

FROM DEATH SENTENCE TO DISAPPEARANCE:
THE INVISIBILITY OF WEST ASIAN LGBTQ REFUGEES

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Abstract

West Asian queer refugees face severe oppression, such as moral exclusion, denial of existence in their home countries, and multi-marginalization in Canada, making them invisible and one of the most understudied populations. I believe the invisibility of vulnerable populations is one of the highest levels of injustice which places them at higher risks of discrimination.

Despite the most visible injustice, why do they remain invisible? I began to seek answers by myself through a critical autoethnography with an analytical approach throughout my journey as a West Asian queer refugee in Iran, Turkey, and Canada to tackle the reasons behind this invisibility. In the absence of a support system locally and globally for the West Asian queer refugees, simply living, surviving, and thriving is an act of resistance. This research introduces self-acceptance and self-compassion as a strategy at a grassroots level toward visibility and equality for the West Asian queer refugee.

Poem 1: Dedicated to Toronto's West Asian Queer victims

From two oceans distance
Often in mud, times in blood,
where the home stance?

Walls are tall
season of the hearts, forever fall

even with bricks, seals in the four walls
home remained, unknown thus far
but I chose to walk

Middle East, West- north, south
constant attacks by all doubts
what a waste of search on the earth, sky
I become the home, no one can deny

You have been missing from the village
Not from my eyes
You fought for love, to stay alive
in the city of denial I am fighting your fight Birds don't disappear
when they fly

(Mehdi Ghorbanizadeh)

Dedication

Also, to whoever denies, criminalizes, oppresses, ignores or is indifferent about queer rights and equalities. This research is dedicated to you as well; without considering you as the enemy and the other, I invite you to read my research; it may open the door in front of your heart and eyes to see my existence, rights, and humanity.

Acknowledgments

As a queer man from West Asia to Canada, it has been a long journey to arrive at this moment where I can verbalize an untold story and depict an invisible injustice. With so much gratitude and thankfulness, I acknowledge this was impossible without the help of my committee, Dr. Visano, Dr. Hynie, and Dr. Brienza; they each accompanied me with different perspectives and encouragement that I did not feel I was alone. I am grateful that Interdisciplinary Studies was the instrument and platform for my research, my voice, and my queer activism. I am also thankful for Dr. Bird and Fiona Fernandes, who assisted me in my study process. I must mention the pressure of the pandemic and adapting the transitions of all services online, which caused everything to be more challenging; however, this complex task could be possible with this teamwork. With your help and this research, I was able to express, expose and raise awareness and now I can claim that the story of West Asian queer refugees is finally being told.

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Chapter 1- Introduction

Summary of the Research

In 2018 there was a vigil at the Metropolitan Community Church of Toronto in Greek town in memory of gay men murdered by the Toronto serial killer. Some of the victims were West Asian queer, mostly queer men of colour, and some came as refugees in Canada. If it were not for the death of Andrew Kinsman, a white Canadian gay man, the serial killer would have continued to target more victims. (Missing and Missed report, 2021, p 55). The ceremony was at a church, without the presence of their respective family members or any official entity to advocate for them. I looked around; maybe I was one of the few West Asian gay men attending the event. Attendees could hardly pronounce the victims' names; no one knew them, their lives, and their stories. Even though I fought so hard to be a visible proud gay man, I felt invisible; we were invisible. This invisibility was not something new to me and many other West Asian queer people. From West Asia to Canada, living between visibility and invisibility has been a constant battle, which I encountered earlier in my life in Iran and Turkey.

As West Asian queer people, our existence has been denied at the local and global levels, resulting in the sense of invisibility among this population who are being multi- marginalized based on race, gender, sexual identity, religion, and immigration status. I believe invisibility is the common thread of these discriminations and can be introduced as one of the highest levels of injustice. There are only a few studies about individuals identified as LGBTQ from West Asian countries and that make them among the most understudied populations (Alessi, Kahn, Woolner, & Van Der Horn, 2018). To tackle the invisibility of West Asian queer refugees and our battles with invisibility and denial, I expose my vulnerable self, my story and lived experiences as a member of this population in a critical autoethnographic research.

This study does not intend to use reliability in terms of generalizability in depicting the inequalities against the West Asian queer people; at the same time, throughout my life witnessed and heard the stories of many other West Asian queer people, which one can interfere with the commonality with respect to individual differences. I might have been faced with severe consequences in some areas because of my queer activism in West Asia, and by using my life as an inclusive instrument, this research aims to create a platform to help other West Asian queer refugees toward self-acceptance, visibility, and liberation. Therefore, this introduction chapter seeks to offer some background information, the research problem, followed by my specific research aims, the significance of the study and finally, some limitations that the reader may encounter throughout this study.

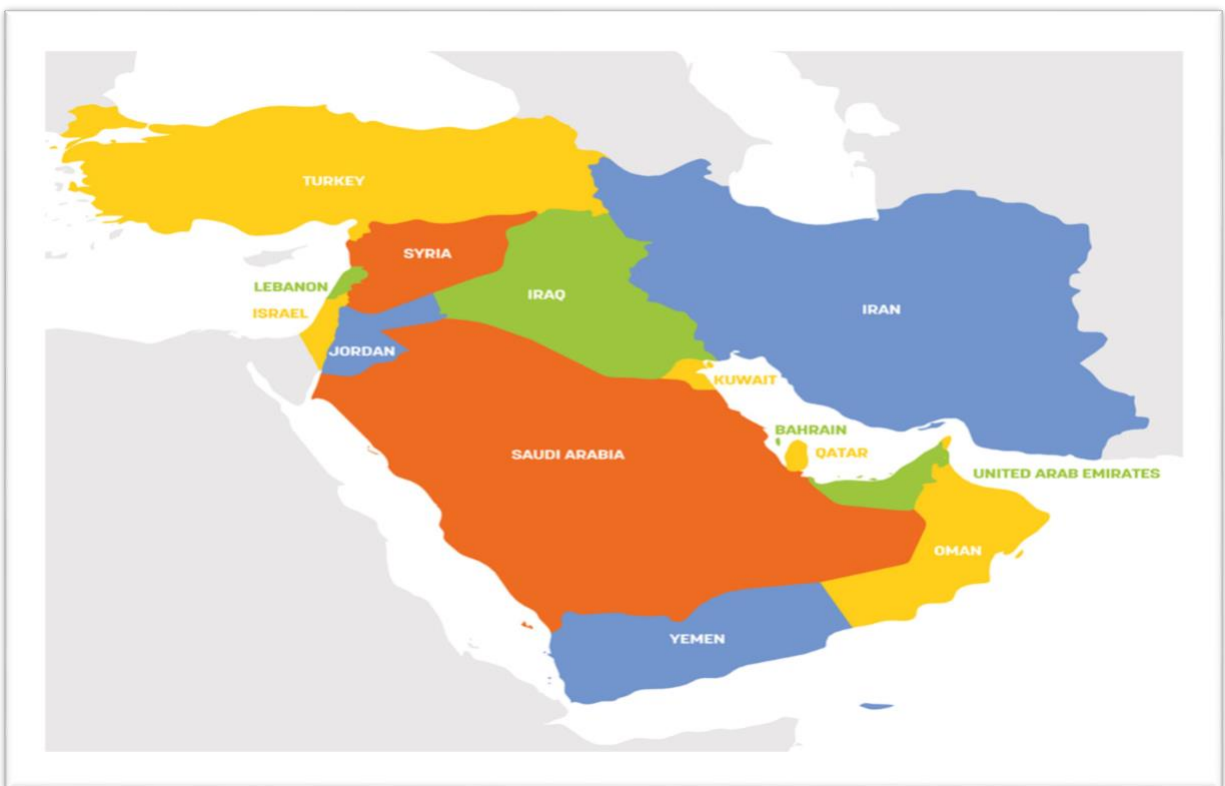


Figure 1. West Asia map, vectorStock.com

West Asian Queers? Who We Are?

West Asian Queers constitute a population that has suffered the most severe forms of punishment attributable to sexual identity. This includes execution, jail, prison, and lashes and in West Asian countries and states such as Iran, in denial of queerness, often resulting in capital punishment. West Asian queer refugees from West Asia to Canada are multi-marginalized. Being a refugee is an act of resistance and survivor and is often the only choice to live and exist. Without support or advocacy from the local and global community, even with the most visible punishments, West Asian queer refugees become invisible and among one of the most oppressed yet understudied populations. As a member of this population and witnessing all the injustices country after country, I could not be silent. I started to conduct a study about us by one of us to find answers series of questions as to why, despite freedom and protection in countries like Canada, West Asian queer people remain closeted. Therefore, based on the characteristics of injustice against West Asian queer refugees, I can summarize my research questions:

- i) What are the reasons behind the invisibility?
- ii) What are the consequences of this invisibility?

The complexity of injustice against West Asian queer refugees requires an interdisciplinary approach based on the various issues that they face from home countries in West Asia to Canada. They go through processes in different locations and entities with different sets of laws and policies, and treatments by different societies. To respond to these questions, I examine the challenges through these three disciplines:

1. Law, Immigration Refugees laws
2. Sociology (invisibility of West Asian queer refugees and inclusion, integration in Canada)
3. Psychology (impact of injustice on mental health and ways of empowerment)

I incorporate critical legal lenses on the impact of immigration and refugee laws on West Asian queer refugees, the central role of invisibility on individuals' well-being and sociological perspectives on invisibility and multi-marginalization based on sexual identity, race and immigration status and their relationship with diversity and inclusion in Canada.

With the evolution of queer terminology toward reclaiming identities, visibility, and empowerment often, various interpretations of terms related to sexual identity are unique to each study's purpose. Therefore, I found it beneficial to the reader to explain how I applied acronyms such as LGBTQ and Queer in my research.

LGBTQ is an acronym developed to represent individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning, which describes a wide range of sexual and gender minorities and has expanded over the years in an effort towards inclusion. The word Queer has historically been used as a derogatory and offensive slur and is more generically used to describe odd or abnormal things, Queer. However, since the 1990s, there has been a movement amongst LGBTQ individuals to reclaim the word. (American Psychological Association website, 2022). Members queer community have reclaimed the word "Queer" as a form of empowerment to take the negative power out of the word and to claim the community's space (Canadian Centre for Diversity and Inclusion, 2022).

Although these terms come with different histories and represent diverse groups of people, in my research, words such as LGBTQ and Queer are primarily synonymous with the purpose of unity, solidarity and inclusiveness. Because my research involves different settings and countries, such as Iran, Turkey, and Canada, depending on the significance and consequences of injustice against a specific group, I will use precise words and terms and name the group of people in the LGBTQ community. For instance, in Iran, I separate the focus on gay, lesbian, and transexual

identities. In the section related to Turkey, I use the Turkish queer community, and in Canada, I used West Asian queer refugees specifically to elaborate on the characteristics of injustice.

