of the martyr, appeared in Iranian society in the form of photographs, murals, posters, paintings, stickers, stamps and so on.”¹⁹ She highlights the insertion of visual symbols into official imagery, such as the dove and the tulip, mirroring motifs used in the official poetics. Tellingly, the flag of the Islamic Republic appears in many images, but is absent from the displays in family homes. Later discussion in this article will demonstrate how the poetry used in the Martyrs’ Section complements Fromanger’s analysis of the visual commemoration of death, particularly in the hidden contrast between state messaging and parental messaging, representative of a public/private binary of grief. However, as we shall see, even in the presence of such contrasts, these epitaph poems reveal the extent to which the official ideology of war has sunk into the collective psyche.

Judith Butler’s notion of the “ungrievable life” provides another interesting lens through which we can understand this binary of grief. In *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?*, Butler writes:

One way of posing the question of who “we” are in these times of war is by asking whose lives are considered valuable, whose lives are mourned, and whose lives are considered ungrievable. We might think of war as dividing populations into those who are grievable and those who are not. An ungrievable life is one that cannot be mourned because it has never lived, that is, it has never counted as a life at all.²⁰

Butler’s theoretical framework takes on deeper dimensions when applied to the graves of the Iranian war dead, whose commemoration project appears to seek to keep them very much alive and “grievable”; however, this grievability is merely performative. To this day, the martyr’s gravestone is perceived by Iranian officials as a “historical document” that has to be preserved and restored.²¹ However, in this restoration process, it is not the individuals who are immortalized, but the political ideology that manifests itself in the preservation of these graves and continues to live on these graves, years after the soldiers’ death. This is particularly poignant in the case of unanimously

¹⁸Mbembé, “Necropolitics,” 12.

¹⁹Fromanger, “Variations in the Martyrs’ Representations,” 1–2.

²⁰Butler, *Frames of War*, 38.

²¹Interview with Seyed Mohammad Jowzi, “Sang-e mazar-e shahid be masabeh-e yek sanad-e tarikhi,” *Muzeh-ye enqelab-e eslami va defa’e moqaddas*, <https://bit.ly/2N849As>

designed gravestones of the unknown martyrs (*shohada-ye gomnam*) in this section of the cemetery and elsewhere in the urban public spheres. As the analysis of the epitaphs shall demonstrate, the lives of these soldiers have been reduced to one shared, deindividualized identity: that of the martyred warrior of the nation. Any sense of nuanced uniqueness—the qualities that would make them, as Butler describes, individually “grievable”—is eradicated. As *individual* soldiers, they are therefore “ungrievable”; their grievability lies entirely in their symbolic sacrifice to the state. The conversion of martial death into martyrdom interacts with a second Butlerian concept of “the precariousness of life”;²² there is a belief, shown through the epitaph poems, that precariousness can be usurped by an unerring conviction of eternal reward. The epitaphs establish a “normative framework” to convey “what kind of life will become worthy of being mourned.”²³

It is not enough to demonstrate the inculcation of a belief or cultural attitude to demonstrate the presence of necropolitics in the Islamic Republic; the dissemination of ideas must be backed up by an official engine of message creation and dissemination, to show the sovereign’s reach over death and the afterlife as a central part of the ideological state apparatus. To give one example, the Martyrdom Foundation (*bonyad-e shahid*) was established by the government in 1980, the year the war started, and continues to oversee official memorialization projects in Iran to this day. The aim of the foundation is to “cherish the remembrance of martyrs and those handicapped by the war, as well as their families and any person living in self-sacrifice.”²⁴ It was the same foundation that issued official martyr authenticity certificates to families during the war and set up museums, including the one at Zahra’s Paradise, to create public reliquaries of the dead. The Martyrdom Foundation was also responsible for the funeral, burial and the design of the epitaphs of the war dead in Zahra’s Paradise during and after the war. Although in the past the martyrs’ families and friends took the initiative to design and prepare some of these epitaphs, the control over protection and restoration of these graves to this day remains the responsibility of the Martyrdom Foundation and other related state institutions across the country.²⁵

²²Butler, *Frames of War*, 25.

²³Ibid., 53.

