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Fantasy, nostalgia and ideology: A Lacanian reading of post-revolutionary Iran

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Introduction

When thinking of ideology, one tends to conceive of it as a configuration of strategic and convergent set of ideas. However, the argument of this paper is founded on the premise that, while a given ideology is supposed to be fed from a clearly identifiable and convergent set of causes and principles, in reality it is often rooted in seemingly divergent and even antagonistic ideas, which can take up different guises within the same context. In other words, from such a perspective, ideology is defined as a body of ideas that, against the commonsense understanding, strategically harbors seemingly opposing ideas that can supplement each other in particular ways. Iran, particularly after 1979 revolution, is a prime example of a country where the state's ideology has been nourished by explicitly divergent ideologies. Specifically, Iran is a country where the state's theocratic-political ideology sometimes goes hand in hand with the nation's plea for a return to the old Persian identity — an unwelcome identity from the point of view the post-revolutionary state— to provide a basis for unity in the fight against an external other.

An interesting recent situation in which the commonly-supposed anti-state idea of return to Old Persian identity showed its consolidating role in relation to the state ideology can be observed in the reaction of the Iranian Islamic state and its society to the threat of the Islamic State (ISIS). While for the Iranian Shia government, ISIS is considered a serious

enemy embodying radical Sunnism, for those Iranians who emphasize their Persian identity, ISIS precisely represents a menace to this pre-Islamic national identity. Now the question that can be raised here is through what mechanism two seemingly opposing sources feed a unified ideology? To put it another way, what is the specific feature of each ideological cause that enables each to supplement the other one?

To answer the above question, one needs, before analyzing the ideological apparatus itself, to explain the complexity that the convergence of the two ideological causes give rise to. This complexity can be explained by referring to the fact that the Iranian Islamic State has not adopted a clear standpoint with regards to the notion of Persian heritage and identity. This equivocal positioning of the state is perhaps affected by the fact that it realizes that there are still a noticeable number of Iranians, particularly among the middle-class, who believe that Persian heritage is an essential source which can give a unique dimension to their identity, an aspect reminiscent of an ancient and powerful civilization with sophisticated system of governing and value system as well. Hence the Iranian state is not willing to unequivocally refute the Persian identity. At the same time, the state has no alternative but to put emphasis on its Islamic principles, rather than on Persian heritage, as this is what, according to post-revolutionary leaders, distinguishes their value system from that of the pre-revolution state and also from the East (socialism) and the West (capitalism) (Golnar, 1990). However, as will be discussed later, this ambivalent positioning toward Persian identity is skewed towards a more or less positive positioning in response to its encounter with a threatening other (at the very current moment ISIS) which is both a threat to the Shia value system and the Persian heritage.

The justification of juxtaposing religion and classical literature as a supplementary combination is that the two entities comprise idiosyncratic features which can turn out to consolidate a single ideology. If the premise is that, as Reilly (1981, p. 13) remarks,

"ideology is not a selection of doctrinaire statements", hence confirming the elasticity of ideology, then it would be necessary to explain how a given ideology *grips* its subjects without necessarily imposing itself via a coercive gesture. Here it can be argued that, in case of the ideology as adopted by Islamic Republic of Iran, the apparently rigid religious doctrine of the state needs to be supplemented by a more porous discourse which is capable of bestowing a necessary degree of flexibility to the state's overall ideology. Moriarty (2006) remarks that "vagueness" and "flexibility" are essential part of an ideology as with the help of these features it foster "its capacity to unite, through the medium of discourse, on the one hand abstract ideas, although viewed less as abstract notions than as concrete particular *positions*, constructed more around images than around concepts, and on the other actual social behavior, through the medium of language, on the one hand, fantasy on the other" (p. 54, emphasis in original). According to this view, treating a literary text as an ideological entity is useful "in the first place wherever the text itself thematizes social relationships or imaginary social relationships; where it contains characters who imagine and live their world in social terms" (p. 54). The relationship between ideology, literature and social imaginary will be discussed further in the analysis section.

To address the question posed above, this paper employs a Lacanian psychoanalytic approach to the question ideology as developed by such Lacanian thinkers as Žižek, McGowan, Glynos and Stavrakakis to deal with the issue of ideology within a post-revolutionary context of Iran. This approach employs key Lacanian concepts as *fantasy*, *lack*, *identification* and *jouissance*.

