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A Narrative of the Disaster: Understanding the Experience of *Zahab* Earthquake in the Context of a Traumatized History

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Abstract

Society's understanding of "suffering" and disaster determines how it will be encountered. In the present study, we apply a constructivist approach and study the understanding of November 12, 2017 earthquake in Zahab at the context of the traumatic history of the region. Applying critical ethnography, oral history, field research and in-depth interviews, we found out that the event is understood in the continuation of a history of irrationality and injustice. Narrators share a common fear among marginalized groups: fear of betrayal, to be forgotten and to be ignored. There exists a vital need for creating collective narratives and identities, hearing them, recognizing them and establishing a meaningful relationship between them.

Keywords: Iran; Kurds; Collective Narrative; Disaster; Oral History; Trauma.

While systematic study on disaster sociology initiated in 1940s in U.S. military funded researches, it progressed into a more interdisciplinary field in the scientific community,

making connections with environmental sociology, sociology of climate change and sociocultural anthropology. Sociology of disaster has mainly focused on human behavior during times of immediate crisis, challenging the notion of "natural" disasters and studying the role of social and economic inequality and unsustainable development in turning hazards into disasters (Peek et al., 2021). A large part of the research literature was developed through structuralism, funded by military institutions, which regarded disasters as events disturbing the social system and its usual performance; until a cultural turn and a constructivist approach found its way into social science and of course, the sociology of disaster. After that, disasters were no longer perceived as objective and obvious events, but understood as social and cultural constructs. The main concern was now the processes through which disasters were socially constructed; the reason some events were called disasters, tragedies, accidents or calamities by the media and finally the groups who profit from calling certain events, "disasters" (Webb, 2018).

Society's understanding of "suffering" determines how it will be encountered. Cultural narratives, cognitive systems and collective expectations form not only the experience of disaster, but also its meaning. Ecological movements, applying the concept of vulnerability in the 1970s, defined an important dimension of the disasters as the vulnerability of communities. The term was coined by scholars who were indifferent to the interpretation of the members of that community. The paradigm of vulnerability that originated from the imagination of Western culture, considered the modern world fundamentally vulnerable, and classified a wide range of social groups under the concept of vulnerable such as women, children, minorities, the elderly, the poor and the disabled. Disaster was no longer considered as an unusual and unexpected event but a part of everyday life. That was why unlike 1980's in Britain, 1950's was not called the decade of disasters, in spite of its much higher mortality rate (Furedi, 2007).

Another important aspect in understanding disasters was the collective perception of its origin. The first perception of disasters was generally attributed to God and the metaphysical world; then, disasters were thought to be of natural origin, and finally, human activity was to be blamed for them. After the advent of modernity, the blame for many disasters aimed at industry, technology, military equipment and human ignorance. The more increased the importance of the meaning of the events, the "why" question became more vital. Disasters whose cause was perceived as human had a far greater destructive effect; due to the ambiguous, controversial, indefinite duration and therefore being a constant source of anxieties that according to Erickson led to "erosive communities" (Furedi, 2007).

The growing attention to individuals' perceptions and collective narration lied in the center of recording oral histories, specially about experiencing disasters. Microhistory defined itself against conventional historical strategies and regarded everyday life of people whose experience was usually lost among memorable historical events. But there remains a sociological aspect for the approach which is sometimes passed over by the practitioners of the school; narrators' interpretation of the event and their description of that, is rooted in their historical experience and the epistemological apparatus that is intertwined with social context and cultural background.

How was the problem constructed in the *Zahab* earthquake?

Geophysics describes Earthquake as a result of energy release in the lithosphere that generates vibrational waves and the ones with magnitude of 7 to 7.9 occur worldwide in an average rate of 18 cases per year. But at the level of human experience; it's the suffering, home loss, emotional crises, death and destruction that raises the issue of meaning. The disappearance of a large part of what constitutes the memory, individual and collective identity and the epistemological apparatus leads to various paths of searching for a meaning in order to gain back peace and integrity.

The earthquake in *Zahab* on November 12, 2017, had a magnitude of 7.2 and destroyed a large part of *Kurdish* region of *Iran* and killed an unknown number of people. It was followed by an expected amount of loss and suffering; but the traumatic history of the region distinguished the experience of inhabitants from that of previous ones, such as *Rudbar* or *Bam* earthquake. The event turns *Zahab* into a multidimensional intersection of various social problems: marginalization, war and insecurity, political conflicts and consecutive traumas. While there is a deep gap between *Kurdish Sunni* culture of the region and the formal *Persian Shia* culture of the country, there also exists a diverse range of religious beliefs, languages of everyday-life and cultural rituals within the area.