²⁴Fromanger, “Variations in the Martyrs’ Representations,” 50.

²⁵Seyed Mohammad Jowzi, the head of the House of Martyrs (*Khaneh-ye shahid*, 1992) and himself the brother of two martyrs elaborated on this procedure in an interview with the Museum of Sacred Defense. He mentions how some of these epitaphs and memorials were made by the martyrs’ friends who were later killed in the course of war. He also sheds light on the role played by such state institutions as the House of Martyrs and the Foundation of Martyrs and Veteran Affairs in designing and protecting the gravestones of the martyrs during and after the war. For more details, see Interview with Jowzi, “Sang-e mazar-e shahid.” In recent years, there has been an attempt on the part of martyrdom institutions in different cities to restore the gravestones of the martyrs. One of the debates has been about whether or not the diversity of the old gravestones is worth preserving or not. During and after the war, many gravestones were made by the families and friends of the martyrs which include, for example, testimonial letters, poems and pictures. Concern over the loss of such materials in the process of restoring the martyrs’ graves has been discussed in official meetings in recent years. For example, see ‘Mazar-e shohada: Samandehi beh ja-ye yeksansazi,’ Shahrara, accessed 9 October 2019, <https://bit.ly/2MEhbGR>

Christiane Gruber has published a comprehensive study of Iran's museum approach to martyrdom, demonstrating "how a cultural institution can provide a dramatic field, in which visitors engage in communal acts of remembrance and mourning, thereby uniting them into a civic body."²⁶ This institutionalized commemoration campaign sits alongside the plethora of state bodies and organizations such as the Centre for the Islamic Arts and Thoughts (*Howzeh-ye Honar-va Andisheh-ye Eslami*, 1980), the Organization for the Islamic Propaganda (*Sazman-e Tablighat-e Eslami*, 1983) and the Foundation for Preservation of Sacred Defense's Works and Values (*Bonyad-e hefz-e asar va arzasbha-ye defa'-e moghaddas*, 1989) governing the production of Sacred Defense art and literature (*Honar va adabiyat-e defa'-e moqaddas*).

Taken together, it is clear how much government resources are dedicated to perpetuating the sovereign state's hold over the glorification of martyrdom. In the case of war martyrs, however, this is given an additional troubling dimension, as Mbembé explores in the example of Palestinian suicide bombers in his article "Necropolitics," where "two apparently irreconcilable logics are confronting each other: the logic of martyrdom and the logic of survival."²⁷ As he points out, the traditional concepts of survival and heroism are inverted in Palestine, as in Iran. He goes on to conclude, "what connects terror, death, and freedom is an ecstatic notion of temporality and politics ... Far from being an encounter with a limit, boundary, or barrier, [death] is experienced as a release from terror and bondage."²⁸

But what does "bondage" mean in the context of the Islamic Republic? We cannot find visceral parallels here with Gilroy's slavery definition of "bondage", as described in *Black Atlantic* (1993);²⁹ rather, in Iran, the necropolitical "bondage" touches on the metaphysical. After all, if both political and poetical agendas urge escape from the mortal realm as a desirable goal or duty, there must be something inherently wrong with the living world beyond the temporary state of war. To follow Mbembé's logic above, death in this context is therefore experienced as "a release from [the] terror" of the battlefield, and "a release from ... [the] bondage" of living as a citizen in the Islamic Republic. The state circumnavigates this tautology by claiming ownership over both the land of the living *and* the land of the dead. The rules and beliefs that govern living citizens are extended to the deceased. Away from the Martyrs' Section, this applies to other state-related burials, too; the gravestones of political dissenters, for example, are often attacked by anonymous agents, a subject which deserves to be tackled separately in another article.³⁰

²⁶Gruber, "The Martyrs' Museum in Tehran."

²⁷Mbembé, "Necropolitics," 35.

²⁸Ibid., 39.

²⁹Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*.

³⁰For example, the gravestone of the independent poet Ahmad Shamlu (1925–2000) has been constantly attacked since his death in 2000. Throughout his life in the post-revolutionary period, Shamlu remained critical of the state politics and was constantly marginalized from the official literary scene. Destroying the gravestones of the political prisoners who were executed after the establishment of the Islamic Republic has been a recurrent event both in and outside of Zahra's Paradise, in cemeteries such as Khavaran.