Significance of the Study

The constant tensions in West Asia and political and economic instability, wars, and arms races between major powers of the region come at the cost of the most vulnerable the queer population. West Asian queer people, their rights are lost among these crises; they face with wide-ranging neglect that becomes manifested in academia and queer studies from East to West which is negatively impacted the issues around the invisibility of this population. This project aims to provide the background necessary for a more comprehensive response in order to raise awareness about the injustices against West Asian queer refugees in breaking the invisibility and offering ways toward empowerment.

This study aims to facilitate the processes of overcoming oppression and injustices and embolden West Asian queer refugees to become equal participants in Canadian society. Further, this is a clarion call for action for the local or global communities to be more accountable and extend protection to vulnerable minorities such as West Asian LGBTQ refugees. This project is a step towards opening opportunities for future studies to build upon the findings herein to maximize the visibility and protection of LGBTQ refugees in Canada and simultaneously prevent further injustice and inequalities.

Essentially, the oppression is not being eliminated anywhere but rather getting more complex even in Canada, as evident in the Toronto serial killer case study that I will discuss later. The enormous injustice against the West Asian queer refugees is understudied, untold, and rarely if there is a report, the story is not being told by themselves. Someone needed to take an action and conduct research to expose societal injustice. As a member of the West Asian queer refugees, a

researcher, and an ethnographer, I will take the moral responsibility for capturing the epistemology of this population.

I claim my space as a queer man of colour who spent more than 15 years of my life advocating for LGBTQ rights with studies in Islamic judicial laws, human rights, journalism, poetry, and multilingual, multiracial background. Therefore, dealing with persecution, becoming a refugee, and going under a different layer of oppression are my lived experiences. I want to take the risk of exposing myself with the purpose of exposing the broader injustice against West Asian queer refugees. With my past and current academic backgrounds and my experiences in queer activism, I can bring readers to an often dismissed and unknown territory, from West Asia to Canada. I will introduce the inequities, name the unknown, and tell the untold as a survivor. That is why my research is part of my resistance.

Limitations

I am aware that my critical autoethnography research is based on my story and lived experience and interpretation; without a doubt, someone else might have a different point of view about the same experience. However, according to the current situation about West Asian queer refugees and the struggle with invisibility, that was the only solution that I could offer at this point in my life, to count on myself, to be a voice, and be the change that I want to see.

There is no intention in this study whatsoever to claim that this is all the story and a complete image of what is happening to this population. As a member of West Asian queer refugees, I accepted all risks, mentally, physically, and emotionally, to expose this injustice. In contrast, reliving and reflecting on oppression and trauma was not easy. I am only a small part of the missing puzzles, intending to invite other West Asian queer people to break the silence and invisibility. I am gratefully open in the face of any criticisms found in my research. Disagreements about my

accounts do not vitiate the purposes of this study which seeks to bring attention, raise awareness, and prevent further dismissal, denial, and callous indifference.

Also, because of the dearth of studies, I often encountered situations where I needed to depict unknown discrimination, define, and analyze, all at the same time, which often made it difficult to align my findings with other previous studies. It was important to me to be loyal to my story yet not lose sight of the experiences of other West Asian queer people that I know. As I will discuss in this study, we are not a community and do not have the advantages of the community that gets the support of visibility and advocacy.

There are, however, studies related to South Asian queer in Toronto, Canada, upon the existence the organization such as ASAAP, (Alliance for South Asian Aids Prevention), but I avoided placing the south Asian with West Asian queers in the same category, even though this inquiry could derive some benefits from the greater scope of the enterprise, especially in terms of contrasts and comparisons. Accordingly, the focus on the unique nature of discrimination against West Asian queer refugees would be compromised. I did not get secure funding for this study, and I often hear that this methodology is granted less credit. As a survivor of many hardships, I was able to manage to stay the course and enhance my act of resistance which otherwise would be inhibited with some funding protocols. Also, the scope of injustice is gigantic. I was only limited in two years of studies to the challenges of a global pandemic that brought to everyone's lives.

It should be noted that for using the decolonized language, I avoided using the term (Middle East) referring to West Asian and North African countries throughout this research because of the colonized term that recognized the British empire as a centre of the world as Nawal El Saadawi well-known Egyptian scholar said: "Middle to whom?" (Saadawi, World Forum for Democracy October 2012). Also, this term comes from overgeneralization which denies the diversity of the

region and narrows my focus on the countries where I live and lived, Iran, Turkey, and Canada. Examples from Syrian or Iraqi refugees are provided as well. Also, I intentionally did not use Muslim queer because I did not want to ignore the diversity of religions of West Asia. Despite different religions, the oppression of West Asian queer refugees shares many similarities.

Five Chapters of Research

This research is designed in five different chapters, which I name and summarize

1. Introduction
2. Theoretical framework and literature review
3. Methodology
4. My journey from West Asia to Canada (Autoethnography)
5. Conclusion - Self-acceptance

Chapter 1. The introduction. It is an overview and background on West Asian queer refugees, a brief history of the injustice against them, drawing the research questions, research problem, the significance of the study and key limitations that I encountered, or a reader might find throughout my research. Finally, a summary of the chapters will be outlined.

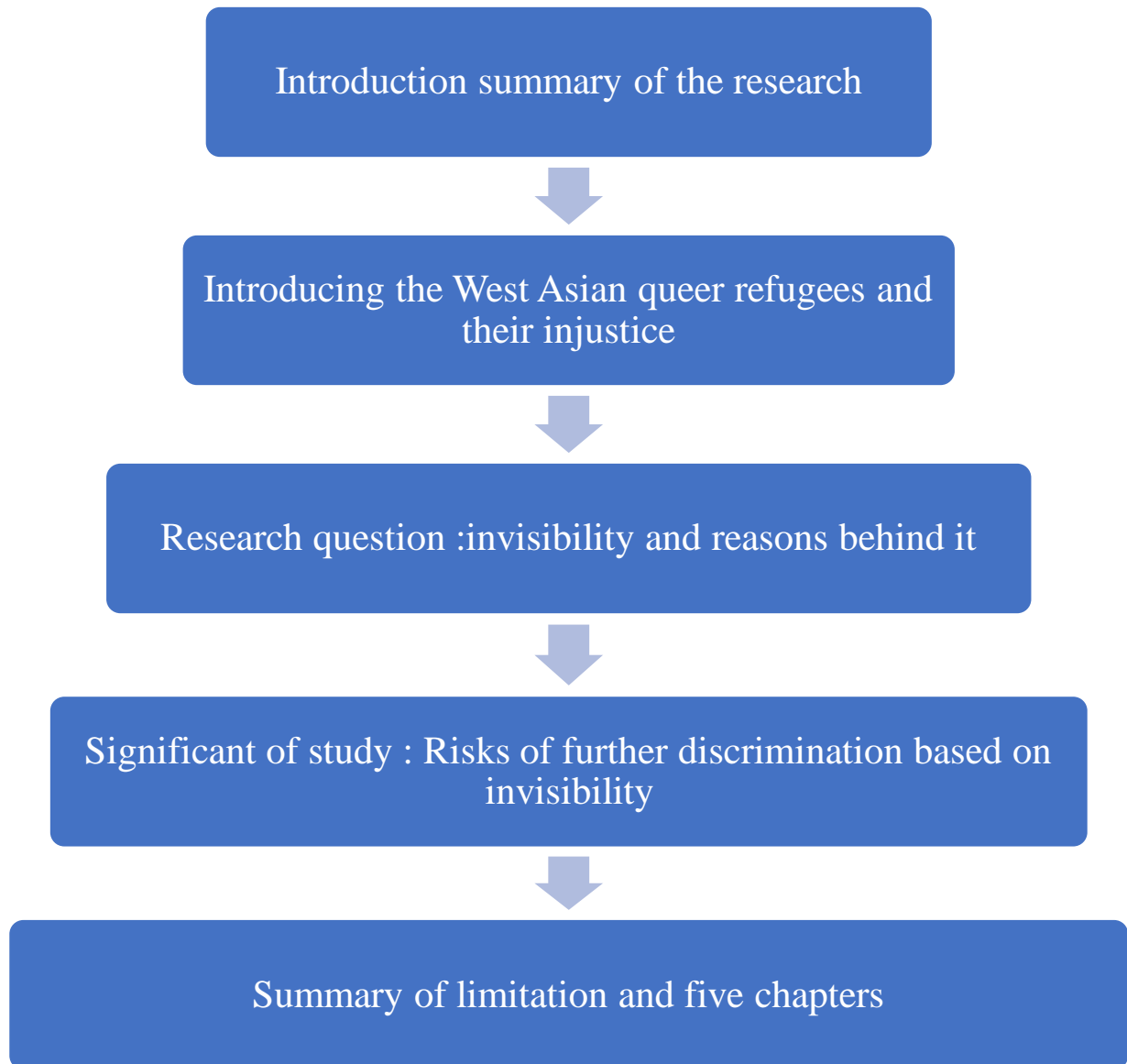
Chapter 2. Theoretical framework and literature review. The chapter elaborates on the invisibility of the West Asian queer refugees in three parts, three stages with different theories and the assumption by various. These are some of the most significant pieces of literature related to the research. (Queerness at Home-Iran) explains the life of LGBTQ people in Iran under moral exclusion and systemic denial for the West Asian queer community. (Becoming a Queer Refugee-Turkey), Analyzes the life of West Asian queer refugees in the new paradox between the United Nations and the Turkish government and, on the other hand, between the invisibility of the local queer community and the maximum visibility of queer refugees to get minimum rights and

protection.(Being a West Asian Queer Refugee in Canada) Faces multi- marginalization and the clash of identities due to the intersection of race and gender immigration status.

Chapter 3: Methodology. Introducing critical autoethnography as my methodology and the justification for choosing this research method concerning the injustice against West Asian queer refugees and how critical Autoethnography allowed by bringing interpersonal experiences as a vulnerable self to challenge a broader structure of oppression.

Chapter 4: My ethnographic journey. I categorized my life journey in Iran, Turkey and Canada by my interpretation and reflections on living in different states of oppression. In this chapter, I intimately bring the reader to my life and into the scene thoughts, emotions, and actions (Ellis, 2004). I use all my skills to draw a clear image of invisible injustice; therefore, I am a storyteller, researcher, and observer and often express the events as a whistleblower.

Chapter 5. Conclusion, Self-Acceptance. In this chapter, I discuss and introduce ways of resistance in the absence of local or global support. I developed a formula to introduce self-acceptance as a powerful tool against all forms of oppression and rejection. This resulted from inspiration from Buddhist teachings and self-help methods in psychology to transform the force of oppression into liberation and equality.

Chapter 1 Summary:

Chapter 2- Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

Invisibility

Oppression constantly evolves and takes different forms in how to target vulnerable populations; however, not all types of oppression have equal negative impacts on individuals and communities. Before discussing any theoretical framework, I need to explain the nature of invisibility and its continuation throughout my life and many other West Asian queer refugees. This tension between visibility and invisibility as West Asian queer refugees is a constant negotiation depending on the time and place, often internal or external, is reflected as an action or inaction, or it can be in silence or verbalized.

