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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Pahlavi's Ideal of "Citizen-Soldier" for Iranian Men, and Three Cinematic Responses: Broken Bodies, Fallen Soldiers, and Tradition Resisting

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Abstract

This article explores the Pahlavi regime's ideal of the "citizen-soldier" in Iran and its subsequent failure, and reaction generated, as depicted in three instances of the politically conscious Iranian New Wave cinema: *Requiem* (1978), *Beehive* (1975), and *Baluch* (1972). These films act as critical lenses reflecting the profound disjunctions between the state's objectives of training citizen-soldiers and the public realities. *Requiem* portrays the broken bodies that the state failed to train and subsequently abandoned in the outskirts of Tehran. *Beehive* features a young man trained but left unutilized by the state, while *Baluch* depicts a rural man rebelling against the "corrupt," "weak," and "westernized" urban elite, advocating the revolt of "authentic" Iranian soldiers against the citizen-soldier model. Through these films, the ideological conflicts and palpable consequences of the state's body politics for men, and the culminating resistance, are exposed. The films are concerned with the societal and individual impacts of the Pahlavi regime's body policies, and highlight the disconnect between state aspirations and lived experiences. The analysis underscores how these films criticize, and react to the state-driven modernization and the resultant socio-political tensions, and participate in the revolutionary sentiments that culminated in the 1979 Islamic Revolution

Keywords: citizen-soldier; body politics; Pahlavi era Iran; *Marsi-ye*; *Kandū*; *Balūč*

Introduction

The central thrust of the modernization initiatives led by both Pahlavi Shahs revolved around a romanticized national vision, articulated by Mohammad Reza Pahlavi as progress towards "great civilization." This vision, promoted a secular-nationalist ideology that celebrated ancient (pre-Islamic) Persian heritage and aspired to revive this historical grandeur within a modern context, as orchestrated by the Pahlavi Shāhanshāhi (Litvak, 2017, p. 15). This entailed an enforced and coercive effort aimed at "transforming the multiethnic empire into a unified state with one people, one nation, one language, one culture, and one political authority" (Abrahamian, 1981, p. 142). Within this framework, Iranian identity was re-conceptualized, and transcended ethnic and religious divisions, thus consolidating disparate groups into citizens of a rejuvenated, modern urban society infused with a revitalized ethos of civilization, as interpreted, and desired by the state (Litvak, 2017).

Under such an ideology of unification, the molding of physical appearances and the conditioning of bodies, would assume a pivotal role. As Michele Foucault has it, the body serves as a canvas upon which cultural forces inscribe their influence, transforming individuals into subjects (Foucault, 1979). In turn, these subjects are sculpted into obedient citizens of the civic "body," embodying specific gender roles and a collective ideology propagated by a top-down nation-state structure. Indeed, in Pahlavi-era Iran, the civic body emerged as the unifying symbol within the nation-state's modernization and Westernization agenda. Minoo Moallem has argued that the Pahlavi regime celebrated "specific bodies—through gendered and heterosexist practices, gestures, and postures—serving not only to facilitate modern disciplinary control of the body but also to create gendered citizenship" (2005, p. 59). As such, a range of measures, sometimes extreme, were implemented during the reign of both Pahlavi Shahs, meant to cultivate modern Iranian citizens distinguished by their appearance and behavior (Afary, 2009, p. 155). These efforts encompassed various dress codes—some enforced, others encouraged—and the promotion of particular body types, activities, and conduct, all designed to steer the nation toward the envisioned "great civilization."

The prevailing model of ideal citizenship for women was conceptualized as an educated maternal figure, fashioned after the European model, who didn't forget to manage her domestic duties and served as an active social participant, albeit within the constraints of a patriarchal society. These women were envisioned as suitable companions for their modern male counterparts (Amin, 2002).

For men, scholars such as Afsaneh Najmabadi and Mollem identify the archetype as the "citizen-soldier" (Najmabadi, 1991, p. 53; Mollem, 2005, p. 72). Reza Shah Pahlavi, a military man by training, and his son's fervent enthusiasm for military prowess are well-documented. Both expended substantial national resources on procuring advanced weaponry, and military budgets were consistently inflated (Katouzian, 1981). Abrahamian notes, "Reza Shah relied on the modern army to be the central pillar of his New Order ... He wore military uniforms for all public occasions... Finally, he raised his sons, especially Crown Prince Muhammad Reza, to

be first and foremost active officer in the armed forces” (1981, p. 136). Reza Shah frequently asserted that “the greatness of the country depends on the progress and strength of its army, weakness and decay of the country results from the incapacity and degradation of its military forces” (qtd. from Najmabadi, 1991, p. 53). . Mohammad Reza made sure to follow his father’s path, and by the time of the Islamic Revolution, although did not succeed in transforming Iran into the “Japan of the Middle East” as promised, yet had undoubtedly achieved being the preeminent military force in the region and a reliable “gendarme” of the Persian Gulf for the West (Abrahamian, 1981, pp. 435-436)..

However, Pahlavi militarism extended beyond mere armament and military expansion, and the military institution was extended over the entirety of society (Ansari, 2007, p. 72); Pahlavi militarism encapsulated a mentality that mandated every male citizen embody the mindset, physical vigor, discipline, and obedience of a soldier, aligned under the uniform command of a military leader, initially Reza Shah, who saw himself as the personification of the military state, and later his son, Mohammad Reza, who, fueled by oil revenues, considered himself the military state itself (Najmabadi, 1991, p. 59). This military-patriarchal ideology positioned men of every profession, and both within their private sphere and public sphere, as modern soldiers under the command of the ultimate paternal figure and the commander, the Shah. These men were tasked with defending against what was deemed traditional backwardness, safeguarding from internal and external threats, and striving for the welfare of any “possession” thought to be valuable, which was often female—such as the motherland (Mām-e Vatan), women, honor, decency, and the home (Moallem, 2005, pp. 73-74). As Moallem has it, “The state became the sacred father/king, but coercion and violence were necessary to guarantee obedience. An important component of this coercive patriarchy was a redefinition of gender roles, which the state effected by imposing a heteronormative order characterized by a hegemonic masculinity and an emphasized femininity as the appropriate gender identities for the social subjects of a modernized country” (2005, p. 65).