In this project of spectral colonialism, citizens are never released from the grasp of the state. As Shahla Talebi argues, with reference to the burial of “empty coffins” of state martyrs in the courtyard of the San’ati Sharif University in Tehran in 2006, not only cemeteries but also the public space in Iran has become “a battleground over the geographies of life and death.”³¹ Talebi’s observation of the empty coffins in the Iranian public space echoes Volk’s analysis of public war memorials in Lebanon, where “the public ceremonial reverence accorded these monuments [is] precisely because they are either deliberately empty or no one knows who lies inside them ... The less we know about the bodies, the more national they become.”³² Benedict Anderson’s important remarks about the tombs of Unknown Soldiers in his groundbreaking book, *Imagined Communities*, is also worth noting here: “no more arresting emblems of the modern culture of nationalism exist than cenotaphs and tombs of Unknown Soldiers. Void as these tombs are of identifiable mortal remains or immortal souls, they are nonetheless saturated with ghostly *national* imaginings.”³³ Butler, too, adds to this discussion of public deindividuation: “Although it is not possible to singularize every life destroyed in war, there are surely ways to register the populations injured and destroyed without fully assimilating to the iconic function of the image.”³⁴

The necropolitical project of the Islamic Republic continues to this day. In new sections of Zahra’s Paradise lie the bodies of Afghan soldiers, killed in the war in Syria (2016–18). This conscious necropower campaign has further reach, too, playing an important role in shaping the Arab–Israeli conflict. Thousands of miles away from Tehran, in southern Lebanon, images of Khomeini and Khamenei sit alongside pictures of prominent Iran–Iraq war martyrs in the Hezbollah war museum. Glorification of the dead as an integral part of Hezbollah’s resistance against Israel is extensively modelled on the Iran–Iraq war, with ongoing support from the Islamic Republic over many years. An extension of the tenets of the Islamic Republican ideology into neighboring regions, with an emphasis on the politics of death, is a clear indication of the state’s foreign policy goals, that seek to hold dominion over not only the way people in allied countries live, but also how they die.

Formulating “Necropoetics”

Placed within the political context outlined above, the epitaphs of the Martyrs’ Section undoubtedly take on a greater significance than a handful of words may at first convey. They are the evidence of a dialogue between the dead and the living; be it the state or the grieving parent. In death, as in life, what Iranians say, what is said to them, and what is said *of* them, remains sharply delineated. The lines can be

³¹Talebi, “From the Light of the Eyes,” 120.

³²Volk, “Re-Remembering the Dead,”

³³Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 9.

³⁴Butler, *Frames of War*, 39.

interpreted to represent a canonization of failure and loss. Taken together, the epitaphs provide a morbid account of life in post-revolutionary Iran—a space where necropolitics at times meets *necropoetics*, a term I have coined to expand Mbembé's concept into the realm of language and verse. Like necropolitics, *necropoetics* gives us useful insights into contemporary forms of life and death subjugation. The headstones themselves become sites of political action, of propaganda and campaign. The language chosen may be rhyming, or whimsical, but it is often merely a poetic manifestation of the necropolitics.

While the war with Iraq ended in a reluctant ceasefire in 1988, with neither side making territorial gains, one far more significant border was crossed—the border between the living and the deceased. As will be shown here, the absence, presence or content of something as simple as a line of poetry on a grave can, in fact, reveal a subtle necropolitical project, seeking hegemonic control over the land of the dead, through reinvigorating the mystical lexicon, a return to the idea of gnostic love, the reunion with the Beloved, and the Sufi tradition of spiritual intoxication—a new nomenclature of romanticized, nostalgic and pastoral poetic motifs, visibly present to distract citizens from the brutal reality of war.