Therefore, the sociology of disaster, if applying a hermeneutic approach, has no choice but to stand on this intersection while studying such experiences. Human communities perceive the world differently, suffer differently and react differently to specific events; on the basis of their lived experience and the meaning they ascribe to those events. Thus, what is the role of social history of *Zahab* in understanding the earthquake? How are the narratives constructed and transformed? How does the experience integrate into the individual and collective identities of Survivors? How are epistemic systems formed in this condition? What kind of action this way of suffering leads to? We try to find some answers to these questions, although a more comprehensive survey requires an interdisciplinary perspective employing anthropology, history, religion, social science, psychology and ecology and their inter relationship in order to understand the human experience as a whole.

How are we going to approach the problem?

We are going to apply a constructivist approach; since we believe in multiple realities, field study and closeness of researchers to the subject, minimizing the objective separateness and applying a literary form of narration. We are aware that problem construction and data analyzing are value-laden and dependent on researchers' social status, lived experience and personal perspectives. The extracted meanings are varied and multiple and come from the complexity of views and are negotiated socially and historically. We also use an advocacy/ participatory world view attending oppression, domination, suppression, alienation and hegemony to provide a voice for marginalized groups and try to empower them (Creswell, 2007).

The approach creates a strong connection to ethnography which has gone through a long path from classic anthropology to field research and participatory observations of *Chicago* school, orientalism and evolutionism. It encountered a hermeneutic turn in the second half of the twentieth century which played an important role in the formation of interpretive anthropology that cared for meaning in the context of culture. Its major tasks are discovery and description and is an appropriate methodology for grasping native's point of views. Their relation to life and their vision of world; for setting aside naïve realism; for learning from people instead of studying them and for comprehending the role of language not only in communication about the reality, but also in constructing reality (Spradley, 1979). The present study can be categorized under the title of critical ethnography, which, in addition to field research, addresses the issue of inequalities and social injustices and their structural causes.

We did not speak the native language of narrators (*Kurdish*), which caused some valuable data to be missed. Fortunately, the narrators spoke in *Persian* and used their translation competency quite cleverly and translated the meaning in their culture into an appropriate form of ours and we contemplated on their application of *Persian*. We tried to preserve the originality of the meanings in discovery, description and translation phase (not only the translation into English, but also in translating the local experience into the prevailing language of science).

As a preliminary stage of ethnography and before the start of the operational phase of the research, the social history of the region and the written and visual reports of the earthquake were studied. In September 2017, a research team arrived at the scene. The team was consisted of the students and professors of sociology, anthropology, social work and welfare planning who performed field observations and in-depth interviews with over ninety people in *Zahab* and nearby villages. Because of the social, ethnic, religious and cultural gaps with research population, gate keepers helped to facilitate communication and gain trust of the narrators. The data was gathered in audio and video files, while the atmosphere, background events and body languages were recorded by researchers. The accumulated data was shared between team members for individual purposes; each scholar following his field of interest. The narrators included housewives, workers, volunteers, city council members, government officials, nurses and paramedics, adolescents and students, the elderly, teachers, clergy and small business owners. The data was analyzed inductively, coded on a descriptive level and classified. The patterns were extracted and generalized and their association with specific social theories were examined (Sangasubana, 2011).

At the stage of description and sharing what we have learnt, we are also going to use oral history ways of narration and points of interests, as *Svetlana Alexievich* puts into words:

I've always been drawn to this miniature expanse: one person, the individual. It's where everything really happens... I don't ask people about socialism, I want to know about love, jealousy, childhood, old age, Music, dances, hairdos. The myriads sundry details of a vanished way of life. It's the only way to chase the catastrophe into the contours of the ordinary and try to tell a story... there is an endless number of human truths. History is concerned solely with the facts; emotions are outside of its realm of interest. In fact, it's considered improper to admit feelings into history. But I look at the world as a writer and not a historian. I am fascinated by people (Alexievich, 2016, p.15).

The missed part of truth in *Alexievich* version of dealing with reality is the complex and mutual ties between everyday life experience and dominant orders which cannot be ignored; no matter how much we care about individual's way of life. They will be there, and their rules will deeply affect our everyday life regardless of our recognition or indifference. We will try to investigate the connection between the narrators' construction of social reality and a totality which can be figured out at different levels, through retrospective movement between micro and macro levels of reality; since it's the only way for criticizing the pervasive orders and creating courses of resistance.

Before the earthquake

Perhaps the mysterious origin of *Kurds* depicted in the legends, is a reference to their *Assyrian* predecessors. The myths describe *Kurds*' ancestors as kids who escaped from *Zahak*¹ or the result of the marriage between an elf and *Salomon*'s slave who were driven away to the mountains by him; a history that begins with rejection and displacement even in the legends (McDowall, 2004).