The invisibility of West Asian queer refugees is aligned with the definition of absolute invisibility by Goffman, which explains that invisibility is reproduced by an active "writing out" of the story and which means one's group is not there without the possibility of being and finding themselves "ways to be" or "ways not to be" and with feelings about their self that range "from a whole and usual person, to a tainted, discounted one." (Goffman, 1963.p.3). I lived and experienced the tension between the visibility and invisibility of my sexual identity in at least three countries such as Iran, Turkey, and Canada. I can divide this long journey into three parts and how invisibility takes different shapes:

- Invisible to survive or visibility equals persecution (Iran)
- Visible to get right and protection (Turkey)

- Invisible under new inequalities (Canada)

In each of these stages, as a West Asian queer refugee these societies I never felt that societies gave an opportunity for belonging, inclusion, or acceptance and even upon arrival in Canada, this battle did not end and just took a different shape regarding the injustice, which I will discuss in this chapter.

Queerness at Home (Iran)

Queer people in West Asian countries such as Iran are categorized as subhuman and diseased by the state, and although queer people and especially gays and lesbians are, facing criminalization and the most visible punishments such as execution, whips, and prison yet, the Iranian government denies their existence. This can be introduced as a form of Moral exclusion, which Young considered perhaps the most dangerous form of oppression (Young, 1990). According to Opatow, moral exclusion occurs when individuals or groups are perceived as outside the boundary in which moral values, rules and considerations of fairness apply (Opatow, 1990). Susan Opatow's work also helps in categorizing moral exclusion from mild to severe. Moral exclusion can take the form of genocide, slavery, and a violation of human rights in severe cases. Both minor and severe forms of exclusion deny people their rights, dignity, and autonomy (Opatow, 1990). Upon the theory, I will explain how the government of Iran applies the moral exclusion under systemic denial in all entities, such as the criminal justice system and compulsory military laws, and I will discuss how trans identity and its visibility are being used for the invisibility of homosexuality with the main consequences for the queer community in Iran.

A. Denied Yet Criminalized

The irony of the moral exclusion and systemic denial in Iran against homosexuality is in the criminal code, the punishments of any acts around homosexuality are carefully identified and

criminalized. A lot of details and information for something that the Iranian government denies leave the readers of Iranian criminal codes wondering and conflicted. These offences are so detailed that even talks about the active and passive roles of homosexual men in bed, their backgrounds even, their religion, marital status, presence of a wife or her absence will influence the punishment, in article 234 introduces the conditions of punishments with the translation of these criminal codes is from the Iranian Human Rights Document Center:

Hadd (Islamic methods of punishment) for Livat (Biblical term for men who engage in the same sex act) shall be the death penalty for the active (sexual role) party if he has committed Livat by using force, coercion, or in cases where he meets the conditions for Ihsan; (forgiveness or reduction of punishments) otherwise, he shall be sentenced to one hundred lashes. The Hadd punishment for the receptive/passive party, in any case (whether he meets the conditions for Ihsan) shall be the death penalty. (Iranian Penal Code, IHRDC,2021)

In Articles 235 and 237 explain the ways that two men can have sexual intercourse or intimate such as kissing all have separate criminal offence and punishments “Tafkhiz” is defined as putting a man’s sex organ (penis) between the thighs or buttocks of another male person. A penetration [of a penis into another male person’s anus] that does not reach the point of circumcision shall be regarded as Tafkhiz. (Iranian Penal Code, IHRDC,2021). Criminalization with public execution, the gathering of witnesses and the whole legal process in front of global eyes can be the indirect sign of recognition of homosexuality that the Iranian government strongly resist. Therefore, there is no direct language in the criminalization of homosexuality in the judicial system and court. Instead, there are terms and coding language that uses offences such as “corruption on earth” instead of homosexuality:

Crimes that require Hadd [hudud] punishments include adultery, male homosexuality, lesbianism, sexual procurement, accusations of adultery or homosexuality, use of alcoholic beverages, fighting, corruption on earth, and robbery. corruption on earth among all crimes against Iran's security, waging war on God and corruption on earth, neither of which has been defined by law. However, the charge of "corruption on earth" investigated by Iranian Revolutionary Court where decisions "are left to the discretion of a Revolutionary Court judge. (Iranian penal code, 2021)

Even though homosexuality is punishable by death which comes with all details and conditions in applying the sentence, this criminalization is designed in a way to avoid any admission of homosexuality even as a crime. With this systemic denial in place, it will be significantly difficult to monitor and track the rate of punishments in Iran against gay and lesbian individuals by other human rights international organizations.

B. Trans Visibility, Homosexual Invisibility

After the revolution, the Iranian government created a new interpretation of sexuality by applying trans rights and trans visibility in an effort to convert, deny and render invisible homosexuality. Although, culturally in the country, many struggles to accept transsexuality and trans identity, Iranian leader Ayatollah Khomeini wrote a book in which he stated no religious restriction on corrective surgery for transgender individuals. After, it became the shape of political and legal Islamic order called Fatwa. (Khomeini,1984). Trans visibility is applied in the political form to overshadow the gay and lesbian identity. Recommending gender reassignment surgery in Iran originates from the belief that homosexuality is deviant but that it is possible for a person to be trapped in a body of the wrong sex.



Figure 2. Maryam Mulk-ara from Kaveh Kazemi Blog

Maryam was born in 1950 in the North of Iran. She was the first transsexual in Iran to legally undergo sex reassignment surgery with the permission and authorization of Ayatollah Khomeini. In the early 1970s, Mulk-ara started working at the Iranian National Radio and Television, and she went to work dressed as a woman. Also, by travelling abroad, such as in England and Thailand, she could explore and understand her sexuality better. (Najmabadi, 2013). There is no law criminalizing sex-reassignment surgery (SRS) in Iran. About a decade before the 1979 Iranian revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini stated that SRS was permissible under Shari'a law in practice; however, SRS did not occur in Iran until after Ayatollah Khomeini issued a specific fatwa, or a religious edict, that legalized SRS in 1986. Using the trans identity and visibility against homosexuality and making them invisible is a unique way of denial based on the definition of sexual identity. By the Iranian government, sexualities are divided into Straight and Trans. Transgender individuals, after reassignment surgery, will be accepted legally as good heterosexual citizens in society. Transsexual rights and protection are conditional on completing transition after

sexual reassignment surgery; however, that does not mean that life for transsexual individuals is easier.

Many gay and lesbian individuals were forced to go through sex reassignment surgery by governmental physicians and psychologists who define gender and sexuality under the government's platform. These arms of government give the medical confidence that any identity out of heteronormativity can be fixed in the shape of sex reassignment surgeries. Therefore, the political inclusivity behind trans visibility by religion and law in the Iranian government is not a sign of acceptance, yet it is a distraction for the international community about capital punishment against gay individuals. 6Rang, which means (six colours) in Farsi, referring to rainbow colours, is an Iranian queer advocacy organization established in Europe (The Iranian Lesbian and Transgender Network) suggest that hundreds of individuals are subjected to these operations every year and that 45% of them are not transgender, but lesbian or gay. Moreover, these surgeries "drastically fall short of international clinical standards and often result in long-lasting health complications including chronic chest pain, severe back pain, unsightly scarring, loss of sexual sensation, debilitating infections, recto-vaginal and recto-urethral fistula and incontinence. (Justice for Iran, 6Rang, 2014).

The psychotherapist's role is significant in pushing the government's agenda to eliminate homosexuality. Rehman reports that members of Iran's LGBT community are often advised that their gender nonconformity or same-sex attraction represents gender identity disorder, which necessitates reparative therapies or sex reassignment surgeries to cure them (Rehman, 2020). The role of the healthcare system in general and psychotherapists are to follow the government's ideology and apply these binary ideas of sexuality. Thus, sexual identity is divided into straight and trans, with homosexuality as a nonexistent identity by the government's definitions. This is

evident in the case of Donya reported in BBC news channel. Donya is an Iranian refugee that identifies as a lesbian who lived with her son (who is the result of a brief marriage) and struggled with her sexual identity because of the government agenda toward eliminating gays and lesbians, now she identifies as a lesbian, and in an interview with BBC she says:

Doctors are told to tell gay men and women that they are sick and need treatment, I was under so much pressure that I wanted to change my gender as soon as possible, For seven years, Donya had hormone treatment. when doctors proposed surgery, she spoke to friends who had been through it and experienced lots of problems. She began to question whether it was right for her. Donya didn't have easy access to the internet - lots of websites are blocked. I started to research with the help of some friends who were in Sweden and Norway. (Hamedani, 2014)

The Government of Iran claims that there are no restrictions on medical services and that any treatment is administered with consent. However, it needs to be pointed out that any access to free information about queerness is banned in the country. All sources come from government authorities with their denial of the existence of queerness. Moreover, acceptance, support and guidance are conditional on accepting the government's definition of gender identity that only divided into straight and trans. Without free information and with the imposition of binary identities, the Iranian government cannot claim that the sex reassignment surgery is consenting. The notion of consent is even further challenged by the application of these interventions to individual's underage of 18. The Special Rapporteurs were also concerned about reports that lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender individuals were subjected to electric shocks and the administration of hormones and strong psychoactive medications (Rehman, 2020 paras. 53–54).

C. Diseased and Denied (Mandatory Military and Homosexuality)

Iran is among the countries with mandatory military service but only for men, starting at 18 years old. Individuals can also be exempt if they suffer from a mental or physical illness or disability. Once individuals have the conditions defined by law for the exemption, they are issued a military exemption card, which identifies the reasons by colours or codes on the card. A failure to serve in military without being granted an exemption can result in the government's refusal to grant a driver's license to that individual, revocation of their passport and a ban on them leaving the country without special permission (IHRDC, 2018). The recruitment, registration, and determination of eligibility for compulsory military service in Iran is the responsibility of the Military Draft Board (MDB), which allows this entity to review once again the whole history of the person, such as religion, sex, gender, ability, and illness. Under Iranian law, a designation as a transsexual constitutes a medical and psychological condition that warrants an exemption from compulsory military service (Justice for Iran, website, 2021). The IHRDC [Iran Human Rights Documentation Centre] indicates that some exemptions “on account of physical or mental health problems or disabilities” include “schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, manic-depressive tendencies and other serious mental illnesses” (Article 33, paragraph 8 of this code). Here is another example of the moral exclusion of the Iranian government which only includes gay men and their sexual identities. Individuals who are exempt from compulsory military service are given a card that can be identified as a person with a mental disorder. Therefore, if an individual identified as gay man goes through this process to be exempt from military service, they will be automatically identified as transsexual even if, in the process, psychologist is admitting that the individual is a homosexual. Supposed homosexuality in the reasons for exemption uses the code of mental disorder and individuals will face advanced and updated questionnaires that differentiate the different sexual

identities. If a person shows the elements of homosexuality in the interview with psychotherapists, or the psychotherapists assume the homosexual identity, they will be responsible for recording the information and giving them back to the military board but in the returning documents it will be written as a transsexual.