To fully understand the reverential politics of the Martyrs' Section, it is important to understand the politics of martyrdom that were promulgated by the Islamic Republic during the Iran–Iraq war. At the heart of the new government's necropolitical project was a conscious co-option of poetry to create a new lexicon for death and the afterlife, which, in turn, led to the mass inscription of epitaph poems used in *Behesht-e Zahra*—which I suggest to be a form of *necropoetics*. Whether inscribed by the order of the martyr's family and friends or by the state institutions that were deemed responsible for the affairs of the dead soldiers, epitaph poems in the Martyr's Section share the same necropolitics, albeit with some differences that I will demonstrate later in this paper. This affinity may be taken as profound evidence of how the state's ideology of martyrdom has seeped into social consciousness.

The Iraqi invasion came at a time when the Islamic Republic was still in the depths of transition, and woefully unprepared for war. It lacked regional and global allies and a decent supply of arms, and was embroiled in domestic power struggles, managing intense clashes between opposition groups on home soil in the wake of the revolution.³⁵ An official war culture (*farhang-e rasmi-ye jang*) had to become the state's first priority to maintain morale through pervasive iterations of optimistic patriotism: slogans dripping with hyperbole and bravura, and constant waves of propaganda to mobilize citizens to support the war. The conflict not only had to be normalized but also sanctified, a task performed largely through religion and language.

One significant tool in this pro-war project was the leveraging of legends and stories, well loved by everyone in Iran. No religious tale is more deeply engrained in the Iranian psyche than that of Ashura. This Shi'ite legend tells the story of Hossein, the grandson of the Prophet Mohammed, and his death at the Battle of Karbala in 680 AD. Hossein is portrayed as an innocent “infallible,” a Shi'ite Imam who,

³⁵To read about these struggles, see Abdulghani, *Iraq and Iran: The Years of Crisis*.

along with his seventy-two companions and family members, was murdered at the hands of unjust, infidel Umayyad caliph on the plains of Karbala. It is a foundation story of good and evil, in which Hossein is immortalized as the symbol of innocence (*mazlumiat*) for the Shi'ite community, who still seek to continue his path in their own lives, to replace tyranny with justice. It is a story known by all Iranians from childhood, remembered every year with an important festival of commemoration and associated poems and rituals.

Ashura rituals and processions had already played a significant role in the mobilization of the masses against Mohammadreza Pahlavi and his overthrow leading up to the 1979 revolution. During the war with Iraq, the legend was evoked once again as a powerful shortcut to quickly establish a sense of good versus evil, tyranny versus justice. It was used to justify key tenets of sacrifice, martyrdom and moral certitude. On numerous occasions, Khomeini compared Iranian soldiers with the Prophet's companions and the Iranian army to the "army of Islam," continuing to fight the Prophet's battles. Such parallels were given extra weight by the geographical location of Karbala, inside the territory of Iraq.³⁶ The modern-day conflict between the Shi'ite clerical state of Iran and the Sunni Ba'hist government of Iraq fell neatly into a holy lineage of strife, stretching back to the seventh century. The martyrs of Ashura and the dead of the Iran–Iraq war were positioned side by side in eulogies and political speeches. Turning the war into a sacred cause, therefore, turned the modern war dead into martyrs.

In her ethnographic study of martyr memorials in Lebanon, Lucia Volk highlights how Lebanon, too, leveraged the Karbala reference in its commemoration of the 1996 Qana Massacre, in which Israel attacked a United Nations compound in South Lebanon. "To inscribe Karbala into the Qana memorial," Volk writes, "not only makes a statement regarding righteous opposition to illegitimate rule and the need for sacrifice, but is also a comment on an heroic Shi'i identity that is vested in a struggle against corrupt co-religionists as well as foreign invaders."³⁷ Her documentation of the evolution of the state's Qana memorial billboard presents a compelling case study of the deployment of memorial messaging for political gain, a strategy that has also been implemented by the Islamic Republic throughout its governance.

Similarly, Iran's war memorials never "display bloody corpses sprawled on the battlefield."³⁸ The flags and identical graves are important signs "not only for the public expression of grief, and the creation of a space" where the families of the soldiers or state-sponsored employees gather "to remember sacrifice; they also create and sustain the political legitimacy of their sponsors."³⁹ In contrast with the Lebanese war memorials that "sublimate bodily horrors through displays of beautifully sculpted marble bodies,"⁴⁰ however, the memorials in Zahra's Paradise rarely depict the human

³⁶See a collection of Ruhollah Khomeini's statements about Iran–Iraq war: *Chera Jang?*

³⁷Volk, "Re-Remembering the Dead," 54.