It was in *Seljuk Empire* that *Kurdistan* was applied to name the land that belonged to *Kurds*: a land between *Gulf of Alexandria*, *Persian Gulf*, *Caucasus Mountains* and *Mesopotamia*. Most of *Kurds* (The exact number is unknown) are scattered throughout *Turkey*, *Iran*, *Iraq*, *Syria* and post-soviet states (Blau, 1963). The concept of *Kurdishness* has always been an ambiguous one, because of the religious, linguistic and cultural differences between *Kurds*. There are *Sunnis*, *Shia*, *Yezidis* and other groups among them (Saatci, 2002, p.558) who may speak in *Kurmanji*, *Sorani* or other languages. In fact, *Kurds* are often introduced under the topic of "*Kurdish issue*" in history, in politics and even in academic social research; the dehumanization and depersonalization of a large population under the notion of "the *Kurds*" that ignores a wide range of plurality and individual particularities (Bochenska, 2017, p.55).

The politically, economically and even geographically marginal position of *Kurdish* tribes, played a dominant role in shaping the social history of the region. Located on several faults of *Zagros* and at the borders of three great powers of the *Middle East* (the empire of *Iran*, the *Ottoman* empire and *Russia*) along with possessing oil and water resources resulted in an eventful history. They were hired in *Armenian* genocide, massacred and displaced by the *Ottoman* empire, lived among infectious diseases, burning lands, famine, slaughter, vengeance, poverty and bombardments. On occasions, *Kurdish* tribes, sometimes resisted for their independence and sometimes compromised with the *Ottoman* empire, *Turkey*, *Iran*, *Iraq*, *Britain* or the *United States*.

Along with the increasing industrialization of central areas in *Iran* by *Reza Shah*, *Kurdistan* and other Border areas were pushed to marginal and peripheral regions economically and politically. The gap led to the formation of ethnicity-based nationalism and even to some degree an ethnocentrism. The struggle of *Peshmerga* and *Kurdistan Democratic Party* against government advocates who were called humiliatingly *Jash*²,

¹ Cruel monarch in Persian mythology who used young men's brain to feed the snakes on his shoulder.

² A traitor who betrays his people.

lasted for a very long time and represented a struggle between a traditional ethnic identity and a modern national one which sought out security in the price of submission by a nation-state. *Ba'ath* party granted autonomy to *Iraq's Kurdistan* in 1970 and announced a trustful brotherhood between *Kurds* and *Arabs*; but the events did not proceed as anticipated and a war among *Kurds* and *Ba'ath* party had become inevitable by 1974. *Mustafa Barzani*, as the leader of *Kurdistan Democratic Party*, compromised with *Reza Shah*, but was abandoned by him in fighting against *Ba'ath* party of *Iraq* and suffered from severe losses. In 1986, during the final stages of *Iran-Iraq* war, *Saddam Hussain* started *Anfal* campaign and massacred about 150,000 *Kurds* and displaced about one million by chemical bombing, burning villages and torturing the survivors in *Iraq's* and *Iran's Kurdistan*. The genocide was hardly noticed and remembered by international community. At the same time, the mass executions of *Kurdish* rebels that took place in 1980 by *Iranian* regime, was repeated in 1988 after the operation *Forough Javidan* by *MEK*³ who invaded western borders of the country (McDowall, 2004).

Pursuing short-term goals was a characteristic of tribal mode of life and has endured more or less up to now. Diversity of tribes, religions, languages and cultures as well as governments' abuse of intra-group differences, made unreliable relationships and made it difficult to find an integrated identity. It's just a little more than a century, that *Kurds* have conceptualized a national identity whose elements are taken from mountains, weapons, musical instruments, mysticism and placelessness. The first nationalist *Kurd* was *Sheikh Obeidollah Nahri* in 1880's; who despite his ambition and bravery, eventually surrendered to his enemies, just like his substitutes; *Qazi Muhammad* and *Mustafa Barzani*. *Kendall* believes that *Kurdish* national movement as well as its leaders and elites lacked a degree of modernity and it took a long time for them to use political organization, apart from armed battles (*Kendall and Nazdar, 1994*); again, a consequence of ignoring pervasive currents.

Ibrahim Younesi in an introduction to the translation of *Kinan's* book says: "If you ask me what did the *Kurds* do? I'll say they revolted, fought, betrayed each other, failed and got massacred" (*Kinan, 1997, p.5*). He believed that *Kurds* do not care about recording their history and that is why they make the same mistake again and again. Since *Kurdish* language was generally abandoned in formal education; even if there was an opportunity to study, *Kurds* associated it with betrayal to their origin and identity. The result was nothing more than a history, recorded by English, French and American narrators.