The model of the citizen-soldier was enforced, implemented, and propagated through various means. Initially, this included the imposition of dress codes on both genders. Individuals were compelled to forsake their traditional, ethnic, and religious garments in favor of a new dress code influenced by Western styles. For men, this often meant being forced “to wear militarized clothes” (Balslev, 2019, p. 229), notably the Pahlavi hat, inspired by the French military cap. Although the state deployed sophisticated surveillance mechanisms to ensure compliance with these regulations, there was also an encouragement of surveillance by citizens within their private sphere, particularly urging men to monitor the women in their families to ensure adherence to the laws such as mandatory unveiling, as one of their very first assignments as “soldiers” (Moallem, 2005, p. 70). Despite these measures being abolished during Mohammad Reza’s reign, fashion remained a significant site for gender and national identity, and “The signs of modernization were written on the body, as dress became the focal point of such identification” (Moallem, 2005. p. 65). During his bureaucratic regime, men from diverse

cultural and fashion backgrounds were compelled to adopt strict European dress codes to gain acceptance within the nation's modern economy. This requirement made participation reminiscent of militaristic practices, where individuals have to wear specific attire, which in turn dictates certain behaviors, as a precondition for community membership.

The "militantly secularist cultural and educational program" (Keddie, 1981, p. 111) also assumed responsibility for the actualization of modernization that required not only specific knowledge, education, manners and forms of dress, but also the training of a specific male body (Balslev, 2019, p. 256). Pahlavi Era Schools emphasized discipline, loyalty, and obedience as integral to the modern centralized education system, with daily activities that are very reminiscent of military discipline (Dabashi, 2007, p. 4). The militarism of educational system, including schools, physical education and highly endorsed athletic programs, scouting, and mandatory military service from the age of eighteen too, "was indicative of the central philosophy behind education reform, which was to produce competent loyal citizens – supportive of the state" (Ansari, 2007, p. 75).

The state also attempted to facilitate the burgeoning cinema industry in Iran in this ideological training. Starting in the early 1950s, a resurgence of fiction cinema after a long break saw the production of films that served various military-related purposes, including justifying the Shah's extravagant military expenditures, aligning the populace with the state's militarism against Iran's ethnic diversities, and stirring militaristic sentiments among viewers. These films showed that a strong army was a necessity, and there was no honor beyond being a soldier of the nation-state. The Army Film branch of the military was established, and some military personnel became filmmakers. This era saw the creation of numerous propaganda films, such as *Mihanparast* (*Patriot*, Gholam-Hossein Naghshineh, 1953), *Ghiyam-e Pishvari* (*The Revolt of Pishvari*, Parviz Khatibi, 1954), *Noghl Ali* (Parviz Khatibi, 1954), and *Khun va Sharaf* (*Blood and Honour*, Samuel Khachikian, 1955), among others. Nonetheless, due to high production costs and low audience reception, this initiative was short-lived (Sadr, 2006, pp. 55-57)..

Like many modernization efforts by the Pahlavi Shahs, the citizen-soldier ideology ultimately faltered. This failure stemmed from various factors, including the disregard for the social and cultural backgrounds of Iran's diverse groups, resistance from traditional sectors, persisting economic hardships in both rural areas, often oppressed due to their rural status which acted as a symbol of "backwardness," and "traditional Iran" in the eyes of the state, and in urban areas, which despite substantial expenditures thanks to oil revenues, lacked the infrastructure and basic necessities to support the citizen-soldiers expected to drive the nation towards a "great civilization" (Katouzian, 1981).

Numerous manifestations underscored the failure of these body politics; urban centers presented themselves as Janus-faced arenas teeming with modern architecture, automobiles, and crowded streets, yet simultaneously struggled to accommodate numerous "broken" bodies that had been insufficiently prepared by the state to function as specialized forces within the

industrial economies of the cities. Moreover, even the trained and educated individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds found it difficult to leverage their skills and fulfill the role of the desired citizen-soldiers, especially in public sphere and as specialized workers. Despite considerable investments, modern economic structures failed to achieve economic efficiency and did not provide adequate capacity for employing the burgeoning urban workforce. As such, both groups were afflicted with malnutrition, sickness, and lacked the means to procure the requirements or advantages of a “modern” life, or even shelter (Katouzian, 1981). The visibility of such individuals in urban centers, interestingly, intensified with the surge in oil revenue, particularly in the southern districts and outskirts of the city, as the surge of immigrant into urban areas increased. Conversely, many “trained” bodies, disillusioned by economic downturns, leveraged their physical conditioning and military training to challenge the system. A notable instance involved guerrilla militants who, utilizing skills acquired during compulsory military service, played a pivotal role in the regime's downfall in 1979 (Abrahamian, 1981, p. 495).

State oppositions also critiqued the regime's body policies, particularly its promotion, and preference of the citizen-soldier model over rural men, by asserting that the robust, rural masculine body was the one that epitomized Iranian identity, in contrast to the “effete” and “westernized” urban bodies. This perspective was particularly pronounced in modern discourses advocating a “return to the roots,” which sought to forge an Iranian modernity and societal transformation rooted in Iranian-Islamic traditions, countering perceived western modernization of the state, and acted as the most potent and influential revolutionary ideology fueling the Islamic Revolution of 1979 (Mirsepassi, 2000).