The question of the political culture of Iran is approached by scholars like Jahanbegloo (2012), who believes that Iranian civil society has adopted a distinct, though not necessarily oppositional, path from that of the state. From this perspective, in Iran today there is a moral and ethical call by a peaceful-minded society which "represents an alternative sphere of

citizenship which holds a promise of individual autonomy beyond the political and religious sectarian attitudes" (p. ix). Such an approach, which views Iranian civil society as demanding serious consideration as citizens, rather than as "part of a society organized on a theological-political basis" (p. ix), is tenable in terms of the importance it gives to the role of individual voices of the Iranian society. Yet it tends to imply that civil society does not share any interest with the state at any level (e.g., social, cultural, political and economic). In contrast to the above approaches, the argument of this paper is that, first of all, the critique of ideology is still a highly effective way through which one can provide an explanation of how, in a country like Iran, state and nation can have somewhat similar, but apparently opposing interests that converge in particular circumstances to invigorate and shape an overarching ideological structure. In other words, the very civil society which seeks to strike a different path from that of the state's ideological apparatus is liable to (unintentionally) consolidate the same ideology through a revivalist national agenda which has its roots in classic literature (a phenomenon not limited to Iran). What this suggests is that the question of identity in Iran is of a complex nature which does not follow a top-down approach, hence demanding a multiperspectival approach which is able to consider the question from as many dimensions as possible.

Crisis of identity in Iran

Whenever the question of Iranian identity is raised a common word that crops up is *crisis.* Indeed, the whole contemporary history of Iran can be conceived of as the history of struggle over identities (Ashraf, 1993). According to Ashraf, recent debates have focused on the epistemological aspect of Iranian identity, i.e. what is the *true* Iranian identity? Should Iranian identity be defined based on nationalistic ideas, which highlight the Persian civilization before the advent of Islam in the country? Or should it be defined based on a mixture of Persian culture and Islamic principles? Debate has been heated as antagonistic

narratives of Iranian identity have competed with each other, culminating in the 1979 revolution, in which a theocratic (Islamic) state overthrew its predecessor and was celebrated as the state of God, while the Shah's regime, which had sought to build its legitimacy upon 2500 years of Persian civilization, was re-positioned as the embodiment of Evil (Bashiriyeh, 1984). However, considerable energy and effort notwithstanding, the theocratic regime has not been successful in establishing a pure Islamic identity for Iranian society. In this regard, as Ashraf (1993) points out, the preoccupation of the Iranian state and society with the question of identity "reflects not only the recent origin and complexities of the concept, but also the crisis of national and ethnic identities in the post-revolutionary, post-Soviet era" (p. 159). As such, the question of defining Iranian identity reflects a critical issue impinging on the state and civil society more globally.

Hillmann (1990) observes that Iranian literary history is like an arena in which two conflicting and contradictory approaches to sociology, religion, philosophy and aesthetics have been played out. From this perspective, one can observe competing ideologies rubbing shoulders in this ongoing arena: the idolization of the old Zoroastrian worldview alongside the relatively newer Islamic ideology based on revelation; a bittersweet, nostalgic-sceptic look at everything coupled with a fantasmatic allegiance to seeking definite answers to fundamental questions; an appreciation of individualism and independence combined with an embrace of collective identities in order to navigate dire straits, such as the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988) and the current threat of ISIS.

The coexistence of contrasting identity narratives in Iran after 1979 revolution, raises a significant question: how is it possible that the state's ideology can be consolidated by narratives and discourses seemingly opposed to its causes? From a postcolonial perspective (e.g., Bhabha, 1994) it can be argued that hybridity is an inevitable factor in contemporary life, an inevitable consequence of identity being constructed through an address to an Other.

In case of Iran it can be argued that the state's emphasis on a Shia identity *and* civil society's nostalgic attachment to a putative Persian identity are reactions to the four centuries of war (16^{th}, 17^{th}, 18^{th} and 19th) with Ottoman Empire. From this perspective, the latter represents Sunni Islam *and* the Arab other whose conquest of Persia in 651 led to decline of Zoroastrian religion in Iran. We see this historically inflected and hybridised reaction to an external Other resuscitated in response to the emergence of ISIS as contemporary representative of the radical Sunni and foreign/external Other – with Turkey and Saudi Arabia representing additional, if less-threatening, versions of this antagonistic other.

As the above highlights, any identity is constructed in relation to some other and any study of Iranian identity needs to take into account the ways through which Iranians think of their history and the complex relations of Iran with the West (Ansari, 2014) and also with its neighbors, particularly Turks, Arabs and Mongols (Amanat, 2012, p. 3). But alongside this spatial dimension of identity, classic literature provides a vital temporal anchoring point, reflected in the prominent place of literature in elementary, secondary and tertiary curriculum in Iran, as well in the significance of classic literature in general and folkloric dimensions of Iranian identity.

A Lacanian psychoanalytic approach to identity

Lacanian ideas have been fruitfully used by political and cultural theorists for more than two decades (e.g. Glynos, 2011; Stavrakakis, 2009), including analyses of literary works and their implications for questions of ideology and gender in Iran (e.g. Talattof, 2011) and Lacanian studies of cinematic representations of modern Iranian society (e.g. Copjec, 2006; Erfani, 2012; Jöttkandt & Copjec, 2009). Nonetheless, it is useful to reiterate why and how Lacanian conceptualisations of identity and ideology offer unique insights into the question of the political.