Kurds' partiality and their fondness of their leading figures eventually turned them into arrogant ones. *Barzani* fought armies of *Iran, Iraq* and *Turkey* simultaneously for fifteen days, fled to the Soviet Union and left a legend of himself. He was a worshiped figure among his people and even he, did not care for reading. He believed so much in his mission that did not care for others' opinion or historical experiences (*Kinan, 1997*).

Consecutive struggles, consistent failures and collective wounds continue to reproduce themselves until the very moment. With establishment of *ISIS* in 2014, many *Kurds* were attracted to fundamentalism, and many were victimized by or resisted against it.

War, Love and playing the role of a scapegoat were the main context in the embodiment of *Kurds* collective identity and formed the theme of their art and literature. On one hand,

³ *Mujahedin-e-Khalgh*

there is the traditional concept of honor which refers to faithfulness, courage and being ready to die for something precious. On the other hand, the modern notion of dignity that recognizes the value of life that may be associated with cowardice and submission to discriminatory policies (Bochenska, 2017, p.47). That is why everyday language of narrators speaks of 'a debt of a death to God' instead of a right to live. Poems and lullabies narrate the sufferings of whom breathe in the atmosphere of waiting for the disaster to come.

Today, living on a demarcation line continues to overshadow the lives of the region's residents. "Border" is the most widely used term of their everyday-life and a chance for livelihood for many of them. Since 1992 and with the autonomy of *Iraq's Kurdistan*, border trade became popular and *Kulbary*⁴ became a common way of living in *Kurd* cities. Poverty and a high rate of unemployment, forces *Kurds* to embrace *Kulbary* and its consequences: disability, frostbite, avalanches and border guards' shootings.

At these intersections of contradictory forces, and under the burden of these painful experiences is when and where the earthquake of *Zahab* takes place.

An outsider

I had not been in any of the *Kurdish* cities before, I did not know any of *Kurdish* languages, neither much detail of customs of different sects and groups; and in spite of that, I immediately felt at home. We visited neighborhoods, streets and parks where people resided in tents and Conex. We traveled to small villages with few residents, and we were welcomed everywhere. They were eager to speak and share their experiences; they were somehow used to that, since they had been in the center of the media for some time. We explained that we were not from charities, we were there to hear their stories, share it with others and record it; so, it would never be forgotten. Some got disappointed hearing that, and some embraced the idea and asked more questions enthusiastically. Sometimes, they started to tell a story they thought everyone liked to know, the story they were used to retelling; as if reading from a manuscript. But then, time passed away, the conversation went on and something transferred in the air. Little by little, they began to narrate their deepest fears, sorrows and angers. Sometimes they were not keen for conversation and looked at me with hesitation, distrust, even hatred. This was when I turned off my recorder, put it in my bag along with my notes and started to share my own experience of loss and fear. I knew how they felt me as an intruder, and they had every right to feel that way. I was a *Fars*, middle class student living in capital who had never lost her home nor her family. What else could they feel? The truth is, it was out of their generosity that they let me go at their home, sit with them drinking tea and reminding myself that I had no right to feel pity for them because of their misfortune. I was more than grateful for that and ready to leave their privacy; just a small sharing of honesty and they never rejected me; not once. Somehow, we were alone in our own ways, and we wanted to trust each other; and more than that, to know each other.

The amazing fact revealing itself immediately was that they were extraordinary storytellers, regardless of who they were or what they believed: a young, energetic and

⁴ Carrying smuggled goods on one's back and crossing the border.

cheerful woman with a light make up, a solemn pensive widow or a bluffing and humorous old man; they all had their own language and their own style in telling their stories. I saw the most wonderful people and heard the most breathtaking stories in *Zahab*. I saw enormous men with heavy mustache and innocent looks, carrying their guns on their back and telling funny stories, childishly laughing; I heard narrative of a mother telling the story of her life like a music coming from an ancient time; I met old couples married under *Khun Bass*⁵ agreement; I was guest in a young man's house who got shot and passed away a few weeks later while carrying fuels in the border; I saw local women carrying their responsibility as council members in a masculine political and social discipline; and I heard about narratives that will never be heard: people getting burnt by the fire at their tents and young ones committing suicide whose families wouldn't talk about them.

I learned a lot and laughed and cried with my sisters and brothers a lot; but there was also a sad side for the story. None of the friendships and contacts could last longer than a year; as if there was an ice burg between us, a little part visible and a massive bulk invisible. They considered themselves as eternal victims and a trouble in any relationship outside their community and I was condemned to stay on the upper status of a hierarchy that kept me from bonding through an equal and just relationship.

The moment of the earthquake

The moment of the earthquake is perceived at the context of a long-lasting poverty and illiteracy.