Figure 3. Military service exemption card from www.baranmoshavereh.com

Homosexual male individuals are given a mental disability card that will often lose many legal rights for an independent life; the result of interviews will be disclosed to the family members via a mail or phone call from authorities regarding the gender identity and sexual orientation of the individuals. If during this process person is identified as transsexual, or the psychotherapist determines it, the sexual reassignment surgery process must start immediately, and the exception of military service will be conditioned to when the process of transition will take place. Recently this disclosure caused the death of a gay man by his family members. Queer activists have blamed Iran's compulsory military service laws and regulations for the alleged 'honour-killing' of the gay, man in the Southwestern Iranian city of Ahvaz on May 4:

Alireza Fazeli-Monfared, 20, was allegedly killed by three male members of his family after they opened a letter from Iran's conscription organization saying he had been exempted from compulsory two-year military service due to his sexual orientation. The card clearly referred to a clause in the law exempting those with "moral and sexual depravities such as transsexualism. (Iran International News Agency, 2021)

D. Consequences

The structure of the invisibility of the Iranian queer community is based on the Iranian government's propaganda against homosexuality is unique because the state uses trans identity with the use of sexual reassignment surgeries in excluding and denying the existence of homosexuality. This is a complex process that, on the one hand, denies the existence of homosexuality and, on the other hand, applies the combination of trans visibility and sexual reassignment surgeries in Iran in a new way of using conversion and correction to eliminate homosexuality. Moral exclusion has been part of the Iranian government's national and international policies. While attempting to push queerness toward invisibility and nonexistence, this process creates "the other," that are eligible for deprivation, exploitation, and other harms that might be ignored or condoned as normal, inevitable, and deserved (Opotow, 2000). With the local and global neglect in recognizing the severity of the oppression, further injustice and invisibility will directly affect the queer community in Iran and other West Asian countries with similar policies. In the Iranian example, queer people are under threat of being assigned to a body that does not belong to them, and this harm cannot be undone. By defining being queer as a medical problem and claiming that any identity that does not conform with heteronormativity can be fixed through sex reassignment surgeries, the Iranian government is essentially erasing the existence of gays and lesbians. Therefore, the political inclusivity claimed for trans visibility by religion and

law in the Iranian government is not a sign of acceptance. However, it distracts the international community from severe moral exclusion and injustice against homosexuality in Iran. Until today, the Iranian government has strongly rejected any agreement or discussion about any accommodation of UN special rapporteurs to directly visit Iran to investigate human rights abuses. These reporters become a bridge between individuals and activists in the home country and international community to collect the data. This is worth mentioning that the Iranian government criminalized this partnership as a crime against the state and treason. By improving access to the internet and social media, in the absence of any accessible source of information and advocacy inside the country, lived experiences and storytelling by many LGBTQ activists and individuals are essential sources of data about the queer community in Iran. These are reflected online on personal social media or through other queer activists who work outside the country. These lived experiences and stories are often reflected in the reports from the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Iran, Javid Rehman (current), Ahmed Shaheed (2011–2016), and Asma Jilani Jahangir (2016–2018). These UN special rapporteurs document all human rights violations in Iran each year and recently dedicated a section exclusively to LGBTQ rights and equality. There are not many studies about the effect of moral exclusion on mental health; however, in the research [Traumatic Stress Among Sexual and Gender Minority Refugees from the Middle East, North Africa, and Asia Who Fled to the European Union] indicates that LGBTQ refugees may be vulnerable to ongoing trauma from, Statistics in the research indicate this creates risks of mental health issues, and moral exclusion is interconnected. Out of the 37 participants assessed for PTSD, 33 (89.2%) reported that their most distressing event occurred before migration (Alessi, Kahn, Woolner, & Van Der Horn, 2018). The only way for queer people to exist is to accommodate and convert to the definitions of sexual identity by the government agendas or leave the country

and become refugees. There are not many ways of resistance in the state of non-existence with this severe oppression. Some will stay in the country and must accommodate the structure of invisibility by the state. This means the participation in society is at the survivor level. Therefore, the queer people in Iran are not only being excluded by the state, but the significant impact of moral exclusion is that individuals exclude themselves (Opatow, 1990). As a result, some have no other option but to leave, flee the country and being a refugee, in this case, is a way of resistance and existence.

In Turkey: Becoming a Refugee

Turkey is a bridge country between Asia and Europe and is considered more economically and politically stable by the region's standards, making it a transit country for refugees. While by comparison with countries outside the region, Turkey can be politically unstable with several coups, the last one was on July 15, 2016, which the military tried to take over the country (BBC news, 2016).

Citizens of several countries are able to visit Turkey without a visa, and by the existing travel agreement between Iran and Turkey, Iranian citizens can cross the border without having a visa (Republic of Turkey website, 2022). Since Iranians do not require to obtain a visa in advance, Turkey became an accessible destination for Iranian asylum seekers. Queer asylum seekers and refugees in West Asia usually choose Turkey as a transit country. Non-European asylum seekers are subjected to two parallel procedures: the request for temporary asylum to the Turkish authorities and the application for the recognition of refugee status to UNHCR (Zieck, 2010). As a result, this process involves the United Nations office in Turkey and the Turkish government, and recently a new organization called ASAM (Association for Solidarity with Asylum Seekers and Migrants), which is a non-profit humanitarian, non-governmental organization concerned with refugees (ASAM website, 2022). In this part, I explain what it means to be a queer refugee in Turkey, which does not support LGBTQ rights. I intend to elaborate on two aspects challenge to queer refugee rights: the tension between the United Nations office in Turkey and the Turkish government and the paradox of visible queer refugees with the invisible Turkish queer community.

A. "Straight until Proven Queer"

Even though several documents like the Yogyakarta Principles in 2006, a terminology defining sexual orientation for queer individuals suffering criminalization and state censorship in their home

countries, many LGBTQ asylum seekers cannot access these documents and their principles. Some discriminatory assumptions and practices toward LGBTQ asylum seekers and refugees further the invisibility of these individuals whose states already deny and criminalize them based on their sexual orientations. The terminology of queer and queerness mostly comes from Europe and North American definitions without considering cultural-linguistic and other barriers to the sexual identity of West Asian queer refugees, especially in the refugee process. (Koçak,2020) Their interpretation and vocabularies are often different and might not be aligned with these documents in their claim under the lenses of immigration and refugee officers. As a result, the standard of queer and queerness for West Asian refugees is being measured by the global north countries and their definitions. Queer refugees must prove their sexuality and gender identities as LGBTQ with well-founded evidence of immediate risks of fear of persecution in their home countries. (Rehaag, 2008). Protection for as queer asylum seekers and refugees depends on a transition from a systemic denial and invisibility to complete force visibility of queer individuals. The state of questioning queerness and proofing sexuality is a new stage for queer refugees that do not have the right to self-determination about one's sexuality now. Also, it points to how these LGBTQ asylum seekers are rendered invisible, discriminated against, rejected, or even deported in the absence of precise language about sexual identity. Even though these interviews are under the supervision of the United Nations, examination of the queer asylum seeker and refugees can be very preformist, stereotypical, and even queerphobic.

There are still some discriminatory assumptions against a West Asian queer refugee that I call "Straight until Proven Queer." This is an unfair and problematic assumption without attention to the challenges of a population after escaping criminalization and punishment. These refugee claim interviews are more like a court hearing in which someone must go through the most intimate and

private parts of their life to get the protection and permission to live like a refugee. This time, the queerness from nonexistence enters the proof state. In the refugee process, any of these steps could not fulfill the narratives of immigration and refugee officers of a country; a queer person can be easily deported without any protection. This is an example of a gay refugee in UN interview:

I was rejected right after the first interview. They told me that I don't look like gay. How should I look like [to pass as gay]? Do I have to act femininely? Because I have a beard and I don't act femininely, they thought I cannot be gay. After the rejection, I appealed the decision. Now I am waiting for the second interview.” (Kara& Çalık, 2016, p 35)

To challenge these assumptions and prevent rejection and deportation, queer refugees came up with a creative solution to create a confirmatory petition for queer refugees that we were not able to convince the UN caseworkers about their queerness; the result was not guaranteed, but grassroots advocacy was significant action at its level in the absence of any support. I know a queer refugee who still lives in Turkey; he got rejected in the UN interview because of his profession as a construction worker and lack of access to advanced language to express and prove his queerness. That is why many other queer refugees, such as his friends, signed a petition to support his claim as a queer person and his risks of deportation. This process took three years to get a review again. Eventually, the UN officers in the second interview accepted that he was gay. Yet, since 2010, still living in Turkey as a refugee without any progress in his application.

B. Paradox of Maximum Visibility for Minimum Protection

Turkey does not have capital punishment against LGBTQ people; it does not mean the Turkish queer community has full access to their rights and freedoms. Although the current Constitution of Turkey guarantees that all individuals are equal without any discrimination before the law, (Constitution of Turkey at Art. 10 1981) has other severe discriminations legitimate by the state.

In the Republic of Turkey, LGBTQ people do not enjoy legal protection from discrimination and abuse.

Same-sex sexual activity is legal in Turkey, but Articles 225 and 226 of the Penal Code on “obscenity” and “indecent behaviour” have been used by prosecutors and judges against LGBTQ people; to reduce the sentences of the individuals who have been found guilty of killing LGBTQ people (Yılmaz,2019). Queerphobia and violence in Turkish politics and laws with the intersection of culture, religion, a tradition created various threats against the Turkish queer community, from losing employment to crimes such as honour killing or death and disappearance of gay and Trans individuals. Based on the ideas of the different political parties and governments, the attacks on LGBTQ rights and equalities will fluctuate. Therefore, even the local Turkish community with no protection is forced to be invisible to survive. This is evident in annual reports of human rights watch about Turkey that concludes: Visibility means violence for queer people. Violence by different entities such as state or non-state players such religious leaders. Therefore, the visibility of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people amid expanding political openness has made them exposed, easy targets of violence. This is only one report Human Rights Watch, in an interview with Dr. Şevki Sözen, in Istanbul University says:

37% reported having undergone physical violence, and 28% reported sexual violence. Among transsexuals, 89% reported physical violence and 52% sexual violence. Among all cases, Dr. Sözen told us, only 42% of victims sought help, and only 26% turned to the police. Less than one-sixth of the latter said that their cases had been adequately addressed by the criminal justice. (Human Rights Watch, 2003)

C. Invisible Turkish queers, Visible Queer Refugees

This instability of LGBTQ rights in Turkey creates a complex relationship between local queer Turkish and other queer refugees. The state's injustices against the Turkish queer community make the queer refugees extremely vulnerable. The Turkish queer community must be invisible to survive the violence and discrimination. In contrast, queer refugees must be in maximum visibility in the United Nations offices to get minimum protection. The queer refugees are exposed in all the refugees' documents and identifications between the UN and Turkish authorities, especially the police. Yet, again outside the United Nations' office, they must hide and live invisible to prevent the violence against them.