According to Stavrakakis (1999), the central concept in Lacanian theory of subjectivity which ‘opens the way for a first confluence between Lacanian theory and political analysis” is the idea of the subject as constituted by and through *lack* (p. 35). It is important to note that lack is not an entirely negative concept, as critics of psychoanalysis would have it, but can instead be thought of as an opening for creativity and change – as Ruti puts it, lack is the ‘empty slot’ that allows for movement in the ‘puzzle’ of life (2006, p. 13). Indeed, this lack is the main incentive for the subject to establish an identity as part of a continuous process of imaginary and symbolic identification with the available resources in his/her environment. However, the important point to note here is that this identification process only *temporarily* fills the lack in the subject (Laclau 1996, p. 21). This is because the desire that arises as a result of lack – itself a consequence of losing the ‘lost object’ we never really had, as consequence of our constitution as subjects on entry into the symbolic order (McGowan, 2013) – continually latches onto a sequence of objects – the objet petit *a*, or small other, as object-cause of desire – identifying each as ‘the real thing’ when the ‘reality’ is that nothing is capable of staunching the interminable void at the core of our being. As Stavrakakis (1999) points out, it is precisely this evanescent nature of identification process which makes it such a critical notion in Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, as this temporality causes the *reproduction* of lack within subjective structure (p. 39). We might say that identification is ‘an ambivalent and indeterminate’ process, which is accompanied by 'idealization and projection, incorporation and rejection, of the other', as the subject attempts to eliminate lack, and consequently form a substantive identity (an impossible endeavor), as part of an endless process (Laclau & Zac, 1994, p. 31; Duncan, 2013, p. 412). This is precisely the place where the question of politics enters: “The constitution of every (ultimately impossible) identity can be attempted only through processes of identification with socially *available* discursive

constructions such as ideologies, etc." (Stavrakakis, 1999, p. 36). This brings us back to the question of ideology.

A Lacanian psychoanalytic approach to the question of ideology

Although Lacanian thinkers such as Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe, Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek have contributed to rethinking critical political analysis through their meticulous and innovative application of Lacan's ideas to a range of contexts (Stavrakakis, 2007, p. 3), it is in relation to the field of ideological critique where their contribution has been most significant, by conceptualizing ideology in terms of a "constitutive lack" whereby 'existence is constructed around the repression of a fundamental, unrepresentable and impossible negativity" (Robinson, 2004, p. 259) that subjects attempt to fill by deploying fantasies. In particular, by re-inflecting fundamental political concepts, such as ideology and hegemony, in terms of Lacanian notions of lack and fantasy, Lacanian thinkers such as Žižek has developed an approach to political critique that, according to Glynos (2001), "goes beyond today's sophisticated accounts of how particular socio-political traditions have been contingently constituted" (p. 191).

Specifically, Žižek does not confine the conception of ideology to the notions of false consciousness and misrecognition characterizing Marxist and Althusserian analysts of ideology respectively, instead adopting distinctive ontological position (Glynos, 2001). As Glynos points out, whilst Žižek (here he also refers to Laclau) preserves the consequences of "concrete meanings and socio-historical specificity in ideological analysis", he asserts that so long as ideological analysis is restricted to such contextual evidence, we will fall short of achieving a comprehensive understanding of ideological mechanisms (p. 195). Instead, Žižek gives priority to analysis of ideology in terms of the enjoyment it offers subjects, in order to render palpable the ways through which ideologies 'grip' their subjects and, as a result, have

a hold on them. One of the key ways in which this occurs is through the operation of empty signifiers.

Empty signifiers and the impossibility of closure

To understand the functions of ideology as theorized by Žižek, we should pay close attention to the idea of 'illusion of closure' and its role in providing fantasmatic defense against the 'impossibility of closure'. Critically, rather than attempting to eliminate such negative connotations as 'illusion' and 'misrecognition' – notions which are commonly associated with Marxist framings of ideology – Žižek re-introduces them to define one of the characteristic features of ideology. But while in the latter approaches, ideologies are criticized for misrepresenting reality by hiding truth and presenting false knowledge in its place, a Lacanian approach involves "non-recognition of the precarious character of any positivity, of the impossibility of any suture" (Laclau, 2014, p. 125) or closure. In this sense, the denial of ideology's continued existence is the ideological exemplar par excellence (Žižek, 1989).