Here, children have no dream. I once asked one of them what's his dream and he said he wanted to sell plastic waste when he grew up. It was his ultimate dream... They don't care about scientific and academic progress. My students get married on the first grade of high school. I asked them why and they said that even if they are accepted to the university, their fathers wouldn't let them go. Because "it doesn't suit girls". I had thirty students and none of them had read a book (a young teacher; she speaks with enthusiasm and excitement).

Thus, it is not surprising if scientific definition of the earthquake does not make sense for many of them. It is understood in the continuation of a history of irrationality and injustice and although it creates a breathtaking interruption in everyday life; the breathtaking interruptions have become the normal way of living. Many are confident that the earthquake is the result of a secret military operation. Human disasters do not leave a possibility for occurrence of a natural one. The story of mothers and daughters that repeats itself generation after generation.

I painted a picture in 2002; of a woman, losing her child. It got a worldwide reputation. I'm painting pictures now and I recognize they are the same, crying women and dead bodies of children. You'd be surprised of the similarities between the works before and after the earthquake; and you'd probably ask me if I have any joyful peace of work (a male artist with paint all over his hands and clothes).

⁵ Meaning "stopping murder"; is a custom held when a member of a tribe murders someone from another tribe; the former must send a girl to marry a man from the latter in order to stop revenge.

We went to *Dalahu* recently and my daughter cried hard; so did I. She said: “this is where my father used to sit, make tea, irrigate the trees” and I answered: “it’s also his suffering place, his crying moment, his blood print”. She said: “I wished to have father by my side when I’m 60” and I told her that no wish comes true (a still mourning widow).

The shadow of the past weighs heavily on the experience of the moment of the disaster. There are scientific explanations among narrators with academic educations. It’s shaped by the lived experience of the narrators: a physician compares it to an electrocardiogram, a construction worker to strikes of a hammer, a mother to a cradle and the artist.

This disaster may be hideous; but for an artist, it’s also beautiful. It’s painful and inspiring at the same time.

Earthquakes are natural disasters and *Iran* is on a seismic belt. We are looking for someone to blame; but the truth is that such disasters happen all over the world: in Mexico, in *Peru* and in *Japan* the earthquakes may have displaced a whole city. We must desist conspiracy theories and try to enhance our buildings instead (a doctor; conversation took place at his office).

People said it’s our fault. We weren’t grateful to God and it’s our punishment. I told them it was an accident, the result of chemical reactions underground. Otherwise, punishing innocent children would be unfair. The destructed buildings were unsafe from the beginning, *Zahab* is a sedimental region and that’s the whole truth (a part of a conversation with three women, two of them at city council; they spoke freely, making me feel among a bunch of friends).

Some religious narrators associate the moment to the doomsday; but for most of them, their experience of war or the stories they have heard about it, fabricates the context of their memories.

It reminded me of war, when I was a student. We heard the siren, and we would run to the shelters. In the earthquake, it was the same. No one looked down. We were gazing at the sky. We thought it’s a bombardment. No one thought about an earthquake for a second (a woman sitting in the open area between several Conex; her children play around us).

They describe the experience of war as a much more bearable one, because the enemy was visible, and they could shelter in a trench; while now, they feel completely insecure almost everywhere.

I hate everything, even the ground under my feet. I curse it every day (a single mother, divorced a few months ago because of her spouse addiction; she is grim and bitter, hardly looking at me).

I was at war myself and I swear to God I was not afraid back then. *Iraq* army had come close, and we had emptied *Zahab*. When they were bombing the city, I would sit on the bridge and look at them. But now! God I’m scared. I still cannot sleep under a roof (a disabled man lying on bed outside his house).

Is there an attachment to the place in *Zahab*?

“Place identity” was introduced in the late 1970s and became a subset of social identity just like gender and social class which was essential for cognition, expression and mediation in defense mechanisms; a cognitive basis on which all experiences took place. In other words, places lied in complex socio-historical networks, found various meanings and played different roles in shaping identities (Qazimi, 2014). Both place identity and place attachment contain psychological and sociological aspects. The latter meant both an emotional bond to a place and a feeling of peace and security in it; a role in the creation of individual and collective identity on conscious and unconscious levels that satisfied the need of belonging to a particular, distinct and even slightly separate place. The meaning ascribed to a place is not dependent on its aesthetic essence nor its physical geometry, but on symbolic interpretations which is fluid and responds to changing patterns of socio-economic organization (Sepe, 2013, p.6). It is neither just a matter of getting used to a particular site; People make place a part of who they are by manipulating it and interacting with it (Dugan, 2007).

I would like there to exist places that are stable, unmoving, intangible, untouched and almost untouchable, unchanging, deep rooted; places that might be points of references, of departure, of origin... Such places don't exist, and it's because they don't exist that space becomes a question, ceases to be self-evident, ceases to be incorporated; ceases to be appropriated. Space is a doubt: I have constantly to mark it, to designate it. It's never mine, never given to me, I have to conquer it (Perec 1997, p.91).