Meanwhile, there was an underground alliance and network between LGBTQ refugees and the Turkish queer community. This alliance is something that the Turkish government and other West Asian states are fearful of a potential queer movement and resistance. This underground alliance between the local queer community, queer refugees, and other supporters of LGBTQ rights became the foundation of the most prominent Turkish pride parade in 2015. This unity and expansion of queer social and physical spaces were exemplified on the streets during the LGBTQ pride parades in the heart of Istanbul, which attracted close to 50,000 participants at the last permitted march in 2015. (Özbay, Öktem, 2021). This unity made the Turkish authorities and other political and religious leaders extremely concerned and fearful. As a result, since 2015, each year, the response of the Turkish government to any activity related to the pride parade has been an iron fist that resulted in 373 detainees, by Turkish police. (KAOS, 2022).

D. Queer Refugees and Mental Health

Life as queer asylum seekers and refugees in Turkey comes with enormous challenges in almost all aspects of life, such as legal, political, socioeconomic, and healthcare, which creates bring many vulnerabilities. However, I need to emphasize on the mental health of queer refugees that often get lost, among other challenges. Persecution, multiple exclusion by societies and communities, and the pressure of life as a refugee caused a mental health crisis. Precarious living conditions and the frightening environment have led to psychological problems, which is evident in data from a study by the Helsinki organization in Turkey in 2011 these are some of the main mental health challenges:

- extreme feeling of loneliness and helplessness
- Depression
- Stress
- Suicide
- Isolation

LGBTQ refugees who were reached mentioned the quality of the psychological support they got, 37 percent of them stated that the psychiatrist referred by UNHCR did nothing but prescribe medicine; 36 percent of them stated that the psychological support service provided by ASAM was not adequate and functional while 27 percent of them did not specify from which institution they received support, they stated that the psychological support was insufficient. (KAOS, 2019)

Having access to psychologists and psychiatrists is a long and expensive process between the United Nations and Turkish public health. Psychologists and psychiatrists must know sexual orientation and identity, which makes access to any mental health assistance even more complicated. Thus, the lack of immediate access has significantly cost queer refugees' mental health and their lives in Turkey. Today LGBTQ individuals are Turkey's most marginalized and

vulnerable asylum seekers and refugees (Grungras, Levitan & Slotek, 2009). Even by being a refugee, they are not being protected, and they face violence from other refugees and residents of the host country. Nevertheless, for West Asian queer people, this is the last chance and state of survival after living under severe oppression, systemic denial, and persecution. The obstacles and upheaval of queer refugees cannot be minimized, especially with the fact that many West Asian queer refugees do not have the support of their family, community, or other entities to advocate them. The next step for queer refugees' life is to wait for the third country, which generally includes Canada, USA, and Australia, open to refugees to accept their profile. (Shakhsari, 2014). This is a journey with enormous pain and suffering for many West Asian queer refugees from West Asia to countries like Canada, only based on their sexual identity and rights to exist and live, to be themselves.

In Canada: Being a West Asian Queer Refugee

The dual between invisibility and visibility of West Asian queer refugees will not end once they arrive in Canada. Their struggles with the intersection of race, gender, immigration status, and religion cause more vulnerability and marginalization without any entity specializing in their complex discrimination or advocacy. Thus, their sexual identity and queerness disappear among other new identities produced by Canadian society for this minority, and once again, they become invisible even in a country that supports LGBTQ rights. I intend in this part to briefly discuss the current situation of queer rights in Canada and then draw attention to the life of West Asian queer refugees under multi-marginalization and further vulnerabilities regarding their invisibility in Canada.

A. Contemporary Queer Rights in Canada

By arriving in Canada, I realized that queer inequalities are a global issue that changes forms in different countries from severe to mild but continues to be present and persistent. Despite Canadian laws that promise the rights and protections of LGBTQ people, it does not mean that LGBTQ Canadians are not facing any discrimination. A significant part of the global history of the queer community comes from the discriminatory and exclusionary beliefs that they are not a desirable member of society. They either need to be erased, punished, or converted and corrected to be part of society. Canada's promise to advocate LGBTQ rights and equality is a successful global image; however, at the local level, it is not a secret that conversion therapy and blood ban are still being practiced in Canada. Conversion therapy is a practice that seeks to change an individual's sexual orientation to heterosexual, to change an individual's gender identity to cisgender, or to change their gender expression to match the sex they were assigned at birth. Just recently, the move toward banning these practices took place, and conversion therapy will be a crime punishable by up to five years in prison. (Bill C-4 As of Jan. 7, 2022). Conversion therapy has existed in Canada, in various forms, since the 1950s. During the 1970s, conversion therapy was increasingly used on LGBTQ Canadians in the forms of reparative treatments such as electric shock therapy to hands and genitalia, prescribing psychoactive medication, hypnosis, and masturbation to pictures of the opposite sex (Bieschke, Hardy, Fassinger, Croteau, 2008).

Another concern of LGBTQ Canadians was the blood ban, a public health policy against gay men that still spreads stigma and discrimination with a significant negative impact on queer community in Canada. It was only in December of 2021 that Canadian blood services submit a recommendation to Health Canada to apply other ways of screening the donor's blood regardless of sexual orientation (All Blood Are Equal website, 2021). As I was writing this research, On April

28, 2022, Health Canada approved to use of sexual behaviour-based screening criteria for all donors, regardless of gender or sexual orientation, without discriminatory attitudes in screenings only against gay men. (Canadian Blood Services website, 2022). While these steps are promising actions toward LGBTQ rights, the side effects of these practices will have a lifelong impact on Canada's queer community. These types of policies are not severe as criminalization, such as the death sentence, but without a doubt, they still have the elements of a milder version of moral exclusion that I previously explained such as , "Derogation": disparaging and denigrating others by regarding them as lower life forms or inferior and , "Fear of contamination" perceiving contact with others as posing a threat to one's well-being (Opotow, 1990) which clearly can be found or promote in the ideas behind blood ban in Canada.

For the most part, the struggle of the queer community is a global challenge that is not being eliminated in many societies, even Canada. A clear example of my claim is when I witness queer rights being negotiated around the Canadian elections with strong language and rhetoric often being used against this community, it reminds me that the rights and freedom of queer people are not entirely guaranteed. This constant battle indicates that there are still more works to do toward LGBTQ rights and equality, and mild versions of discrimination are still considered as injustice.

B. Vulnerability of West Asian Queer Refugees

In 2014 when I arrived in Canada as a West Asian queer refugee, and while my queerness was the main reason for my hardships and a long journey of facing inequalities, it became almost lost or the last priority among other new identities. Now I was categorized as a person of colour, Muslim upon my name and country of origin, a refugee, and a visible minority which I still try to understand what it means. These series of new labels and categorizations based on race, gender, immigration status, and sexual orientation are aligned and can be an example of the theory of

intersectionality. Intersectionality is a lens through which you can see where power comes and collides, where it interlocks and intersects. (Crenshaw, 2017). The injustice against West Asian queer refugees is not coming from one course or identity, it comes from a series of new identities at the intersection of each other that make West Asian queer refugees subjected to all discrimination and multi-marginalization based on (race, gender, religion, immigration status ...). The inequalities linked to all these labels make West Asian queer refugees become increasingly vulnerable and invisible, leaving them unprotected and distanced from equality.

C. Why Vulnerable?

First, I need to define the vulnerability and how West Asian queer refugees being from West Asia (region, race), being Queer (sexual identity) and refugee (immigration status) identity are entangled with vulnerability. A vulnerable person can be defined as someone who belongs to a group within society that is either oppressed or more susceptible to harm. Vulnerable persons as persons belonging to populations such as children, senior citizens, low-income workers, and asylum seekers. (Eagly, 2010). By this definition, I now need to explain the nature of the vulnerability of West Asian queer refugees in Canada under the new categories and identities produced by Canadian society.

Vulnerability because of being from West Asia. Coming from West Asia means already these individuals come from one region with significant complex issues such as wars or proxy wars, or constant economic or political conflicts that cause the unpredictability and instability of the region (Petti, 2021) which results in queer rights and freedoms not only cannot flourish at home, yet it is being criminalized, punish, and denied by local governments. Being from West Asia in Canada means being racialized with sets of discriminatory policies based on racial and religious biases especially produced after the 9/11 event and the war on terror and USA exceptionalism that had

its impact and side effect on Canada as well. Therefore, West Asian queer people can be discriminated against by the foreign policies produced by 9/11 and second by the imposed interpretation of queer and queerness in the West that define who is queer and who's not. That is aligned with the idea of Homonationalism by Puar, which refers to the definition of queerness that corresponds with the coming out of the exceptionalism of the American empire, and this brand of homosexuality operates as a regulatory script not only of normative gayness, queerness, or homosexuality but also of the racial and national norms that reinforce these sexual subjects. (Puar, 2018). For instance, a West Asian queer refugee might not identify as a religious person or belong to a specific faith, and while they are very diverse by ethnicity or religion and language, in Canada, the USA or other countries in the West the assumption is queer Muslim is a paradox or too only victims and have nothing to offer (El-Tayeb, 2012). However, now even if they identify as a Muslim queer, the singularity of the Muslim or gay has been amplified in the West since September 11; it cannot imagine someone is gay and Muslim at the same time. (Puar, 2007). These assumptions are wildly being practiced in Canada as a dominant scenario on how the queerness and sexuality of a West Asian refugee can be interpreted. This overgeneralization consequently creates binary ideas that Muslim and queer contradict each other, and West Asian queer refugees must choose one of them.

Vulnerable as Queer. Queer people, even in countries that promise LGBTQ rights and protection, still face discrimination. However, the queerness for a West Asian refugee goes through different processes depending on the society that they will be placed in and the definition of that society about queer and queerness. The queerness of the West Asian LGBTQ refugees in their lives can take shape in several stages:

- Queerness under complete denial and criminalization

- Being queer is something to be converted or corrected
- Queerness must be proved and validated

These discriminatory processes place West Asian queer refugees in further vulnerability without the right to self-determination of one's sexuality, which is being overshadowed by a series of new labels and binary identities that the individual needs to choose from. While queer people globally are still being discriminated against, West Asian queer refugees will be among the most vulnerable within the global queer population.

Vulnerable as a refugee. “Refugees are among the most vulnerable people in the world.” The 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol emphasize that refugees deserve, as a minimum, the same standards of treatment enjoyed by other foreign nationals in a given country and, in many cases, the same treatment as nationals. Just being a queer refugee equals vulnerability. This state of life is not a choice, it is a survival mechanism between life and death only because of one’s sexual identity. This means being a refugee for so many West Asian queers was the only way to live and survive. Being a refugee is a departure from all variations of support from family, community, and country and a new beginning from statelessness. Being a refugee involves with a significant amount of courage and resilience yet is mostly stigmatized in other societies. In addition to all these vulnerabilities, when language barriers, cultural differences, and socio-economical pressure are being added in comparison with other minorities in Canada, I believe a West Asia queer refugee is the body of the vulnerability and perhaps the most vulnerable.