Current article aims to analyze the consequences of the state's citizen-soldier body politics, and the reactions it elicited, as illustrated through three notable films from the last decade of Mohammad Reza's reign. These films, namely, *Balūč* (Baluch, Masoud Kimiai, 1972), *Kandū* (Beehive, Fereydon Gole, 1975), and *Marsi-ye* (Requiem, Amir Naderi, 1978), belong to overtly critical, politically charged, and socially aware New Wave Cinema, that “challenged the hegemonic image of progress and prosperity presented by the state to the outside world”, depicted the opposition's critique of official policies, and expressed apprehensions regarding the repercussions of the Shah's modernization efforts, all while manifesting revolutionary sentiments prior to the Islamic Revolution (Rekabtalei, 2019, p. 281). Films of Iranian New Wave are rich sources for studies of the social and political context that they were made in, especially considering they consciously attempted to depict modern Iran and Shah's Modernization project, with bitter and stark realism; and three case this study has in mind, can be analyzed for their treatment of the state's model for its male populace, the citizen-soldier. It is the contention of this article that *Marsi-ye* illustrates the failure of this model through metaphorical and literal portrayal of the broken bodies of Tehran, that due to inefficient or insufficient training, are left useless in the urban outskirts. *Kandū* highlights the plight of a fallen “soldier” whose potentials aren't appreciated and is left as an outcast, with shattered

dreams and aspirations. He resolves to use his potentials to revolt against the structure that has excluded him. Meanwhile, Kimiai, adhering to the discourse of "return to roots," depicts a rural man in *Balūč* as the symbol of a "real," Iranian soldier rebelling against the incompetent citizen-soldiers to reclaim the "authentic" Islamic-Iranian culture and identity.

Broken Bodies, Fallen Soldiers

Cities have been the epicenters of administrative, political, and economic authority in Iran since the Qajar Era, hosting decision-makers even during periods when the economy was agrarian rather than modern or reliant on oil (Katouzian, 1981, p. 296). By the early 20th century, urban centers had become melting pots containing diverse groups of cosmopolitan figures, intellectuals, politicians, and reformists (Rekabtalaei, 2019, pp. 4-5). Consequently, these locations were chosen by the Pahlavi Shahs as showcases for modernization, transforming them into symbols of a nation ostensibly on the path to "progress." The urbanism promoted by the Pahlavi Shahs culminated in the concentration of virtually every facet of modern life—new streets and buildings, industries, bureaucratic institutions, service providers, entertainment venues, and health and education facilities—in a few major cities, especially the capital, Tehran (Katouzian, 1981).

This is not to imply that rural areas and traditional economic practices were immune to change. On the contrary, through violent, militaristic, and economic repression of these areas and practices, the Pahlavi regime was able to allocate budgets—sourced either from these traditional economic mechanisms, which were often more effective than modern economic methods in Iran, or from oil revenues—to frivolous expenditures in urban centers. These strategies also produced inhabitants who would move to the cities, participate in its modern economy, and ideally, epitomize the model citizen-soldiers and modern women desired by the modern Iran of the Pahlavi. The hardships and inequalities thus generated led to significant migration to urban areas. Mohammad Reza once boldly proclaimed that by 1980, no more than 2 million people would remain in rural areas (Katouzian, 1981, p. 304). Although this prediction, like many of his assurances, went unfulfilled, it underscores his regime's disdain for the "backward," and alarmingly independent rural life (especially in terms of politics and ideology), and its concerted efforts to nearly eradicate it. Katouzian notes: "*The politiconomic policies of the state resulted in a very rapid growth of towns, cities, and urban activities: ... the demise of agriculture and the peasantry, resulted in a cumulative exodus from villages into towns; the expansion of the state bureaucracy, and the further ... concentration of administrative decisions, led to a torrent of immigrants from smaller towns into larger cities*" (1981, p. 274).

This trend was particularly pronounced from the late 1950s onwards since during Reza Pahlavi's reign, the state still relied on the efforts of landowners and the agricultural economy, and rural areas maintained some independent cohesion. However, from the 1960s, bolstered by economic support from the US and oil revenues that granted Shah independence, and with land

reforms that led to nothing but bankruptcy and the collapse of agriculture for the peasants, migration to metropolises surged unprecedentedly. Between 1963 and 1978, the total population grew at an average annual rate of 2.9 percent, increasing from 23 to 35 million. However, the average annual growth rates in the rural and urban sectors were markedly different: as low as 1.2 percent in rural areas and as high as 4.6 percent in urban areas. “Whereas in 1966 only 21 percent resided in cities with populations over 100,000, by 1976 some 29 percent resided in such cities. For example, Tehran grew from 2,719,730 to 4,496,159; Isfahan from 424,045 to 671,825; Mashad from 409,616 to 670,180; Tabriz from 403,413 to 598,576; Shiraz from 269,865 to 416,405, and Abadan from 274,962 to 296,081” (Abrahamian, 1981, p. 431)..

It goes without saying that misery awaited these people in the cities. The state's allocation of budgets to urban centers like Tehran did not foster genuine urbanization but rather exemplified a skewed form of urbanism, benefiting only a narrow cohort of technocrats and bureaucrats closely linked to the state apparatus. This dynamic exacerbated the socioeconomic divide, enabling a small elite to enjoy the amenities of modern urban life, while the vast majority sometimes lacked even the most basic necessities. Scholarly investigations into the quality of life in metropolises since the late 1950s, uniformly attest to the profound disparities engendered by ostensibly grand modernization efforts¹. Chief among these issues were the stark lack of employment opportunities, particularly jobs that offered sufficient wages for city living or that were not deemed fake employment. This was either because workers weren't specialized enough to work in certain industries, or because the positions were usually secured for elite technicians and even foreigners, and trained young men of lower strata, had much lower chances of securing such positions; severe housing shortages that resulted in the proliferation of substandard housing in the southern districts and the sprawling of city outskirts into slums; daily battles against malnutrition for a significant segment of the urban population; and inadequate and inefficient infrastructure and services such as electricity, sewage systems, transportation, and medical and educational facilities to support a rapidly expanding populace.

This scenario rendered cities like Tehran bursting with overcrowded, squalid streets inhabited by despondent individuals clad in tattered garments and without proper homes. Occasionally, one might glimpse someone fortunate enough to have a low-wage job, navigating through streets, tired and strewn with fallen dreams. These streets, rife with crime and bars filled with patrons seeking to drown their sorrows, were lined from downtown to the outskirts with the broken and the sick.