³⁸Volk, *Memorials and Martyrs in Modern Lebanon*, 2.

³⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰Ibid.

form, featuring instead Quranic and/or Arabic inscriptions to evoke religious sentiments and align their death with divine sacrifice. There is, of course, a visual language of commemoration in the billboards and murals and other imagery found around the Martyrs' Section, but it is through the epitaph poems that we find more layered and varied representations of the official ideology of martyrdom.

A second important aspect of the state's wartime *necropoetic* campaign is the leveraging of ascetic principles—such as self-negation, justice and the pursuit of the divine—to reinvigorate and redefine the concept of martyrdom for a society at war. This specific terminology of death in the path of the divine was communicated to the public through literary messaging that drew heavily on the language and motifs of mysticism, long engrained in Persian culture as being intrinsically linked with an ascetic life. This connection could be traced in the poetry of the prominent Sufi poets such as Sanai (d. 1131), Attar (d. 1221), Mowlavi (d. 1273) and the philosophy of Al-Ghazali (d. 1111), who all had their share in the formulation of the Sufi idea of complete negation of the ephemeral, mundane world (“the killing of *nafs*” [self/ego]).⁴¹

This particular understanding of martyrdom, however, usually positioned the martyr *against* the oppressive ruling elites, with martyrdom itself a subversive act.⁴² In the build-up to the 1979 revolution, mystic sentiments and Sufi ideas were of particular interest to the revolutionary ideologues, not least to Khomeini himself, as they sought to reawaken a form of “poetic violence” (*khoshunat-e sha'eraneh*) in the national imagination; a form of shared lyrical resistance, revived and harnessed by a new ideological call to arms. Ali Shariati (1933–77), renowned Iranian intellectual and one of the “ideologues of the revolution,”⁴³ may have been the catalyst for this paradigm with his influential blend of politics, religion, class and Sufism. His use of Sufi terms such as self-construction (*khodsazi*), self-awareness (*khodshenasi*) and self-annihilation (*bikhodi*), all of which were borrowed from the works of pioneering mystic poets, were later integrated into official post-revolutionary rhetoric⁴⁴—rhetoric that was still very much in vogue in the fledgling nation state when war with Iraq broke out. Quickly, the promotion of self-abdication evolved to serve the new martial circumstances; a mystical poetic militarization emerged, that sought to transform physical loss into spiritual gain.⁴⁵

The epitaph poetry found in the Martyrs' Section is worthy of closer attention. At times, the poems mirror the state propaganda machine, following the state's agenda of glorifying war, sanctifying the dead and perpetuating popular slogans. Grave after

⁴¹In my forthcoming book, *A Revolution in Rhyme*, I have dedicated a whole chapter to the mystical lexicon of official war poetry, in which I thoroughly explore the ways in which death on the battlefield was glorified through poetry in the course of war and after the ceasefire.

⁴²The execution of Mansur Hallaj (d. 922), the rebel mystic of the Abbasid era in Baghdad, for his claim to divinity and his commemoration as a *shahid* (martyr) in the Persian literary tradition is an example.

⁴³Abrahamian, “Ali Shariati: Ideologue of the Iranian Revolution.”

⁴⁴Weber, *Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, 335.

⁴⁵For further discussion of this topic, see Varzi, *Warring Souls*.

grave bears identical poems and funerary copy, a textual repetition that reminds visitors of the deindividualized uniformity of the soldiers. This resonates with James Mayo's argument and his point about the war memorials and the design and structure of the graves in America: "the repetitious epitaphs and repeated gravestones lead to the unavoidable visual counting of the gravestones, which highlights the communal aspect of the dead."⁴⁶

On some occasions, however, there are hidden layers in the epitaphs that speak of a parallel set of feelings and emotions—perhaps even another reality. Through these exceptions to the mass repetition of certain words and phrases, we can trace different responses to the ideology of war. Death in these poems is perceived as less of a sacred loss and more of an unmeasurable loss. Such views are particularly found on personal epitaphs written by grieving parents.