Anthropological places are identitary, relational and historical (Sepe, 2013, p.9). Positivist approach applies indicators such as familiarity with place, duration of familiarity, the ability of the place to meet needs and the extent of knowledge of the space to measure the intensity of attachment to a place, while phenomenological approach regards meaning and experience in a qualitative and descriptive manner. By evoking a feeling and memory of the past or by experiencing a cognitively and emotionally important event, attachment to a place can occur like love at first sight (Najafi and Kamal, 2012). Applying the first approach along with an authoritarian attitude by urban management reveals after the earthquake of 1968 in *Gibellina, Italy*, when the mayor decided the town to become an open-air museum. He invited well-known architects to create a new identity for the *Gibellinese* community. The result was a top-down decision-making process, denying the plurality of the memories and never asking local opinions or their collaboration. People were not abandoned by authorities, but they did become the object of a theatrical performance (Crotti, 2020).

Physical places aid our self-formation by reminding us of important personal and collective experiences, events, traditions and memories... Identity is grounded in the autobiographical memory, resulting in a feeling that we are re-living our past (Knez et al. 2018, p.12).

Identity crisis was first used in a clinic for injured soldiers of WWII to describe the situation of soldiers who experienced a sense of historical discontinuity and personal instability. Although place-attachment takes a long time to be established; it can be disrupted quickly through devastating disasters (Lucini, 2014). In spite of that, stronger place attachment and identification with one's community helps to deal with the aftermath crisis and softens the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disease (Muldoon et al. 2017).

Although there is a huge literature about PTSD, place identity and place attachment in scientific research, such terms make no sense for people living in peripheral communities. After the earthquake in *Bam*, feeling at home, sense of belonging, and social connections suffered from the disappearance of the characteristics of urban identity such as the citadel and the palm farms (Lak, 2016). But *Zahab* earthquake occurred in a place where the oldest urban structures were less than 40 years old. Narrators refer to "steel neighborhood", "agricultural town" or "*Ihsan* complex"⁶ as part of the city. If there were concerns about the unification of houses and the non-distinction of neighborhoods in *Bam* (Aarefian, 2018), the tenants in *Zahab*, withstand the extreme cold and heat of the cabins, so they would not have to pay for rents and services. In other words, places in collective memory and urban identity did not exist in the first place. Instead, there existed a burden of memories around forced migrations and fruitless sufferings. Economic impasses loosen ethnic identity and provoke place detachment even further.

My family was moving from *Iraq* to *Iran*. I was born somewhere between (a man making *Falafel* in his stall to start selling them by noon).

My father says we are *Kurds*. But I couldn't find out if I'm from *Iran* or *Iraq*. If you're born here, they'll call you *Iranian*, not *Kurd*. But I wish I was born there; I wish I was just a *Kurd* (a 12-years old girl outside the Conex they hold their classes in).

People in *Zahab*, are used to start from the beginning. Before I was born, *Iraq* invaded *Zahab* and people ran away to *Iraq*. So did my family. My father was a partisan and served in *Iran* military for twelve years. When the war was over, he came to *Iraq* after us. I was born there, and my father died a few years after that. We came back to *Iran* and my brothers went to get help from government; but they said there are no recording regarding our father, as if he never existed (a young man in *Kurdish* clothes sitting in the entrance of a complex of Conex erected by military organizations).

Many have gone to *Tehran* for work and their families live here. The administrations usually employ people from other cities. There are no jobs for us, no library, no park, no playground and not because of the earthquake; we didn't have any before the disaster either (the same young teacher).

Thus, if attachments to the place are so fragile and unreliable; where does this strong sense of belonging that's floating in the space come from? One year after the disaster, they are still wandering between the remains of the event, indifferent, not trying hard to improve anything; but they still seem to feel at home. I ask myself how is this possible?

When there is no refuge but within

How are traumas dealt with elsewhere? I search for the answer impatiently where ever I can. It seems they are overcome in a variety of ways: They are named to find a human, descriptive, memorable and controllable character and collective mourning is held at the local, national and international level. Rituals -including funerals- as spontaneous responses, meet the needs that people cannot express and that is why they are important in

⁶ Collection of Conex established by governmental or military institutions.

critical situations (PAHO/WHO 2004, p.99). When a national or even international mourning ritual is held after a tragic disaster; collective mourning channels the grief, expresses social support, deals with the loss and relieves the anger. Of course, *Shia*, *Sunni* and *Dervish* each has its own funeral ritual that allows to understand the significance of what cannot be directly experienced; But the chaos after *Zahab* earthquake did not let many to bury their deceased ones as they felt was suitable and it was no surprise that they got caught in unresolved grief.