This notion of the 'impossibility of closure' and its relevance defining a theory of ideology, returns us to the Lacanian premise of society as 'constitutively lacking'. Thus, not only is the subject a subject of lack, but society is also theorized as impossible, not in Margaret Thatcher's individual-centered sense, but as necessarily lacking or incomplete. In fact, what society is lacking is "an ultimate signifier that would render the socio-symbolic order complete" (Glynos, 2001, p. 197). However, as Glynos states, this very feature of society, in which its symbolic representations are always-already lacking, renders possible the 'politico-hegemonic struggle' to fill this incompletion. But to fully understand the theory of ideology within a Lacanian conceptual framework, we need to elaborate another pivotal concept playing an essential role in the construction of identity: fantasy.

On the function of fantasy and its relation to ideology

For Žižek (1998), fantasy-construction is not done to “obfuscate[s] the true horror of a situation”. Instead, its main purpose is to structure reality in such a way as to render it full, harmonious and complete. In particular**,** fantasy “dictates the way in which the subject enjoys” (McGowan, 2013, p. 217) and thus, as the locus of enjoyment, "literally teaches us how to desire" (Žižek, 2006, p. 47). In other words, from such a perspective, fantasy not only is not degraded as an embodiment of hallucination, but it is treated as “an image set to work in the signifying structure” (Lacan, 1966, p. 532).

To elaborate on this in more detail by conceiving fantasy as an effective element in symbolic structure, Žižek (1997) argues that it can be thought of as "a 'schema' according to which certain positive objects in reality can function as objects of desire, filling in the empty places opened up by the formal symbolic structure" (p. 7). According to Žižek, the schematic nature of fantasy enables “in the first place, the formulation of desire within the symbolic order and the establishment of some kind of identification within the empirical world of infinite possibilities” (Daly, 1999, p. 233). In other words, according to Žižek (1989), fantasy by “equating the subject to an object of fantasy” provides him/her with a possibility “to obtain some contents, some kind of positive consistency, also outside the big Other, the alienating symbolic network” (p. 46).

It is here that the ideological aspect of fantasy becomes obvious. Fantasy renders the impossible society possible; but because society is ‘actually’ impossible, this can only be achieved by creating an imaginary enemy that can be incarnated in different forms in different situations and held responsible for the non-realization of society (Koenigsberg, 2009). In this way, the survival and completeness of a given society can only be achieved by eliminating the enemy. However, as Daly (1999) points out, for Žižek “it is not simply that the *presence* of the other is preventing me [the subject] from being fully myself because every identity is already inherently negated. This is why the Lacanian mark for the subject is

$; a signifier designating the subject's auto-blockage" (p. 224). According to Daly, in such an antagonistic relation then the subject "attempts to externalize the immanent blockage by making the other… responsible for this blockage" (p. 224).

The Iranian state and its religious ideology: Beatific and horrific fantasies

In order to function effectively, ideology relies on a fantasy-construction to iron out the inconsistencies, contradictions and dislocations that are an inevitable aspect of social reality. Given that experience can never live up to this fantasmatically complete and harmonious version of reality, sustaining investment in the ideology necessarily relies on the creation of an (external) other who can carry the burden of blame for the inevitable non-realization of the idealized (but ontologically impossible) vision of society. In analyzing this fantasmatic dynamic, we can further identify two modalities that work together to sustain the ideology. The first can be described as a 'beatific' mode, involving the positing of a state of harmony and completion, the realization of which the demonized other is preventing; the second is its necessary complement, a 'horrific' mode, depicting the devastation and destruction that will ensue if the threatening other is not tackled (Glynos & Howarth, 2007). Informed with this reading of ideology, we will elaborate on the psot-1979 Iranian state's ideological structure.

An essential characteristic of the ideological discourse employed by the Iranian state after 1979 revolution is its multidimensionality, in the sense that this discourse simultaneously draws on political, mystical, spiritual, nationalistic and religious sources. It is precisely here, we believe, that the ideological function of fantasy-construction is critical. For instance, post-revolutionary Iran continually asserts the inseparability of religion and politics (Manavi, 2013). More specifically, in Iran the supreme religious leader possesses the highest political status, so any and all important decisions must be made by him (and it is always a 'him'). Although this is not unusual in theocratic systems, the case of the Iranian supreme leader becomes special when one asks what makes the supreme leader different from other subjects.