The Grieving Parent: "Wherever I Look, Your Face Appears"

One category of epitaph poem I analyzed in Zahra's Paradise concerns the voice of the grieving parent. In some cases, this may complicate the official conceptualization of death in the field as a sacred event. The grieving parent often chooses to mourn the physical loss and absence of their child, in sharp contrast to the political project of martyrdom. Although there are parental poems that confirm the sacredness of martyrdom, death is often conceived by the parents as destructive and devastating, rather than a path to salvation. This logic sits in contrast with the state's necropolitical attempt to rebrand death as a mediator of redemption:

Day and night, I cry in your sorrow
 There is no single day that you slip my mind, my thorn-free flower!
 The dream of you being a groom on your wedding night
 Turned into an unfulfilled wish
 Alas! I will never forget this pain
 Your tearful father weeps for you
 Your mother, mourns your loss with a bloodied heart.

The text on this headstone quoted above references the physical sense of pain and sorrow, as well as the interrogative part of speech in which the deceased is addressed in the hope of them still being alive. This confirms the suffering of the bereaved parent, and the centrality of life versus afterlife in the parental mindset. Moreover, these poems have a hidden aspect, indicating that the parents had not reconciled themselves with the death of their child as being a path to eternal salvation. They convey an unconventional sense of loss in death. This is a unique form of social existence, in which the mourning parent is expected to perceive death in the field as a mediator of salvation in the interest of the nation, while lingering in a state of *living*

⁴⁶Mayo, *War Memorials as Political Landscape*, 31.

death.⁴⁷ The narrative voice in most of these poems is that of the martyr's mother. In the following lines, grave visitors can almost hear the mother weep: "How do I distract myself when, wherever I look, / my heart yearns for you and my eyes seek your trace."

In its nationwide efforts to validate the prolonged war with Iraq, and as part of the sanctification of death on the frontline, the state glorified the mother of the martyr (*madar-e shahid*) as a national role model for every citizen.⁴⁸ Countless televised interviews with mothers of martyrs were broadcast during and after the war to perpetuate a certified message: that martyrs were not dead. Yet some of these parental funerary poems stand poignantly at odds with this official message. They repeatedly speak of a void felt in the physical absence of the dead:

You left and the sorrow [of your loss] still weighs my heart
whenever we look, your face still appears
Don't you ever think we'll forget your memory
until the day we rest in this soil.

The Soldier's Voice: "Don't You Cry! I Haven't Died, I am Alive"

The parental lament stands in sharp contrast with another category of epitaph poetry in the Martyrs' Section—the contented soldier. Perhaps ironically, most of these poems are written in direct conversation with the mother whom the soldiers left behind:

I sacrificed my youth in the path of religion and nation
I chose the eternal heaven with full awareness
Tell my good mother a martyr never dies
For I have learned the love for martyrdom from Imam Ali.

Oh mother! Don't you cry! I am thrilled.
I haven't died, I am alive, and your sorrow is in my mind
You breastfed me with purity and taught me to sacrifice myself
And so I did, in the path of Islam and religion.

This theme of inverse patriotic praise—lionizing the status of an ideology by diminishing oneself—is at the foreground of these poems, as the soldier legitimizes his death in the name of a journey to reunite with the Beloved (God, in this case):

Mother! I am leaving, Karbala is calling me
A companion is calling me from distant lands

⁴⁷Mbembé, "Necropolis," 40.

⁴⁸As noted earlier, Zahra's Paradise is named after the daughter of the Prophet Muhammad, who is considered among the Shi'ite community as the most revered woman martyr. For a detailed account of the memorialization of the martyred women in post-revolutionary Iran, see Shirazi, "Death, the Great Equalizer."

There is no time to question the purpose of this journey,
 I am bidding farewell to you
 As this time, the Beloved is calling me.

Such poems also display prevalent mystical expressions that allude to the Sufi paradigm, with which the warfare ideology identified in order to represent the war as a spiritual cause:

Blessed are those who in the path of God,
 Rolled in their blood and left.
 Blessed are those who with love of Hussein in their heart
 Chose martyrdom and left.