Marsi-ye (1978)

Marsi-ye, following *Khodāhāfez Refiq* (*Goodbye Friend*, 1971) and *Tangnā* (*Strait*, 1973), represents the third cinematic exploration by celebrated Iranian New Wave director Amir Naderi, delving into the hardships and despair of life in Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's modern

Tehran. Inspired by a line from a poem by Mehdi Akhavan Sales—where he mourns, “I’m having a requiem for my own dead homeland”—the film serves as a cinematic requiem capturing “the desolate despair of Iran on the verge of revolution” (Dabashi, 2007, p. 238). It narrates the plight of Nassrollah Bagheri (Manuchehr Ahmadi), who, upon being released from prison after eight and a half years, discovers his mother's death during his incarceration. His subsequent endeavors to secure employment prove futile. Left with nothing but a blowgun and a pointing board, the remnants of his household, Nassrollah resorts to street performances involving shooting demonstrations and betting. His life meanders through visits to a friend's wife, interactions with new acquaintances like Looti Karim and Morshed Abbas, and a series of disheartening events where friends depart or pass away. Ultimately, he sells his equipment for alcohol, aimlessly wandering the bustling streets of Tehran. As critic Khosrow Dehqan describes, the film “comes from nowhere and leads nowhere. It's a stroll, with no ups and downs, no beginning or ending, no drama, no fight, no conflict, no dialogue” (2020, p. 749). The film faced immediate censorship upon its release, only to be reissued in 1978 amid the Shah's fleeting lift of bans in a desperate bid to quell burgeoning public discontent (Naficy, 2012, p. 427)..

The opening titles of *Marsi-ye* are set against a stark black background, gradually revealing an image amidst the credits. This obscured image, eventually identified as the ID photo of a young man, transitions to a visual of Nassrollah—a now aged, bearded, and wrinkled man—being verified by a security guard at the time of his release. An inquiry unveils his identity and the duration of his incarceration, during which he acquired a skill in sock-weaving—an education revealed to be ineffectual in training him for employment in the state's desired sector, modern industry. The film subtly critiques an educational system that fails to prepare a workforce competent for technical roles, as the majority of diploma holders remained unemployed (Katouzian, 1981, p. 248). In fact, the characters of *Marsi-ye* are subjects that were supposed to be trained as citizen-soldiers, yet the state has failed as these bodies are far from being a “soldier.”

Upon his release from prison, Nassrollah is depicted in stark solitude, walking alone along the prison walls, in contrast to other prisoners greeted by family. His journey as an alienated and obsolete body begins here. Wandering through the decaying parts of the city, he encounters fellow outcasts. One old friend, referred to as Uncle Hossein, responds despairingly when Nassrollah inquires about employment: “What can I do? Nothing is possible by my hands anymore.” This sentiment reflects Uncle Hossein's diminished labor value—his body is not trained enough to work in existing positions. Nassrollah faces a similar fate, as potential employers seek workers adept with machinery, underscoring the pervasive disconnect in the industrial economy of major cities, where a significant portion of the workforce lacked the specialization required for such sectors, leading them to low-wage jobs at construction sites, fake employment, or unemployment (Katouzian, 1981, p. 249)..

After an instance of being rejected for a job, director Naderi employs a poignant point of view shot of butchered cow carcasses being loaded onto a vehicle—a grim metaphor for the devalued and broken bodies of individuals like Nassrollah, who do not belong to the model bodies envisioned by the state to propel the country forward. Throughout his wanderings, Nassrollah encounters numerous other broken, sick, and dead bodies, mirroring his own depreciated state in the contemporary landscape. After learning of his mother's death, he visits the cemetery, where he observes a group of mourners interring another body. The recurring presence of dead bodies throughout the film, such as a young boy mourning his deceased mother in the market, or a hearse carrying a dead body, underscores a motif of pervasive mortality and despair. Toward the film's conclusion, Nassrollah's acquaintance Luti, who holds an illicit job akin to Nassrollah's, contributes to this somber theme. A recurring visual motif features an old man carrying his ailing wife on his shoulder, symbolizing enduring hardship and loss. However, in their final appearance, the woman has passed away, and the old man sits desolately beside her body, begging for money. The film maintains this tone of hopelessness to the extent that even children are depicted as stillborn, such as the child of the wife of Nassrollah's friend, whom he visits at the friend's request. Near the end of the film, the pregnant woman gives birth to a dead boy.

This relentless portrayal of desolation and futility scattered around the modern city, encapsulates the film's thematic exploration of broken bodies and human disposability, in a state that had claimed to train and integrate these bodies as modern citizens, such as the male citizen-soldier, yet failed to deliver. Throughout the film, Nassrollah encounters both actual and symbolic representations of bodies, that stand witnesses to this failure, and reflect Nassrollah's own marginalized state as discarded and useless



Figure 1 & 2: Dead and sickly bodies, prevail in Marsi-ye

The film contrasts these grim realities of not actualized promises, with propagandistic statues symbolizing unfulfilled promises. One scene, viewed from Nassrollah's perspective, which is incidentally the first view of the city that Nassrollah encounters, presents a statue of soldiers unitedly bearing the national flag, embodying the idealized national solidarity, the community of soldier-citizens that adhere to the mentality of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's "glorious" army, that he isn't included in (see Figure 3). Director shows Nassrollah woeful reaction to this statue,

in a prolonged shot. Another statue he encounters portrays the mythical hero Garshasb, a figure of immense strength from the *Shahnameh*, strangulating a dragon. This epic poem was used by the Pahlavi regime in its propaganda to project an image of heroic, non-Islamic nationalism (Sadr, 2006, p. 34). . The mythical aura of this epic poem, and legends such as Garshasb and his warriorship, stands in stark contrast with the reality of Nassrollah, and *Marsi-ye*'s crude realism.