According to the constitution written after 1979 revolution, the person who occupies the position of Iran's supreme leader is the 'Guardian Jurist' (vali-e-faqih). The Guardian Jurist according to the theory of *Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist* (velayat-e-faqih) as delineated by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the first leader of 1979 revolution, is the person who should lead the community while the Imam, the divinely inspired man, is absent (Algar, 1981). According to Shia Islam, the religious basis of Iran's constitution, God had bestowed the unique quality of divine knowledge upon Prophet Mohammad and thirteen members of his family—known as the Fourteen Infallible—as a result of which these people never committed an error (Ansarian, 2007) and consequently enjoy superiority over the rest of creation, even the previous prophets (Algar, 1990). Furthermore, according to Shia doctrine, as adopted by the Iranian post-revolutionary state, the last member (Imam Mahdi) of the said group is still alive, but living in 'The Occultation' according to the will of God. Accordingly, the Mahdi, who has a Messianic character akin to that attributed in Christianity to Jesus Christ, will return to Earth before the Day of Judgment and distribute peace and justice, prior to which, Earth remains inflicted by injustice and tyranny (Rizvi, 1999). Critically, however, the Savior's coming is heralded by a number of signs, the most important of which are the widespread cruelty and injustice which is caused by Evil and the predominance of ignorance and darkness over knowledge and brightness (Momen, 1985), resulting in absolute *chaos.*

Here we see the beatific and horrific modes of fantasy working together. In other words, what the Iranian state asserts regarding the imminent catastrophe is immediately balanced by the promise of the Savior's coming, a Savior whose righteous successor is already (and conveniently!) here among us in the form of the Supreme Leader. Indeed, the imminent catastrophe can be read as the "radically ambiguous" Lacanian real that "erupts in the form of a traumatic return, derailing the balance of our daily lives… at the same time [serving] as a support of this very balance" (Žižek, 1991, p. 29).

Critically, although the horror of the threatened chaos is kept at bay by the beatific mechanisms performed by the promise of coming Savior, “at the same time it creates what it purports to conceal, namely its 'repressed' point of reference” (Žižek, 1998, pp. 190-191). This ever-present discourse of destruction and death serves to legitimate a regime of power as necessary for preventing the horrific scenario from materializing. In other words, the notion of a destructive enemy presented in the guise of a ‘phobic object’ can be seen as playing a constitutive role, providing, in Feher-Gurewich’s (1996, p. 29) terms, “as a safety valve” for the Iranian state. Accordingly, the enemy in the Shia doctrine, which, conveniently, may be incarnated in many different forms, permits the Iranian subject “to find a point of reference in the outside world that prevents him from falling into the abyss of desubjectivation” (p. 29).

The dynamic we have described can also be analyzed in terms of nostalgia and paranoia to demonstrate how a notion of enemy functions in political discourse. According to this analysis, these two states function in different ways as the nostalgic subject searches for the missing enjoyment in their *own* past, while the paranoiac subject blames the *other* as the one who has taken it. Therefore, for the paranoiac subject there should be an external entity (threat) which prevents subject from ultimate enjoyment. According to McGowan (2013), the paranoiac subject can adopt two attitudes towards the other. According to one attitude, the other has already stolen the privileged object and is enjoying what is originally mine. In the second attitude – which is relevant to the ideological discourse of the post-revolutionary Iranian state – the other has not yet stolen the ideal object, but he is cunningly planning to do so. In this way the paranoiac subject gains reassurance regarding the existence of the ultimate enjoyment but only by assuming that there is always an enemy on the lookout to grab it “despite its status as constitutively lost” (p. 44). This analysis can be linked to the proclamation of the (Iranian) Shia clerics, according to which they believe that, under the banner of the successor (every person who is selected as the supreme leader) of the Savior

(the Mahdi), the Muslim community has security and peace; however, all Muslims must perpetually be on their guard against the evil enemies seeking to disrupt this situation.

In this way, sustaining ideological belief and commitment is essentially bound to dynamics of fantasy and desire, for "the essential kernel of fantasy is its capacity to organize desire, not to represent reality in a faithful way" (Glynos, 2014, p. 183). So long as this dynamic is maintained, it does not matter whether or not the subject's fantasy is realized in 'reality'. Thus, so long as the Iranian state is capable of providing its society with fantastic content and feeding their desire in order to maintain their *jouissance* it need not be concerned as to whether people find any tangible trace of what they desire. From a psychoanalytic perspective, continually projecting the specter of an impending threat ironically serves to provide a source of enjoyment, or *jouissance*, i.e. 'painful pleasure' (Evans, 1996, p. 93), though "not through the activity of acquiring the privileged object but through that of losing it" (McGowan, 2013, p. 219). And it is precisely here that Iranian society shares their ideological orientation with the theocratic, post-revolutionary Iranian state. But in order to grasp this fully, we need to examine the role of enjoyment within the dynamics of ideology.