An interesting literal replacement of “dying” with “leaving” in such poems proclaims the immortal state of the martyr as one who is “gone,” but not necessarily “dead.” Reading this poem in light of the long-lasting mystical poetic tradition, and ways in which mystical motifs were deployed by the state during the war, converts the first-person account and personal voice of the poem into a public statement that demonstrates the obedience and loyalty of the deceased to state ideology of warfare. Here, the logic of martyrdom is epitomized by the epitaph poem, which transforms the dead body into a war motto. Unlike the all too visible violence of war, the violence carried in the form of epitaph poetry is invisible. Although the soldier is concerned about his mother, a higher duty calls him to sacrifice his life.

Death, as an ending point or a state of nothingness, is nonexistent in these poems. This avoidance of using the word “death” reveals a strong sense of the continuation of life. There is a constant emphasis on the immortal state of the martyr in the afterlife, one which is either described as a “reunion with a Beloved,” “travelling to the sacred land of Karbala” or simply to be in a “content and “purified” state.

Another recurrent tract of poetry found in this section employs corporeal references in a way that impacts the definition of the afterlife. The physical separation, or connection, between the living and the dead adds a spatial and earthly feeling to these poems that sometimes sits at odds with the idea of reaching holy salvation. The following example of a recurrent inscription shows that, despite the certainty and contentment with the outcome of his decision, the deceased still sees himself as wounded and bloodied inside his grave. He even remembers his unfulfilled wishes, such as never making it to his wedding night:

Let me kiss your hand, Mother, for teaching me to be a free-spirit
 Come and watch: your son is now a groom
 I am happily going to my wedding bed tonight but I am wounded
 Instead of the wedding suit, I am wearing a cloth made of blood.

The deceased seems to be content with, and grateful for, what has happened to him. Death represents renewal, a “rite of passage,” not to mourn but to celebrate. The state of being dead seems to be at first synonymous with marriage; however, the last two

lines give a frank description of his physical wounds and bloodied clothes, implying a state of physical pain inside the grave. By acknowledging the wounded body and bloodied cloth, a bodily conception of the afterlife takes over the more abstract, spiritual one. This intensely felt private pain contrasts with the rhetorically structured poems in the first group.

Epilogue

Butler writes: “The differential distribution of public grieving is a political issue of enormous significance,”⁴⁹—and one which, in the Islamic Republic at least, is largely underexplored. This article has sought to begin to address that lacuna in politico-literary scholarship, by introducing the notion of *necropoetics* as a way to analyze the post-revolutionary forms of the subjugation of life to the power of death. Poetry can profoundly reconfigure the relations among political power, individual loss, sacrifice and resistance. I have argued that epitaph poems on the martyrs’ graves can be a form of extension or negation of the state’s necropolitics. Through the lens of these epitaphs, it becomes apparent how even the most deeply personal of experiences—death, and the loss of a loved one—come under state control and manipulation. The epitaphs reveal the difficulty of finding and having a voice as an individual in post-revolutionary Iran, in death as in life; whether that is in the small politics of family, gender and identity, or in the official sanctification of the war.

Researching these epitaphs is a form of eavesdropping on the invisible. Studying epitaph poems of the martyrs in Zahra’s Paradise shows that tombs are not only the visual reminder of the dead, they are the audible reminder too—their voice is still “heard” through the handful of words left behind to remember them. Each headstone is a final conversation—between the dead and the living; the dead and the history books; the dead and the state; and between the state and future generations. In a place normally associated with sanctified silence, the air is in fact alive with important chatter. The epitaph dialogues discussed in this paper prove that even the state-owned dead have something vital to tell the visitors about the growth and development of a complex and turbulent nation.

There are indeed dialogues to be had beyond these sections, where the “political dissidents” of the state and the “ordinary citizens” are buried, that offer a broader dialectic with the nature of death itself—whether glorious or shameful, immortal or embodied. They reveal that conceptions of the afterlife among Iranians is not merely limited to a holy scripture, a single religious sect or a powerful state-sponsored ideology; rather, they are rooted in an entire range of complex belief systems and multilayered ideas, in both Persian and non-Persian customs, highlighting religious and secular traditions that increasingly co-exist and overlap. These epitaphs are yet to be the subject of future academic investigations.

⁴⁹Butler, *Frames of War*, 22.

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