Figure 3

Nassrollah, after returning to his maternal home, learns about his mother's death. Overwhelmed by grief, he spends the night in an alley, drinking beside a wall, only to be awakened and expelled by a police officer for "disturbing social order." This incident underscores his alienation from a society that views him as a disturbance, unable to accommodate his existence nowhere within the city.

While inside his maternal house, which is a sub-standard building with multiple tenants, Nassrollah finds his only inheritance from his mother, a blowgun, which mockingly symbolizes his diminished utility, and a marking board. After realizing his status as an outcast and a redundant soldier, and in a reaction of defiance, he purchases posters of semi-nude white women, icons that both symbolize state's model for modern Iranian women's bodies, and the consumerist allure of the commodities he can't afford to buy. He proceeds to use them as targets for his shooting performance. Customers of this shooting performance, are men like him, who fueled by frustration of not being a citizen-soldier, rebel against the system by shooting at the images. In this depiction, Naderi illustrates the characters' acts of revolt, albeit as futile and despairing gestures; afterall, they're shooting at symbolic images using a worn-out blowgun. This act underscores the emptiness of their rebellion, highlighting a pervasive sense of hopelessness throughout the film. Naderi interweaves a scene where Nassrollah, while looking for a location to set up his shooting range, witnesses a guerrilla fighter, defeated and shot in the leg. This moment crystallizes the filmmaker's somber perspective on Iran—a perspective shared by many in the Iranian New Wave (Naficy, 2012, p. 344). This scene reinforces the motif of futile resistance, as even armed struggle appears doomed to failure in Naderi's narrative.

The film concludes with a poignant and symbolic gesture as Nassrollah, bearing the remnants of his friends—the love bird of his friend Morshed who's succeeded at "escaping"

the city, and the baboon used in shows by his deceased friend Luti—goes into a landfill, filled with waste and garbage, and releases them into clutters of garbage, and a background overshadowed by the polluting smokestacks of industrial sites. The bird's flight toward the grim industrial backdrop metaphorically represents a doomed attempt at freedom, reflecting the overall despairing tone of the film. Nassrollah, overwhelmed by the relentless despair and alienation, spends the money he earns from selling his blowgun and marking board, on alcohol, and immerses himself hopelessly in the chaotic, impersonal bustle of the modern city filled with crowds and vehicles. Metropolitan shocks seem to attack him from all sides, and he's eaten alive by the city. This ending with its fade to black, portrays Nassrollah's metaphorical death by the hands of the modern Tehran of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi.

Kandū (1975)

Gole's widely popular *Kandū* (Omid, 2020, p. 688), narrates the poignant tale of Ebi (Behrooz Vosoughi) who, upon release from prison along with Mr. Hosseini (Davood Rashidi), finds himself destitute and homeless. They are compelled to spend their nights at a Tehran tea house within the city's traditional bazaar, which offers shelter to the homeless in exchange for a fee that is although modest, many can't afford. As the film unfolds, Ebi is confronted with the harsh reality that modern Tehran, having transformed significantly, has no place for him. His friends even suggest he might better endure the winter back inside the prison. One day at the tea house, Ebi accepts a challenge proposed by Mr. Hosseini to visit, and drink in seven cafes from the southern reaches to the opulent northern district of Tehran, including the Continental Hotel, without payment. Despite severe beatings, Ebi's resolve does not waver, and he continues to drink freely, even in the most exclusive venues of northern Tehran.

Film critic Amir Bahari notes that "... the antagonist of the film is the inclined street from Lalehzar (southern part) to Tajrish bridge (northern part) ... The hero's (if we can consider Ebi a hero) challenges are not malevolent individuals per se, but rather the structure of the city which he resides in" (2020, p. 655). As such, Ebi's journey serves as a pretext to critique the stark class disparities that were fracturing the capital at the time (Sadr, 2006, p. 162). Ebi and the demographic he symbolizes, are the marginalized majority of Tehran's populace, who have been relegated to the city's mid to southern segments as the elite have scattered northward. Yet, Ebi lacks even the most basic shelters of these impoverished districts.

Drawing inspiration from Rostam, the legendary Iranian *Pahlavān*, which is a term given to the traditional Iranian heroes, and his famous challenge of "seven labors," Gole portrays Ebi's journey as a contemporary parallel to the mythical hero's quest (Rekabtalaei, 2019, p. 260). However, unlike the revered Rostam, Ebi is depicted as beaten, derided, and ostracized. Despite these differences, Ebi, akin to Rostam—a soldier of ancient Persia—clad in military jacket and shoes, and a practitioner of wrestling, the traditional sport of *pahlavāns*, embodies the spirit of a warrior. Nevertheless, his military prowess has remained unutilized, as he is estranged from

the modern societal framework. Ebi's resurgence as a soldier throughout his journey symbolizes the rebellion of an Iranian soldier against a "westernized" regime that fails to honor, and utilize such valor and spirit of warriorship. This narrative evokes a form of oppositional patriotism that critiques the state's version of patriotism, which was perceived by oppositional forces as insincere and synonymous with Westernization.

The commentary by Mir Mehdi Varzandeh, regarded as the progenitor of modern sports education in Iran, delineates the objectives of physical education as "neither to become a pahlavan, nor an acrobat nor a weight lifter . . . The aim is to be healthy . . . clear minded, brave, and disciplined . . . *love one's king and one's nation and thus become a complete human being*" (qtd. in Balslev, 2019, p. 256). This philosophy marks a significant departure from the traditional ideals of *pahlavānism*, which historically had been the aim and the ultimate state of athletic and moral virtue. Yet, Ebi's persona is steeped in the ethos of *pahlavānism*, evidenced by his *luti* mannerisms and dialect, reflective of a contemporary urban adaptation of this traditional warrior archetype, and his journey, reminiscent of Rostam's seven labors. Figures like Ebi and his compatriot, Abdollah—a former wrestler to has now succumbed to illness and addiction, and dies in the tea house—are marginalized and ostracized, emblematic of the state's failure to integrate such individuals. In fact, Ebi of *Kandū* is portrayed as a potent warrior and *pahlavān* that the incompetent and westernized state, can't utilize. He is a trained force and a "true" potential, but as the modern capacities and positions of the nation are predominantly occupied by a minority of elites or foreign technicians, he's become marginalized².