Jouissance (enjoyment) and ideological criticism

In Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, our constitution as subjects of language involves a process of symbolic 'castration' that redoubles the experience of alienation comprising imaginary identification in the mirror stage. As such, the subject is condemned to a lifelong quest in search of a purported 'lost' object that it deems itself to have originally possessed, prior to its being 'cut' by the word. Critically, "the idea that the object was once possessed is strictly a retroactive fantasy – but an illusion that is inseparable from the symbolic order itself and does not cease to have effects, even when its nonexistence has been demonstrated" (Shepherdson, 2008, p. 49). Paradoxically, then, although the notion of a lost object is a post-symbolic phenomenon, for the 'subject' as such did not exist prior to its subordination to the

symbolic, it is also crucial that we recognize subjectification's "ability to create the illusion that this object derives from an origin, that it somehow represents a past that was once possessed" (Shepherdson, 2008, p. 49). This explains why alienated subject in search of the lost object (enjoyment/*jouissance*) identifies with the Other, thereby hoping to fill his/her lack. Yet this lifelong endeavor never leads to finding the lost object because "the Other is lacking" (p. 45). In fact, since the symbolic, like the subject, is characterized by absence and hence is by nature lacking, it can never provide the subject with what he/she desires. It is in such a situation that fantasy emerges and offers "the promise of an encounter with this precious *jouissance*, an encounter that is fantasized as covering over lack in the Other and, consequently, as filling the lack in the subject" (p. 45). According to Stavrakakis, this quest for lost/impossible enjoyment marks the human condition, and it is through the creation of fantasy that the subject is able to continue this constitutive quest.

To fully grasp this perspective, we need to recognize the power of *jouissance* and how it differs from everyday notions of pleasure in that the former is "a kind of suffering through satisfaction, a kind of *existential electricity* which not only animates the subject but which also threatens to destroy him/her" (Daly, 1999, p. 227, emphasis added). Critically for our discussion, while *jouissance* acts as a drive within the symbolic field, it is not limited to this field and consequently "can never be fully captured by it" (p. 227). Consequently, discussion of *jouissance* must go beyond the realm of cognition, discourse and the symbolic because *jouissance* is an affective experience (Dashtipour, 2012, p. 56). In this sense, *jouissance* is "a paradoxical enjoyment that cannot be fully represented in meaning, that is not made of meaning…but, nevertheless, does invest meaning and thus does make some sense" (Stavrakakis, 2007, p. 71).

In terms of ideology critique, this suggests the need for two complementary procedures. One is discursive or what Žižek calls "the 'symptomal reading' of the ideological

text" (1989, p. 140), whereby it is deconstructed to show how different 'floating signifiers' are employed and then totalized through particular 'nodal points' which at the end leads to the realization of particular reading of the text (p. 140). The other is an ideological critique that identifies "the kernel of enjoyment" in a given text to demonstrate how the embedded fantasy creates "a pre-ideological enjoyment", which is implied, manipulated and produced through an ideology (p. 140). In this way, *jouissance* which has a "non-sensical and pre-ideological kernel" and acts as "the last support of the ideological effect" (p. 140), is taken account of in order to supplement "the mechanisms of imaginary and symbolic identification" (p. 139) in ideology critique. This brings us back to the issues of Iranian identities.

Ancient literature as a source of ideology construction

Epics centered on the (fantasmatic) lost glory of a nation are ubiquitous in human history (Honko, 1996), their typical mixture of remembered glory and nostalgic loss commonly serving as the basis for constructing the bonds of national identity (Bellamy, 1992). In the Iranian case, a key source is the *Shahnameh* (Book of Kings), widely regarded as "the most iconic expression of Iranian nationhood" (Omidsalar, 2011, p. 1) on the basis of 10th century Persian poet Ferdowsi's poetic narration of the mythical history of Persian Empire. Ferdowsi concludes his historical account of the so-called grand Persian Empire with its tragic conquest by Muslim Arabs.

Highly acclaimed Iranian film director, playwright, screenwriter and researcher, Baharm Beyzaei, (2013), describes the *Shahnameh* as "a non-militant tool in the greatest Iranian cultural battle for survival" and argues that Iranians have defined their identity by accepting or rejecting the vision it depicts. A grand epic akin to the works of Homer, magnificent in its literary language and replete with paradox – Rostam, the hero of the *Shahnameh* and the symbol of Persian dignity kills his own son in a treacherous manner and then mourns his loss. Despite, or perhaps in part due to, its 'hyperbolic' and 'melodramatic' narrations, the

Shahnameh enjoys a unique status among Iranians. Indeed, Iranian identity hinges upon identification with its narration of their history, its purported authenticity making it an unrivalled source for social identity construction, though, of course, its saturation by nationalist rather than religious ideas generates an equal but opposite response from the current Iranian state (Rajaee, 2007). Despite this opposition, as Ashraf (1993) states, the romantic portrayal of Iran presented in the *Shahnameh* has proved immensely resilient as a source of national identity construction and has "captured the hearts and minds of most middle-class Persians in the modern era and influenced all major brands of Iranian national identity, from monarchist to liberal-nationalist to religio-national" (p. 161). So how does the romantic representation of Iran in the *Shahnameh* (un)intentionally supplement and consolidate the ideology as developed by the theocratic state?