D. Invisible among Visible Minorities

After all layers of the vulnerability of West Asian queer refugees with the intersection of all these identities, it is almost unidentifiable for Canadian laws and society. Canadian laws still categorize the population simply by appearance. This is evident in terms such as visible minorities

in Employment Equity Act which defines visible minorities as "persons, other than Aboriginal peoples, who are non-Caucasian in race or non-white in colour." The visible minority population consists mainly of the following groups: South Asian, Chinese, Black, Filipino, Arab, Latin American, Southeast Asian, West Asian, Korean, and Japanese. (Agocs,2002). While every day, I hear words, expressions, and proverbs in Canadian society condemning categorizing and judgments of people based on appearance as a sign of Canadian culture of multiculturalism and openness to differences, yet this is being promoted by Canadian lawmakers. (Employment Equity Act S.C. 1995, c. 44)

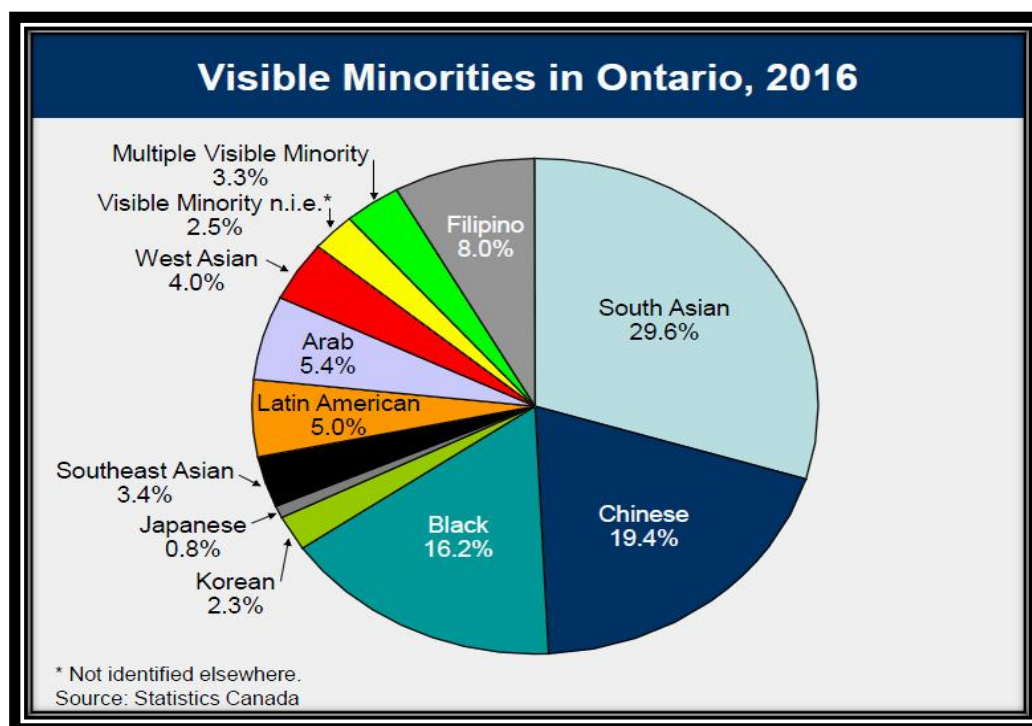


Figure 4. Ontario's visible minorities, Statistics Canada, 2016

United Nations (The Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, 2017) and many others expressed that the term visible minority is a problematic term that does not reflect the reality and experiences of different populations, yet again in the census of 2020, the visible minority being applied as an indicator in the categorization of the Canadian population. By looking at these data

provided by statistic Canada in relation to the issue of invisibility that I am raising in my research, the problem becomes clear in this sense that the West Asian queer refugees can be in the section of West Asia, Arab, multiple minorities. While there is nothing that addresses their queer identity, it is also denying the region's diversity. West Asia includes many diverse populations such as Turks, Kurds, Arabs, and Persians..., and this chart identifies the Arab as a separate identity and places the rest in the same category. Even if we validate this category, how sexual orientation can be recognized or identified and how a West Asian queer refugee is supposed to be counted as a visible minority? This shows how these identifications are inaccurate and overgeneralized. That is why I believe categorization based on appearance creates inaccurate assumptions reflected in terms like visible minorities, which can make some vulnerable populations such as West Asian queer refugees invisible to society.

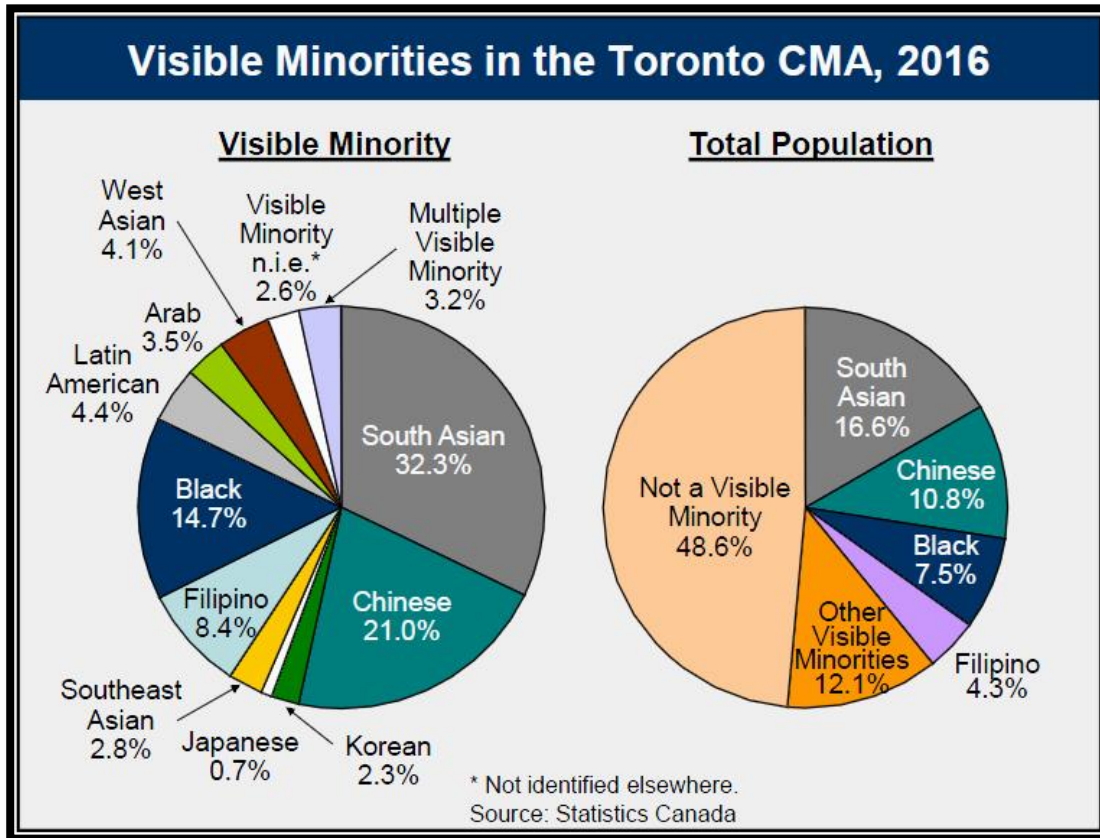


Figure 4. Toronto visible minorities, Statistics Canada, 2016

E. Stigmatized Identities

The sense of invisibility in society comes with visible impacts. Invisibility has taken numerous forms historically, and in all cases, the challenges of isolation, depersonalization, disavowing, and discounting seem present in the lives of the affected individuals. Also comes with consequences such as isolation, sadness, and the loss of self, feeling down, depression, separateness, dissociative behaviour, loneliness, fear, avoidance of self and others, projection outside of self and others, lack of belonging and discounting and denial of self (Williams, 2014). Now, if this result is going to be compared the West Asian queer refugees that are not only in one yet in three different societies who remained invisible; might face even higher severity of these consequences on their lives. These challenges might get more complex when some identities of individuals are stigmatized. Visibility and invisibility of different identities can create a sense of belonging and acceptance or

be a source of rejection and exclusion. Some identities of the West Asian queer refugees, such as their sexual identity (queerness), immigration status (refugee), and race, often stigmatize this population and create further discrimination and place them in the society as “the other.” To clarify more, I am applying Goffman’s theory of stigma and its different types and comparing them with the stigmatized identities of West Asian queer refugees in Canada. Goffman believes stigma can be based on abominations of the body, various physical deformities or based on perceived characteristics of individuals such as weak will, domineering or unnatural passions, treacherous and rigid beliefs, dishonesty, mental disorder, imprisonment, addiction, alcoholism, homosexuality and finally the tribal stigma because of race, nation, and religion, (Goffman, 1974, p12). For the West Asian queer refugees being queer, being refugee, their religion and race are the roots of stigmatization, and this creates tension and a clash of identities based on which identity will be first perceived (visible) and which one will be invisible plays a vital role in rejection and exclusion or inclusion and acceptance. While I believe the visibility of some identities often increases support and a sense of belonging; (for example, the visibility of being gay in the queer community for being part of the LGBTQ community) other identities of the same person can come with rejection and exclusion because of the stigma based on being a refugee, racialization, or religion. Therefore, the tension between the visibility and invisibility of identities of vulnerable populations and how communities and societies perceive them indicates the level of inclusion or exclusion. To examine this idea and the consequences, I would refer to the data and findings in the Toronto serial killer case study.

F. Invisibility and vulnerability (Toronto Serial Killer)

The case study of the Toronto serial killer is a prime example of the intersectionality of different identities that cause the invisibility of vulnerable populations such as West Asian queer refugees

in Canada. In 2017, Toronto gay village found itself dealing with a serial killer who eventually pleaded guilty to eight counts of first-degree murder whose data about the victims were provided by the head of the Toronto Homicide Unit, Hank Idsinga. (Ling, 2020), while some of the family and friends of the victims reported their concerns to the Toronto police in 2010.