However, unlike the passive characters of *Marsi-ye, Kandū*'s Ebi infuses resilience. In the scene where Ebi has reflective moments in a bath, he reminisces about wrestling with Abdollah, the days of his physical education. After this, he decides to accept Mr. Hosseini's challenge, and confront and defy the societal institutions that exclude him. What happens here is that a young man that is trained to be a citizen-soldier, resolves to change ideology, and use his strength not to "love one's king and one's nation," but to revolt against the very nation-state that this ideology promotes, in the guise of a "national" *pahlavān* on a heroic journey. He adorns his military-type shoes, probably issued for him during his mandatory military service, and embarks on the symbolic revolt (see Figure 4).



Figure 4: Ebi fashions military-style jacket and shoes

Ebi's journey, punctuated by episodes of suffering and endurance, culminates not in societal acceptance but in a defiant stand against the modern society that excludes such an "Iranian" soldier. In a poignant scene, as his friends carry his battered body, Ebi reflects on his childhood deprivations of simple offerings of the modern city, and this ignites his determination to persist through rest of his journey. Despite the lack of a conventional victory, Ebi's struggle manifests as a profound act of resistance. Ultimately, he is returned to prison—the only sanctuary the city offers for such a "true" soldier.

Tradition Resists

Differing answers on what modernity is, and what the appropriate path for Iran's modernization is, dates back to the constitutional era (Ansari, 2007, p. 19); however, the debate intensified when a particular mode of modernization—secular nationalism, informed by Western notions of nationalism—prevailed and was imposed from above during the Pahlavi dynasty (Cronin, 2003). Opposition, both secular and religious, particularly flourished during Mohammad Reza's rule, culminating in charges of the state's "westernization." The most intricate, though overly simplistic, counter-narrative developed by blending Iranian-Islamic traditions with the technological and scientific advancements of Western modernity to forge a distinct Iranian modernity, emerged with the discourse of "return to roots." The discourses of authenticity and return to the roots "are internal to modernity, and in fact represent a common means through which 'cultures' attempt to localize the course of modernization," and build an authentic, modern national identity, resisting westernization/Americanization (Mirsepassi, 2000, p. 129). Traces of this discourse, originating from constitutional conflicts, evolved into a potent call to action during the 1960s and 1970s, propelled by intellectuals such as Jalal Al-e Ahmad and Ali Shariati, who drew inspiration from the German model of "return to roots" and post-colonial narratives (Mirsepassi, 2000, p. 130).

This Iranian variant of the "return to roots" fervently criticized secular, liberal, and socialist intellectuals who, overlooked the profound Iranian-Islamic culture, and were "complicit" in the degradation of genuine Iranian culture and identity, in collusion with the state. Religious leaders also faced criticism for their acquiescence and reluctance to criticize the state and mobilize the populace, an attitude equated with cowardice. The discourse extolled the "authentic" Iranian-Islamic lifestyle, and the simplicity, honor, and valor of the rural population, less affected by "westoxication" compared to urban dwellers, and thus at greater risk of eradication. The harsh measures of the Pahlavi era—ranging from severe sanctions and taxes to literal warfare and land reform policies—aimed at homogenizing Iran's diverse population and shifting it from "backward" ways to "progress," were seen as westernization of Iran and a destruction of the authentic Iranian spirit, which was always deeply intertwined with religion (Ansari, 2007, p. 17). Rural, tribal, and farming communities were romantically portrayed as exemplars for urbanites, to evoke a nostalgia of how the "pure" and "authentic" Iranian-Islamic way of life was, encouraging them to fight and reclaim their identity, which was revoked from urban areas,

and was in danger of eradication on rural areas, thanks to the state's measures and policies towards rural societies.

Additionally, influenced by thinkers like Ernst Junger and post-colonial discourse, this discourse advocated for practical solutions. The valor and warrior spirit of the rural populace, along with Shiite martyrs, were idealized for urbanites to emulate and to stand definitively against the state, and its puppets, the "citizen-soldiers." This formed part of a clarion call to arms by the oppositional discourse of "return to roots," embraced by religious and nationalist factions, and emerging urban guerrillas, aiming to channel widespread disdain and anger towards the state into tangible, combative action.

Balūč (1972)

Kimiai's *Balūč* treads a similar path to his other acclaimed and influential films, such as *Qeysar* (1969) and subsequent works like *Khāk* (The Soil, 1973) and *Gavazn-hā* (The Deer, 1974). These films collectively advocate a sense of Iranian identity, deeply embedded in Islamic-Iranian culture and values, while calling for a vigorous and even militant uprising against any social and political force that opposes, and damages this culture and values. The film was initially banned because its portrayal of the eponymous protagonist's armed rebellion against corrupt urban elites, was interpreted as a critique of the state (Naficy, 2011, p. 373). The narrative follows Baluch (Behrooz Vosoughi), hailing from the storied province of Baluchestan—land of ancient heroes like Nariman, Sum, Zal, and Rostam. His tranquil existence is shattered when two Tehran-based smugglers of ancient Iranian artifacts, Abdollah (Amir Pishvaeian) and Amir (Manouchehr Farid) murder two rivals, steal their discoveries, and in their escape, to make matters more dramatic, rape Baluch's wife. Upon discovering this, Baluch retrieves his pawned weapon and seeks revenge. However, he is ambushed, and the smugglers manipulate the situation so the police believe Baluch has killed the two rival smugglers. After imprisonment and eventual release, he resolves to exact vengeance on those who violated his wife and falsely implicated him in a crime he did not commit. Despite falling prey to the allure of a modern, affluent woman named Farangis (Irene), who diminishes his "masculine authority" by employing him as her personal bodyguard, and training him to be "modern," Baluch ultimately reclaims his identity, avenges the affronts against Iranian heritage, and spurns the corrupt and westernized men of the city. Ultimately, he rejects the possibility of urban life with Farangis's wealth, choosing instead to return to his devastated village, poised for revival under his formidable strength and courage.