Recalling the paradoxes of the postsymbolic constitution of the lost object, it is important to note that in striving to revive its national identity, a given society is actually *inventing* it (Žižek, 2006, p. 29; see also Hobsbawm and Ranger, 2012). Pursuing this reading further, it can be argued that Iranians enjoy the *Shahnameh* for the image it reflects back to them of a great and proud nation; their enjoyment derives, however, not from regaining the lost dignity, but by imagining and re-experiencing its loss. In fact, this is the only possible way that fantasy gives subjects a sense of enjoyment, by allowing them to imagine the loss of their ideal object. Such "if only" fantasies are an inseparable theme of religious motifs, literary productions, and cultural rituals, characterizing individuals who are "alienated from the present", "lack interest in the future and constantly wring their hands over something in the past" (Akhtar, 1996, p. 735). One of the most tangible signs of "if only" fantasy, as Akhtar observes, is "intense nostalgia", involving the simultaneous experience of pain and joy: "Pain is evoked by the awareness of separation from the now idealized object and joy by a fantasied reunion with it through reminiscences" (p. 735). In fact, nostalgia achieves its

unique power from this concomitant occurrence of seemingly contradictory feelings (Werman, 1977, p. 393). Striving for “a completely untroubled state” as a contrast to current woes, the nostalgic individual, in his/her continuous pursuit of "the lost object", contrives an idealized, chimerical, and romantic version of that object (Akhtar, 1996, p. 736). Crucial to the maintenance of the “if only” fantasy, however, is that the yearner must not possess what they yearn for, since “the subject can…only enjoy the search and never the possession” (Werman, 1977, p. 391). Accordingly, the quest for the lost object should be so “indefinite and indefinable” that the subject never possesses it, since achieving the lost object would mean demythologizing it and the consequent death of the cause of the joy for the nostalgic subject. From a Lacanian point of view, the achievement of the lost object not only does not fully satisfy the subject, but it brings the subject into contact with the traumatic kernel of the real.

Iranian middle class’s craving to revive their national identity, particularly through resorting to national classic epic can be interpreted as “the attempt at all costs to avoid a more painful confrontation with some basic ‘ontological truths’” (Glynos, 2014, p. 181); the truth that the glory they strive to revive is just a figment of imagination, a hyperbolic and unrealistic myth that is often called for by many nations to build up broader political projects, particularly in the face an Other. In case of Iran, this Other has been incarnated in a variety of entities; sometimes it is the Western world which puts the country in the “axis of evil” and imposes sanctions; sometimes it is Arab neighbors who want to play a more significant role in the oil market; and most recently it has been incarnated in the form of ISIS. In such a situation, Iranians strive to revive their national identity, an identity rooted in the time when the nation purportedly enjoyed a glorious status. Key to this process, in which the subject staunchly strives to avoid confronting the bitter truth is, first, finding, though unconsciously, a symptom to embody a pure but paradoxically un-representable *jouissance* and then

enjoying it (Fink, 1997, in Glynos, 2014, p. 181). In other words, the Iranian subject who believes in the national epic and sets it as a source of identification must inevitably accepts that that glory is lost to avoid a more vexatious scenario: that there was *no* glory. This acceptance leads to enjoyment/*Jouissance* in which a less traumatic state takes the place of a more distressing one. As with the official Iranian state identity, which, as we saw, relies on the fantasmatic presence of a threatening external other, so too the identity of Iranian civil society rests on the fantasmatic foundation of a mythical past whose identificatory value is heightened by the threat posed in the present by those deemed to embody its antithesis.

A Marxian reading of ideology, as modified by Huaco (1973), can shed a light on the ideological function of literature. While Marx considers ideology within a framework including three factors, namely "falsity, role and isomorphism", Huaco replaces falsity with the "analysis of mythical patterns" so as to adapt the notion of ideology with that of literary critique (p. 423). In terms of role, the *Shahnameh* can *justify* the ways through which someone with a Persian identity is supposed to defend their identity at any cost (recall how Rostam, the hero and symbol of Persianness kills his own son). The mythical patterns in the book are of such features that set the ground for such reaction by Rostam. However, a less explicit and yet more powerful aspect of the *Shahnameh* is its isomorphic element. Huaco states that isomorphic patterns are in sway when "a social pattern produces its mirror image in some symbolic domain of culture" (p. 422). Perhaps the best way to see the effects of social pattern of the *Shahnameh*, as reflected symbolically across culture, is to look at language of dominant media in Iran: Farsi. There is no doubt Iranians ascribe unique credit to the *Shahnameh* as the work which saves their language after the country was attacked by different nations whose language was different. Moreover, as Huaco remarks, these three factors separately or in combination can contribute "to the aesthetic unity and coherence shared by the [literary] works" (p. 423). In case of the *Shahnameh*, the combination of the

three factors bestows a specific feature to the work which has made Iranians feel proud of the work for its use of *pure* Farsi. This notion of pure Farsi is of such significance that the Islamic Republic of Iran supports an organization entitled Academy of Persian Language and Literature. At the top of this organization is the President of the country who assigns the Academy's president.