We buried them together, just like years ago; with their clothes on... It was so painful... I wish I had died with them, along with my children, along with my wife (an old man, wandering among anonymous graves in a large graveyard; he looks lost).

In encounters with tragedies, works of art and literature are created to narrate the suffering and collective narratives are recorded to hear the voice of those who share the painful memory. Such efforts are ignored or even prevented in *Zahab* experience.

We went to many places and gathered children for playing and painting pictures; in villages, in hospitals... But no one supported us, not municipality, not governorship, they didn't spare a pen; they didn't even encourage us nor appreciate our work (the same artist).

What constitutes trauma, is subjectively determined, but it definitely is an uncontrollable fear (Etherington, 2003, p.22). Trauma is a wound upon the mind which imposes itself again and again on the survivor. The respond to the event occurs with delay (Caruth, 1996). As Nietzsche said, although we can live life forwards it can only be understood backwards (Etherington, 2003, p.20). "It cannot be merely the consequence of a discrete happening or acute event; but can derive from a persisting condition based upon accumulated life experiences" (Rogers, 1999, p.221).

While in industrialized countries, curing the impact of traumas is defined as the task of institutionalized medical services; in more traditional societies, it's the social network that helps to heal the survivors (Ranke, 2016, p.43). In *Zahab*, some institutions were selected by authorities for reconstruction and presenting medical services; but the duration of their presence, their budgets and their range of services were limited.

During the first months, the army was beside us. The soldiers were gentle and respectful. They pulled the bodies out and rebuilt some structures. They were present everywhere and always active. But then, after a while, they just left. They couldn't be seen anywhere, as if it was the hope that left the city (a smiling and energetic young woman who is in a hurry to take her daughter to school).

It's sometime after the disaster that addiction, family crisis and suicides start to rise and that's the time that native social workers find themselves alone in the middle of the catastrophe. There are some religious or social networks in some villages for empowerment, but small ones are deprived of that, and deep social, religious and political gaps prevent them from connecting together. Specially that the local culture becomes vulnerable as the crisis arise. With the flow of public aid, bulks of canned foods and garments flew into the city. Narrators' description of throwing stuff out of cars at invading people, reveals the damage to a culture known for its mutiny and independence.

I tried to stop my students from following vehicles and asking for help. I told them that we have lost our house and our lives, but not our honor and dignity. They laughed and said their parent would call them losers if they don't go home carrying stuffs taken from

volunteers. The girls used to come to school with pride, wearing elegant clothes; but now, they cried if they couldn't get something from charities. Many things changed so rapidly. Modesty meant ineptitude and disrespect was regarded as cleverness (a tired man resting under the shadow of a tree).

Ethnicity forms a self-consciousness that protects people from total anomie. But "Ethnic consciousness is no longer an exclusively primordial concept, nor is it a cultural universal... rather, it is a collection of human experiences evolving as a product of economic and cultural domination that are expressed through large, historical undercurrents" (Saatci, 2002, p.560). Too much burden on it and everything may go wrong. Sometimes, the community is characterized by established hostilities among ethnic, religious and political groups. Prejudices are often accompanied by fears that are not necessarily dependent on objective threats and it can cause serious disasters in critical moments; just like what happened in *Tokyo* after the 1923 earthquake: massacre of hundreds of *Koreans*, not because of their non-*Japanese* otherness, but specifically due to their positive identity as *Koreans*, which was associated with prejudices in *Japanese* consciousness. Rumors were spread about murders and robberies committed by them, and it was the satisfying character of rumors which revealed hostilities and fears (Allen, 1996). Similarly, *Iran* government perceives minorities as risks for national security and a challenge for national cohesion. These concerns lead to restriction for holding *New Year* celebration, environmental campaigns and literary festivals among *Kurds* (Akbarzadeh et al. 2019, p.11). Stereotypical images and deep social gaps with "center" and national government reveal themselves at the moments of encounter.

People think *Sunnis* are cutthroats and thieves. They were surprised to see us praying. They think of *Kurds* as terrorists (a muscular man who greeted us at his house with a hookah).

I'm a soldier myself and I don't let my children to speak ill of the government, but the truth must be told... people in *Zahab* don't suffer from inflation or even homelessness. They suffer from injustice... A leader is like a father to his people. But we have no father in *Zahab*, no reliable person in charge. We have been under attack for eight years and our home and our honor were stolen from us during the war. They have betrayed us again and again and it was a chance for the government, for the leader himself to compensate the damages they had done, but they didn't use the chance (our host at the inn; the conversation took place late at night, when his work was done).

People said *Iranian* people are impulsive. There will be no help after the first few weeks. So, we must store goods as much as we can. I mean... they were sure that government is not coming to our help. They said the incident was government's fault: a harp⁷. "*Harp*" became a new word in everyday language of people ... We now watch on TV that eighty percent of *Zahab* has been reconstructed, while we know it's a lie! ... I remember exactly, two days after the earthquake the news declared that markets were open and people were at peace, but they were lies all together (a young man working on a corn farm).