Hasan Hosseini contends that Kimiai effectively captured the era's intellectual discourse on "return to self," popularized by thinkers such as Al-e Ahmad and Shariati (2020, p. 465). In the film, Baluch epitomizes strength, virtue, courage, and a profound sensitivity to Iranian-Islamic values. Neither the consumerist nor sexual allurements of the metropolis can stop him from his duty as a defender of his cultural values. He represents an Iranian archetype that resolutely opposes Western, and superficial modernization, paraded as robust and authentically Iranian,

and weak and feminized “citizen-soldiers,” claiming to be strong. In the film’s beginning, the impact of modernization encroaches on the rural landscape via the railroad, a symbol of Pahlavi modernization. This intrusion disrupts local tranquility, violating and plundering its heritage. Having initially acquiesced to his oppressed economic circumstances, a result of the state’s policies, Baluch eventually refuses to endure any longer and reclaims his old weapons.

A figure out of place in the city, he conspicuously eschews Western attire and social conventions. In a notable sequence, after wandering through the “hollow” and ornate Tehran, Baluch sleeps before a grand structure erected for the twenty-five hundredth-anniversary celebrations—a lavish commemoration of 2,500 years of royal history in Iran, orchestrated by Mohammad Reza Shah to impress international guests and propagate the myth of the Pahlavi dynasty as heirs to ancient Persian glory (see Figure 5). However, Baluch, just like Nassrollah of *Marsi-ye* in a similar scene, is rudely awakened by a law officer who accuses him of disrupting the social order. This scene, an instance of Baluch not following and even understanding urban and limiting conventions, serves as Kimiai’s satirical commentary, portraying the authentic Iranian, Baluch, as an outsider during a celebration purportedly honoring Iran and its cultural legacy. Furthermore, Baluch’s embodiment of traditional “Iranian” and “manly” virtues becomes a subject of ridicule among the elite, who, actually, secretly envy his masculinity. In a gathering of both male and female elites, it is privately acknowledged that he is the sole “true” man present. In contrast, other men, styled sharply with western clothes, and behaving “gentlemanly,” are depicted as Westernized figures who have forsaken their masculinity and have lost their “manhood.”



Figure 5

In his quest of vengeance, Baluch effortlessly dispatches the first smuggler, Abdollah, who now peddles Iranian treasures to Western buyers. However, reaching Amir, who has since established a cabaret commodifying Iranian women, proves more challenging—not due to Amir’s strength but because he has cunningly ensconced himself behind sophisticated defenses, setting traps that delay Baluch’s quest for vengeance. The most formidable of these obstacles is Farangis, who intervenes when Baluch is in a legal trouble. She emerges in his quest, when an

unfamiliar with the urban environment Baluch, struggles to navigate the city's restrictive laws, and is stopped and fined for jaywalking. Farangis appears and bribing the officer, frees Baluch. Farangis embodies the Pahlavi regime's ideal of Iranian women, similar to how Amir and Abdollah represent the archetypal soldier-citizens. Although the state presents these characters as authentically Iranian, the film counters this portrayal by depicting them as overtly Western and inherently corrupt. Farangis stands in stark contrast to Baluch's wife, just as Amir and Abdollah contrast with Baluch. In these dichotomies, the first elements are Western, while the second elements are "authentically" Iranian.

Farangis provides Baluch with shelter, and through seduction, undertakes to transform him—altering his appearance, silencing his voice, and conditioning him to endure the mockery and insults from the affluent elite. This manipulation, orchestrated by Amir, as revealed near the end of the film, aims to “castrate” Baluch, stripping him of his potency as a defender of Iranian values. Nevertheless, the resilience of his Iranian identity triumphs as Baluch sheds his imposed urban facade, reclaims his inherent Iranian identity, and ultimately eliminates Amir. He also rescues his wife, who, left without her male guardian, has succumbed into prostitution in Tehran. Weak and vulnerable, she is portrayed as incapable of self-rescue, unlike Baluch. Together, they return to their hometown, which is now depicted as a land in the verge of destruction. Walking confidently towards the ruins, they symbolize the Iranian resolve to reclaim and restore their land.

In *Balūč*, Kimiai critiques the state's enforcement of body politics and Westernization as the eradication of authentic Iranian identity, framing it as both a literal and metaphorical “castration” of Iranian men and “unchastization” of Iranian women. The film advocates for a vigorous and defiant stance against the obliteration of Iran and its cultural essence, championing a return to foundational values and resistance against foreign domination administered by the Pahlavi state.

Conclusion

The uniforming policies of the Pahlavi regime, including endeavors to cultivate civic bodies aimed at propelling the nation toward a “great civilization,” such as training “citizen-soldiers,” largely faltered like its other modernization initiatives, which only succeeded in cultivating a prestigious image of a modern Iran. The destiny of the majority of male citizens, envisioned as “citizen-soldiers,” manifested in two significant ways: 1) Bodies broken and frail, unsuitable for industrial labor, in an economic, as well as social infrastructure insufficient to transform these bodies into adept and useful forces; to the ideal the propagandistic and enforced measures aimed at. Consequently, they became outcasts, feeling worthless in their own bodies, perpetually alienated from the cities meant to integrate them. 2) “Soldiers” trained but underutilized, revealing a state incapable of employing the very bodies it had trained through enforced ideological and propagandistic measures. Typically, these young city dwellers from the 1960s and 1970s failed to realize their potential and were doomed to remain marginalized.