The Demographic of the Victims:

Toronto serial killer victims	Countries of Origin
1. Majeed Kayhan	Afghanistan
2. Soroush Mahmudi	Iran
3. Selim Esen	Turkey
4. Abdulbasir Faizi	Afghanistan
5. Skandaraj Navaratnam	Sri Lanka
6. Kirushnakumar, Kanagaratnam	Sri Lanka
7. Dean Lisowick	Canada
8. Andrew Kinsman	Canada

Figure 5. These data provided from the book Missing from the Village by Justin Ling, 2020)

As it appears in the chart, the demographic of the victims shows that most of the victims were from West Asian countries. While every single life of the victims, in this case, is equally valuable and the loss of each life is extremely painful, by creating this chart, I wanted to address the constant misidentification of the victims by many reports that are still calling them as only south Asian queers which is not the origins of all victims and there are at least four of them are from West Asia. This criminal case significantly impacted me and many others because of the similarities of our journey as West Asia queer refugees with the victims. While many news articles focused on the

serial killer and various speculations about his intention in committing the crime. I am not interested in continuing to follow this trend; I intend to honour the lives and stories of the victims and shed light on their vulnerabilities and invisibility. Lack of accountability from Toronto police in search of the missing gay men is evident in the 2021 report by Justice Gloria J. Epstein:

With the high numbers of missing person cases in Toronto and around the world, it is remarkable that so little evidence-based research in Canada has been done on risk assessment in missing person cases. We know that marginalized and vulnerable community members go missing in disproportionate numbers, and we know that certain community members, by nature of their personal identifiers or environmental factors, are at heightened risk. (Missing and Missed, 2021, p 69)

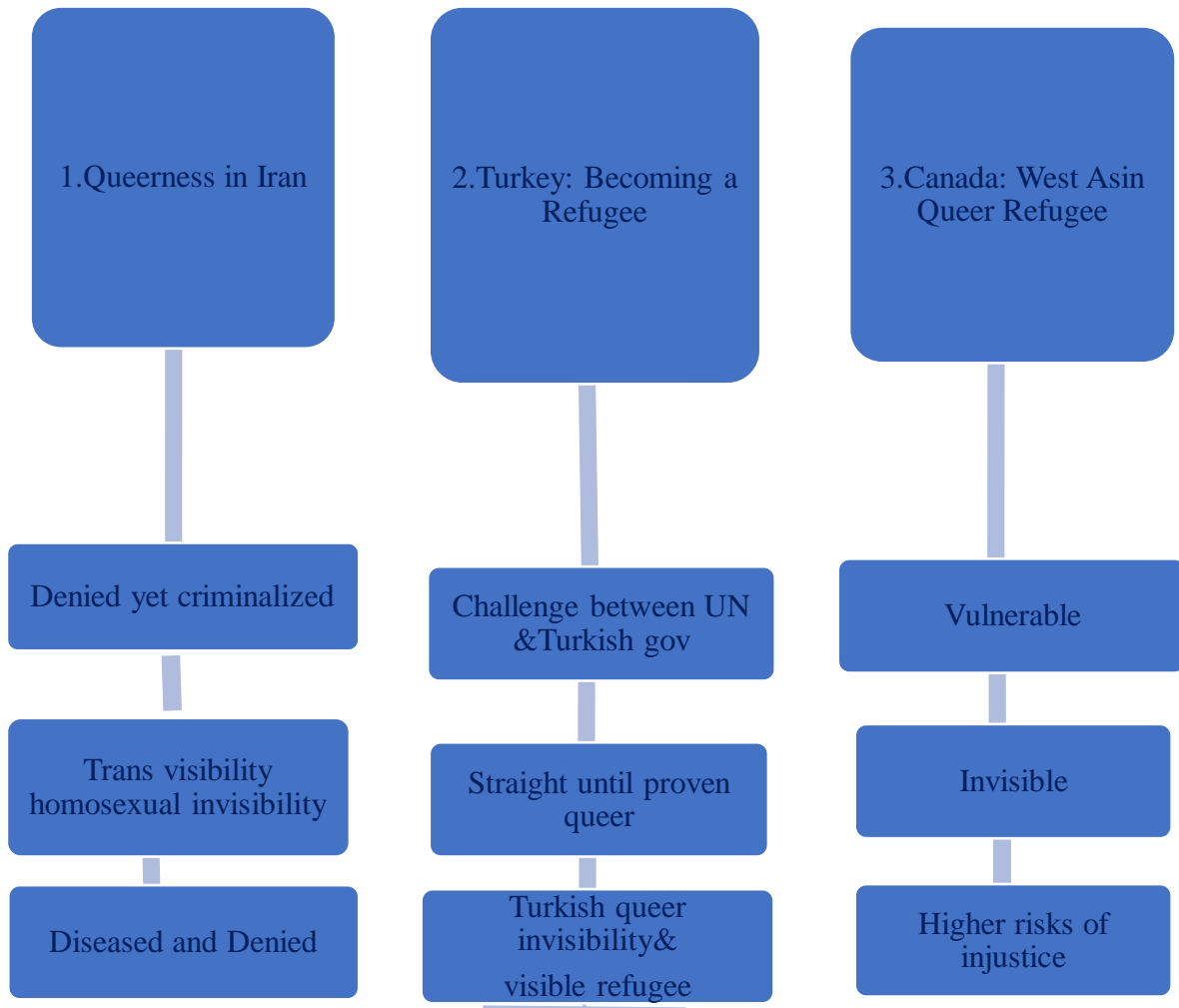
Even though Canada has many cases of missing persons, yet there are minimal steps taking place to address this issue. Because of that, I believe these dismissals and denial of these cases are because of the vulnerable population invisible to Canadian society. Suppose it was not about Andrew Kinsman (a Canadian white gay man) and the support of his family and community that pressured the Toronto police. In that case, the serial killer could continue hunting other queer people. It was pointed out by some queer activists in Toronto that believed the heightened attention by the police appeared to give to the disappearance of Andrew Kinsman, the only white man among the six men reported missing and after those police seriously investigated the other missing men cases. Police investigations were delayed for excessive time under so many denials and dismissals compared to other missing cases, especially non-racialized persons. This failure to share operational matters that potentially impact its reputation or its relationship with diverse communities and on-Board policies or appropriate advice or direction to the chief represents a serious systemic issue. (Missing and Missed, 2021, p11). Also, because of the sexual identity of

the victims as gay men, the West Asian or Muslim community in Canada, did not get support or enough attention. Muslims in Canada are already under systemic discrimination and are increasingly at the risk of hate crimes declared by the Canadian government in the London, Ontario incident is one example of it: On June 6, 2021, four members of the Afzaal family were killed while they stood on the sidewalk at the intersection of Hyde Park Road and South Carriage Road in London, Ontario the members of a Muslim family who police say were intentionally struck down by a vehicle in a hate-motivated attack over the weekend (McInnes, CBC News,2021). Therefore, based on this case study, and the treatment of the cases of 4 West Asian queer victims in Toronto serial killer case, I believe can be counted as an example of multi-marginalization. The West Asian queer victims in this criminal case were lost in the process of Otherism that is taking place in Canada against Muslims which Razack calls “Casting Out” with underline that the eviction of Muslims from the political community is a racial process that begins with Muslims being marked as a different level of humanity and being assigned a separate and unequal place in the law (Razack,2008, p5). Lack of support and extension of exclusion and denial by the Muslim or West Asian communities themselves, within Canada can be evident by comparison of reactions and coverage of the Toronto serial killer with the Quebec Mosque shooting in 2017. That is another example of the extension of exclusion and discrimination outside the home country that occurs in Canada. Because of the established and organized Muslim advocacy organizations in Canada and its political currency in Canadian society, this case got attention and coverage, and the lives of victims are annually remembered.

While the public idea around the victims of the Toronto serial killer is lost, on one hand, Canadian society is still focused on the characteristic of the serial killer and not the victims even though a new tv series on Netflix (Catching Killer,2022) and on the other hand by Muslim

Canadians which until today there is are official statements coming from any West Asian religious communities in Canada in support of the queer victims. This criminal case is being underestimated in Canada while this is a national tragedy that exposes vulnerability and invisibility linked to the multi-marginalization of the population, such as West Asian queer refugees which places them at a higher risk of discrimination. That is why I believe the invisibility of the vulnerable population is the highest level of injustice. Without serious steps toward recognizing these realities in Canada, no one can guarantee that this discrimination and horrific crime will not repeat itself.

Chapter 2 Summary:



Chapter 3- Methodology

Introduction

Critical autoethnography as a methodology and political orientation of praxis is ideally suited to raising issues of the invisibility of West Asian queer refugees. This is because there are not many studies about this population and if there is literature usually is not the reflection of our stories as West Asian queer refugees. Therefore, as I am exposing the injustice, it will be included with defining and analyzing the invisibility from the perspective of a West Asian queer person through a critical autoethnography. It is an action toward an epistemology of and producing knowledge and awareness about a population that has been neglected for so long and an invitation to other West Asian queer people to break the silence.

This chapter provides a research design, procedures utilized, and the rationale for this study. I reiterate the research questions and why I chose critical autoethnography as my methodology, its relations with characteristics of discrimination as a West Asian queer refugee, research aims and the study's design, including data collection and data analysis. I will conclude with a discussion of limitations and concerns about the validity and generalizability of this study.

Research questions?

I navigated this research in each step with these questions in my mind about myself and other West Asian queer refugees:

- i) What are the reasons behind the invisibility?
- ii) What are the consequences of this invisibility?

These questions became the roadmap and a mind organizer throughout this study. It should be noted that the journey of West Asian queer refugees from West Asia to Canada takes place in different settings in several countries, under various laws and policies, often national and some international causes transitioning into different forms of injustice in each stage that impact the

West Asian queer refugees. For example, I could not think about my journey without considering other concepts such as legal systems, cultures, different societies, queerness and queer theory, rejection and inclusion, diversity, and emotional well-being. Therefore, based on these complexities and various issues that West Asian queer refugees face from home countries to Canada, it could not be explained by only one discipline. It needed to be addressed in an interdisciplinary approach in qualitative research with critical autoethnography. I decided to conduct my study and examine the invisibility of West Asian queer refugees in these three disciplines:

- Law (Immigration and Refugees laws)
- Sociology (invisibility of West Asian queer refugees and inclusion, integration in Canada)
- Psychology (impact of injustice on mental health and ways of empowerment)

The decision about qualitative research is based on the nature of discrimination against West Asian queer refugees, which is untold, unknown, and ignored under oppression. Through qualitative research, I intended to challenge the structure of oppression and find meaning in the everyday struggles that West Asian refugees are facing. A qualitative researcher explores how people construct, interpret, and make meaning of their lived experiences. (Denzin, Lincoln, Giardina, 2006). As a West Asian queer refugee, a significant part of my life, became a product of my lived experiences facing different forms of oppression. Therefore, I need a framework to depict my everyday life under multi-marginalization and how I am breaking them, and that is why critical autoethnography is being decided as my research method to expose and reflect on injustice as an active methodology (Dey, 2002) which means not only I conduct research, but it is part of the continuation of my queer activism, or known by indigenous scholars, research as “Anti-oppressor”

(Moosa-Mitha, 2005, p,37) and by claiming my story in the space of resistance is something that no oppressor can take it away from me.