Narrators who consider themselves abandoned, are pushed into the reality of everyday life before feeling mentally and physically prepared for that. They get no chance to objectify their experience. Consecutive traumas are born so ceaselessly that no healing can be gained. They suspend somewhere above people's every-day life, and their shadows darken the lives of the narrators.

⁷ An ambiguous military project.

Sometimes, I wake up in the morning and feel it's the first day after the earthquake. As if something is always accompanying me, is always with me. You have to live, you have to keep going; you just have to. The society expects it from you. But I don't think I'll be able to return my normal life for a very long time. That's why you prefer to be alone with yourself more than anything else. I sometimes wish I was in a coma; then I would wake up after a few years having forgotten everything. I like the time to pass quickly, so our mind gets cleared from everything as soon as possible (a man with a cold look).

We thought to be in a dream for a few months; but then, the inflation hit us, and we found out we are awake (the same *Falafel* seller).

If people are not prepared to return to the normal routine of their daily life, their suffering will be pushed into the realm of mental reality. The objectivity of the disaster is present in debris, cabins, dead bodies and the city atmosphere; but this is a reality shared only by neighbors and relatives. Some narrators say: "no day goes by without recounting the memory"; definitely because the dialogue has the power to create reality (Burger and Luckmann, 1966); but no reality is created beyond that. Protective institutions against fear and loss are solely defined within the ethnic and religious boundaries; so, the local identities sink into themselves in search of a safe ground to step on. The contradiction between ethnic and national identity lead to an increasing destruction of individual bearings.

They have no hope, no regard to the world, no desire, just an enormous nonchalance (the same tired teacher).

My father used to be so strict; but now? He is so indifferent. If I colored my hair before, he would hit me; but last night, I colored it in purple. He saw and didn't say a thing. If I got a good score at school, he would get so happy and cheered me up; but now, nothing. He is so unconcerned about everything (a teenager; she is so self-conscious and permanently touches her purple hair).

If traumatized individuals do not get a voice, their body starts to speak for them. They may be recognized as weak, with low moral fiber, numb, non-realistic and depressed persons which can compose a community with the same characters. Accumulated trauma can lead to the creation of a passively traumatic environment (Etherington, 2003, p.25). Transformation of memory in a healing process can take place only in a safe environment, after gaining some control over life, by narrating stories in safe relationships and mourning the losses created by trauma (Etherington, 2003, p.33). Storytelling transforms abstract values into lived experiences. Accumulated individual narratives around a common challenge, crafts a public narrative; develops group cohesion, sense of purpose and a plan for action. These collective narratives find a chance to stand against master narratives which are usually invisible, and people inevitably conform to them. It's an uneven playing field, since dominant narratives erase personal stories. Discovering meaning is only possible through a retrospective approach in reflecting on past events and not while the experience is actively unfolding. Storytelling is a powerful form of resilience training and helps to practice cognitive and emotional flexibility (Brewster and Zimmerman, 2022).

What was this all about?

Zahab is not the only place in *Iran* in which the relationship between the nation and the government has long been understood as a “master-common people” relationship. The government is perceived as a father whose kindness and fury may address his people any moment; a father who is merciful toward subordinate children and not so sympathetic with disobedient ones; and a father, who gives up on them in critical moments, just like their home, their shelter and their hope.

While people in "center" are more or less familiar with bureaucratic mechanisms for following up their guild and civil interests, marginalized groups are deprived of such luxuries of modern lifestyle. The narrators do not define themselves as citizens, but as members of a specific community or ethnic group suffering from prejudice and injustice. We tried to narrate a common fear among marginalized groups: fear of betrayal, to be forgotten and to be ignored. They are implicitly aware of the common sufferings of people living on political borders; but there is still a long way before the formation of a collective consciousness or civic movements. The truth is, not much is left of a legendary courage. They perceive some affairs to be cruel and still surrender to them for survival: they bribe border guards, sometimes flatter authorities, keep quiet when their beloved ones are murdered, and give up on trying to improve their collective social condition; instead, they hang on a mythical identity woven of pride and honor. Their approach to concrete and ruthless reality is more poetic than realistic; it makes them marvelous narrators, but fragile champions. Death, poverty, illiteracy and deprivation is accepted as an inevitable part of social life. Introspection restricts the field for action, intellectuality confines itself to imagination and literature, political action is defined as armed conflicts and sets the stage for future disasters. There exists a vital need for recognizing the community with all its particularities; for creating collective narratives and identities, hearing them, acknowledging them and establishing a meaningful relationship between them.

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