In terms of the ideological function of a work of literature, Potocco (2009), complementing the Althussarian conception of ideology with that of Castoriadis (1997), remarks how "the (non-)realization of the ideological function within a text always depends on the social, extra-textual codes of interpretation, since ideology can only interpellate as a socio-historical force imposed on a text" (p. 1). Such an approach to the functioning of ideology heavily hinges on the structure of social imaginary which sets the ground for the subject (reader) of literature to identify with the extra-textual world. In Castoriadis, imaginary significations of a society, acting as an agent of unifomalization and homogenization of a given society, provide that society with answers to the most fundamental and essential questions: "Who are we as a collectivity? What are we for one another? Where and in what are we? What do we want; what do we desire; what are we lacking?" (pp. 146-7). Castoriadis believes "the role of imaginary significations is to provide an answer to these questions, an answer that, obviously, neither 'reality', nor 'rationality' can provide" (p. 147). However, it should be noted that for Castoriadis "the imaginary does not come from the image in the mirror or from the gaze of the other. Instead, the 'mirror' itself and its possibility, and the other as mirror, are the works of the imaginary, which is creation ex nihilo" (p. 3). It is in this sense that Castoriadis conceives of 'reality' and 'rationality' as the result of the functioning of the social imaginary in a given society (p. 3).Accordingly, in order to give unity (uniformalization) to members of society, "the social imaginary must be interwoven with the symbolic" (p. 131). This approach to the role of the imaginary is also reflected in Lacan

(1981) as he states while the image that the child receives from the mirror in the mirror stage provides him/her with an illusory coherence and totality, this is a necessary and consequential illusion which plays a determining role in the child's entering the symbolic realm and hence has real effects on his/her life.

Reading the ideological function of the epic literature in Iran from this perspective, we can see how the particular socio-historical situation in which Iran is situated provides the requisite "social, extra-textual codes of interpretation". These codes include the empowerment of Arab states particularly after 1979 Islamic revolution; eight year war (1980-1988) with Iraq which exacerbated tensions between Iran and the U.S.; the positioning of Iran by the USA as part of the so-called 'axis of evil' after 9/11; the subsequent imposition of all-encompassing sanctions on Iran, and; the threat of ISIS and the tension with Saudi Arabia over the lifting of some of the sanctions following Iran's nuclear negotiation with world powers. It is in this situation that the literary text achieves an ideological function and hence unites society around a central idea, namely, the revival of our once-glorifious identity. However, in reality, what the society under the effect of ideology achieves, is not the revival of a formerly existing identity, rather it is creation of that identity *ex nihilo*.

Conclusion

This paper drew on Lacanian psychoanalytic concepts to explore the complex and multidimensional structure of ideology within a country where the state's ideology is formed by ostensibly contrasting ideologies (i.e. the nationalistic myths of the society and religious foundations of the state). Our analysis highlighted how ideology can harmonize different, even antagonistic, worldviews within a society when the latter is confronted by a looming threat such as that posed by so-called ISIS. Particularly, in case of ISIS, an identification with Persian heritage as reflected in the *Shahnameh* seems to indicate that Iranians tend to highlight their national identity when the looming threat recalls the traumatic event which led

to the falling of their lost glory, an event reflected in the *Shahnameh*. Specifically, drawing on conceptual tools from Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, this paper showed that how a seemingly unified ideology can harbor contrasting ideas that find unification via their shared reliance on the notion of an uncanny, well-equipped and intelligent enemy, an (inside/outside) other, who can be incarnated in different forms, including the West, other Sunni Arab formations, Israel and recently ISIS. This enemy, who threatens devastation, destruction and chaos, serves as the reference point for the subject of the state's ideology who comes to define himself/herself in relation to this other. In this way, the state provides a framework through which people can make sense of themselves and their place in the surrounding world. Such an ideology needs to promise its subjects that their search for the lost object, for what protects them against the traumatic kernel of the real, is not futile, something it achieves by representing the desired object as previously possessed. By supplying a glorified mythical past, a national epic such as the *Shahnameh* offers this imaginary lost object as a vehicle for *jouissance*, paradoxically providing a suitably grand identity by fantasizing its loss.

A last point that should be explained here concerns the difference between the *Jouissance* the state sustains in the subject and the *Jouissance* that classical literature gives rise to. While the former mainly relies on the notion of absence (of the occluded Imam) and tries to make the subject rest assured as far as there is a successor for the absent Imam (i.e. the supreme leader), the latter hinges on the absence or loss of a glory that can be *recreated* and hence remembered via referring to one of the few sources which proves that glory: the *Shahnameh*.

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