The escalating misery in urban centers, alongside policies that drove rural areas toward economic collapse, prompted adverse reactions that culminated in practical revolts against the state. Among the more influential and popular oppositional discourses was one advocating an Iranian modernity rooted in a return to the authentic self, as articulated by thinkers such as Ali-e Ahmad and Shariati. This discourse, which romantically idealized an Iranian-Islamic identity preserved in the rural areas, hurt but not transformed by the westernization of urban centers, championed the valor, courage, and honor of the “genuine” Iranian people and called for urban residents in particular, to reclaim their “Iranianness.”

In this study, three films from the politically charged Iranian New Wave cinema were analyzed: *Marsi-ye* and *Kandū*, which portray the initial two consequences of body training policies, and *Balūč*, depicting a rural, “authentic” Iranian rising to defend what is distinctly Iranian against the degenerate, corrupt, and westernized urban elites. *Marsi-ye* presents a bleak and stark portrayal of broken and sickly bodies, discarded and redundant in the urban landscape. In the film, individuals such as Nassrollah, unable to secure legitimate employment, resort to menial jobs that offer wages below the city's living standards. Nassrollah, wielding only an old blowgun—a symbol of his status within the “citizen-soldier” ideal—engages in the ironic and futile act of rebellion against the exclusive city by shooting at posters of semi-naked women, emblematic of the urban commodity fetishism that he and his peers can never access.

Conversely, *Kandū* offers a marginally more optimistic view. The protagonist, Ebi, is a well-trained, valiant young man who could aid his country but finds himself deprived of everything, even a home. The city, clueless about how to utilize such young men, only allows them to perish on its outskirts or in its prisons. Ebi, recognizing his potential, endeavors to assert his rights, starting with the fundamental right to exist and be accepted within the city. However, no legitimate avenues exist for someone like Ebi to prove his worth. All doors are closed, so Gole puts him on a heroic journey of self-imposition. The fallen citizen-soldier rises as a “pahalavan,” determined to occupy the urban spaces from which he is barred. He endures all manner of adversity, even to the brink of death, but nonetheless claims his place.

Balūč lends a triumphant tone to this revolt, depicting what it considers the authentic Iranian soldier—valorous and courageous, and “man enough” to reclaim his rights from the “emasculated” westernized urban elite, the “citizen-soldiers.” He embodies the revolutionary spirit of the *mostaz’afin* (the oppressed and weakened) who finally recognizes his true (patriarchal) power to safeguard his cherished possessions, such as motherland, honor, masculinity, and women—all perceived as compromised by the westernization of the state and its corrupted soldiers and servants.

Notably, films like *Kandū* and *Balūč* were, within their cinematic context, ahead of their social era in terms of revolution. A few years after these films were produced, it was inevitable that the bleakness portrayed in *Marsi-ye* would shift, and both the sickly and broken, alongside the fallen soldiers, would embark on a journey to affirm their existence, like Ebi in *Kandū*; and

empowered with the ideology of *Balūč*, fight for what they deemed their authentic Islamic-Iranian self. The 1979 Revolution marked the culmination of such a revolt.

Conflict of Interests

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

Footnotes

1. For example, see Abrahamian, 1981. Katouzian specifically details economic hardships of metropolises. See Katouzian, 1981. Abbas Amanat also provides an analysis of defects and challenges of urban life during Pahlavi era. See Amanat, 2017.
2. Katouzian provides an analysis in injustices of employment in industrial and modern sections. See Katouzian, 1981.

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ایده پهلوی "شهروند-سرباز" برای مردان ایرانی و سه پاسخ سینمایی:

بدن‌های شکسته، سربازان جان‌باخته و مقاومت سنت

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چکیده

این مقاله به بررسی آرمان «سرباز-شهروند» در دوران پهلوی و شکست متعاقب و واکنش‌های برانگیخته شده نسبت به آن، آن‌گونه که در سه نمونه از سینمای انتقادی موج نوی ایران به تصویر کشیده شده است، می‌پردازد. سه نمونه، عبارت‌اند از مرثیه (۱۳۵۷)، کندو (۱۳۵۴) و بلوچ (۱۳۵۱). این فیلم‌ها همچون لنزهای انتقادی عمل می‌کنند که گسست‌های عمیق بین اهداف دولت در آموزش سرباز-شهروندان و واقعیت‌های عمومی را بازتاب می‌دهند. مرثیه پیکرهای شکسته‌ای را به تصویر می‌کشد که دولت نتوانسته آموزش داده و سوژه‌شان بکند، و لذا در حاشیه‌های تهران، مطرود و شکسته، رها شده‌اند. کندو جوان آموزش‌دیده‌ای را نشان می‌دهد که توسط دولت بی‌استفاده رها شده است، در حالی که بلوچ مرد روستایی را به تصویر می‌کشد که علیه نخبگان شهری «فاسد»، «ضعیف» و «غربی‌شده»، که درواقع همان سرباز-شهروندان از نقطه‌نظر مخالف‌خوان فیلم هستند، شورش می‌کند و خیزش سربازان «اصیل» ایرانی را علیه الگوی سرباز-شهروند تبلیغ می‌کند. از طریق این فیلم‌ها، تعارضات ایدئولوژیک و پیامدهای ملموس سیاست‌های بدنی دولت برای مردان، و مقاومت نهایی، افشا می‌شود. این فیلم‌ها، از منظر انتقادی خوب، به تأثیرات اجتماعی و فردی سیاست‌های بدنی رژیم پهلوی می‌پردازند و شکاف بین آرمان‌های دولتی و تجربیات زیسته را برجسته می‌کنند. این تحلیل تأکید می‌کند که چگونه این فیلم‌ها به مدرنیزاسیون دولتی و تنش‌های اجتماعی-سیاسی ناشی از آن انتقاد کرده و به آن واکنش نشان می‌دهند، و چه نقشی در عواطف انقلابی که به انقلاب اسلامی ۱۳۵۷ منجر شد، دارند.

کلیدواژه‌گان: سرباز-شهروند؛ سیاست بدنی؛ ایران دوران پهلوی؛ مرثیه؛ کندو؛ بلوچ

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