Critical Autoethnography

Autoethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience to understand the cultural experience, and this research methodology is a political, socially-just, and socially conscious act (Ellis, 2004). Autoethnography is becoming a particularly useful and powerful tool for researchers who deal with human relations in multicultural settings, With The main benefits such as: being researchers and readers friendly; it enhances cultural understanding of self and others and creates a coalition of self and others for transformation (Chang,2008). The critical lens will be adopted to open a space of resistance between the individual and the collective (Holman Jones,2016) and it is about connecting the interpersonal experiences of race, gender, sexuality, and ability to the larger systems of power, social privileges, and oppression, (Orbe, Boylorn, & Ellis, 2013).

In my critical autoethnography, because the nature of injustice against West Asian queer refugees, exposing, and emboldening the lived experiences through storytelling is essential in depicting the impacts of injustice. I believe mundane everyday life is a podium that simultaneously shows the problem and progress of justice and equality in different societies. With critical autoethnography, I critically self-reflect and analyze the invisibility of West Asian queer refugees exposing my vulnerable self, who seeks to describe personal experiences to understand the structure of injustice. I believe various forms of oppression against West Asian queer refugees have been targeting the sense of self and personhood of this population, by the investment of the self and self-representing makes a self-reflective method of knowledge-making and understanding of the everyday world more compelling as someone who is positioned to have experienced and is

experiencing the consequences of living from certain social juxtapositions (Visano, 2005). Therefore, from this point of view, gathering stories like mine and others will identify and expose the problem (invisibility) as different pieces of the puzzle and challenge the power and other institutions to demand action and change (progress). Once again, the same everyday lived experiences can indicate progress when they are identified and studied. This research, with a critical autoethnography on the one hand, helps the West Asian queer refugees to have a voice and find each other while filling the gaps in understanding the injustice for the audience in academia and the rest of society.

The storytelling of the complex lived experience of West Asian queer refugees is a powerful tool to break the invisibility and multilayered injustice. Thus, storytelling is not just a story but a resistance mechanism in front of oppression. There are several reasons that I think critical autoethnography allowed me to make this study possible around these four areas:

- My story as a survivor is my only belonging as an instrument of resistance.
- Combining all my selves (poetic, legal, storyteller and analytical).
- Characteristics of the injustice.
- Readiness to relive past traumas and resist present injustices.

As oppression being extended parallel with the risk of exposure of stories for this population, I decided to first accept all the risks and be prepared mentally and emotionally for such a study that needs a fair amount of readiness toward the reflection of hardship challenges and often traumas of a journey as West Asian queer refugee. There are some studies on Syrian refugees and their ability to reflect on traumatic events that have shown that the impact of traumas and how it will impact their worldviews is a precursor to cognitive processing aimed at reappraising shattered cognitions (Matos, Água, Sinval, Park, Indart, & Leal, 2022) and even though this findings was not

specifically on the queer refugees but by the comparison, it could be understood that a queer refugee also could face similar or even more challenges facing and reliving past traumas through research, and this was something that was part of my concern not asking for broader participants for my study. This method needs a readiness of emotions to relive the experiences, which for a vulnerable population might not be easy to participate in research that needs the intimate reflection of prior events. If they struggle to get access to support in overcoming the impact of oppression, it might put them at risk mentally and emotionally to relive the experiences and discrimination to reflect it in research and even a small risk is a significant burden for the researcher.

In addition, several obstacles, such as hesitancy and fear of disclosing sexual identity for many West Asian queer members, are present even in countries like Canada (Missing and Missed report, 2021, p 64), which makes conducting a study challenging. Oppression against the West Asian refugees in Canada will not be eliminated yet it extends itself. Exposing the discrimination is considered a crime against the West Asian states. These states, such as Iran, threaten activists abroad and stop them from expressing their opinion that might be against the states' agendas. Recent targets reported by Human Rights Watch, Iranian researchers and journalists, policy analysts, and human rights defenders subject to a social media campaign filled with harassment, misinformation, and slander (Human rights Watch, 2021) or in another report on 26 July 2022 by the International Federation for Human Rights raised concerns about threats against activists outside Iran who have relied on the social media platform to carry out their critical work on women's issues and LGBTQ rights (FIDH, 2022). As a result, by increasing these threats by home states conducting research regarding populations such as West Asian queer refugees come with its risks and few people are willing to be a researcher or participate in these types of studies.

Why My Story?

From West Asia to Canada, with all complexities of the oppressions that I have faced, I am at the intersection of several identities that give me this capability for a broader understanding and reflection on oppression and injustice. As an autoethnographer, I claim my space as a queer man of colour who spent more than 15 years of life in queer rights and advocacy with studies in Islamic judicial laws and human rights, multilingual and multiracial origin with intimate familiarity with West Asia and Canada. Also, I conducted this research as someone who was persecuted, became a refugee and embodying a different minority (sex, race, gender, religion, immigration status). While I was the only participant/researcher in this study, I do not claim it is all the story and complete image of what is happening. I am only a small part of the missing puzzles regarding the injustice against the West Asian queer refugees.

Research Aim: Visibility and Creating Community

This project aims to provide the background necessary for a more comprehensive response and different measures to extend the protection for vulnerable minorities such as West Asian LGBTQ refugees in Canada. This study tries to raise awareness about this population's injustice and the assumptions and binary ideas about their sexuality and queerness that limit their right to self-determination of one's sexual identity. This will be a platform to help the West Asian queer refugees to be bold and equal participants in Canadian society. As I mentioned in my last chapter of the research visibility of West Asian queer refugees makes creating a community and unity possible. I had in my mind applying critical autoethnography as an invitation to do so. Autoethnography thus not only facilitates community-building research practices and makes possible opportunities for cultural and social intervention (Pensoneau-Conway, Bolen, 2014). This study is a step toward opening a door for future complex studies upon the findings to maximize

the visibility and protection of LGBTQ refugees in Canada and prevent further injustice and inequality.

Design of the Study

In front of the enormous injustice against West Asian queer refugees can be my lifetime commitment, and perhaps it will not be sufficient; however, as a MA student of Interdisciplinary Studies, I was limited in two years study full time, so I developed the research strategy to predominantly focus on the (invisibility) I divided and organized my studies through several stages:

1. Identifying invisibility as a common issue and threat entering the research. Developing the research question, I determined to find answers to What are the characteristics of discrimination against West Asian queer people? Why does this population remain invisible in Canada despite the most visible discrimination against them at home or in Canada? How does this invisibility place them at higher risks of vulnerability and discrimination?
2. Gathering and organizing all my documents related to persecution, asylum seekers, refugees, settlement papers, blogs, articles, pictures, major books, and peer-reviewed journals were analyzed by identifying relevant theories and concepts with interpretive insights related to my experience.
3. Writing my story and experiences in a separate chapter (chapter 4), in a periodic fashion throughout of my journey from Iran to Turkey, then to Canada.
4. Analyzing the lived experience in my research, parallel with existing literature or emphasizing aspects that are neglected in the studies and research about the West Asian queer refugees.

5. Using the case study of (the Toronto serial killer) to expose the issues to the Canadian audience and readers from the perspective of West Asian queer person.
6. Finding meaning and offering a platform based on self-acceptance to break the invisibility

Data Collection

The data collection process was under the structure and purpose of a critical autoethnography as a research method. The data can be divided into personal and public or from official or non-official sources. The use of textual artifacts by their varieties which could be officially produced documents and personal, whether formal or informal and its importance in the research and as Chang explains:

Some artifacts are text-based and others contextual. Living in a text-oriented society, you find ample textual artifacts that enhance your understanding of self and the context of your life. The textual artifacts include officially produced documents and personal, whether formal or informal, texts written by you or about you or your cultural contexts. (Chang, p, 107)

In the process of collecting data, I was constantly in the comparison of past and present events, memories, news, and other sources related to my journey as a West Asian queer refugee in Canada. This is how I collected and categorized my data:

- Personal memory
- My personal notes, predominately electronic notes.
- My official documents such as landing paper,by different states laws
- United Nations reports
- My articles that were published in different magazines

- Poetry (some published and some not)
- Contents of my Blogs and an Admin of the page (Homosexuality and Law)
- Other pieces of literature as my Secondary data related to the research

Personal memory :Before arriving in Canada, as an advocate by nature, I was keen and sensitive to the news and events and any development about LGBTQ rights and especially West Asian queer people, and as I stated, my activism in Iran was the beginning of developments and access to of social media which allowed me to have access to a significant amount of my data that was documented electronically through my digital accounts.

The use of personal memory in my research was accompanied by electronic memory and storage as a complementary and confirmatory to my own personal memory. Also, because of the significant pressure, distress, and challenges during my journey from West Asia to Canada, it was not a process that could be easily forgotten. I am aware that different times and places can change the sharpness and harshness of the events in my memory, but many of my life events are remained fresh and vividly present in my memory to this day and perhaps for the rest of my life.

Documents Official and non-official Documents: Another point that I need to mention is because of my queer activism and journalism, a big part of my journey was documented in different shapes, such as legal articles, poetry, and admin of a blog (Homosexuality and Law), also as an asylum seeker and refugee different entities as United Nations and Turkish government monitors any activity and mobility of refugees that are all documented, which I used in my research. My documents are in various languages, Farsi, Arabic, Turkish and English. Documents were closely analyzed and provided a great deal of information. Some of the articles that I published that were written in Farsi included legal articles about LGBTQ rights and poems in the Art and Literature

part in the “Radio Zamane” website and “Cheragh Magazine” in Canada. These are some of the examples of the documents that I used in my research:

Images and videos: The use of cell phones and access to cameras allows many people to document their lives in different forms and shapes through images and videos. The camera is becoming an increasingly popular research tool in the social sciences, and tape recorder film and videotape equipment can capture details that would otherwise be forgotten or go unnoticed (Fairclough, 2018).

Works of literature as secondary data: After my personal data and documents, there were other public documents, such as significant texts and peer-reviewed journal articles even in Canadian news media, that were crucial to the development of this critical autoethnography. For instance, collecting information about the Toronto serial killer case and official reports regarding the victims’ backgrounds. Having access to other pieces of literature as a source of data enables the researcher to contextualize the personal story within the public history and gives autoethnography an identity as the social science research, intersecting the subjectivity of the inner world with the objectivity of the outer world. (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011). I drew connections between these documents and my lived experiences also during these years in closely followed the development of this criminal case and the impact it had on the West Asian queer refugees in Toronto and Canada.

Data Analysis

After gathering all sources of data through all the documents for this study, the next step was to understand the invisibility of West Asian queer refugees through understanding and reflecting on my own experience to connect my interpretations to a broader population who have similar lived experiences. Thus, first, I started to write a chapter related to my own autoethnographic journey based on the structure of my methodology, in which the storytelling is the foundation of

conducting a critical autoethnography. After finishing my chapter with some personal data that I gathered and categorized, I started the process of addressing my research problem and analyzing it, which was evolutionary stages with the constant connection and reflection between myself and others. The processes of analysis, and evaluation, are neither terminal nor mechanical, qualitative research is endlessly creative and interpretive. The researcher does not just leave the field with mountains of empirical materials and easily writes up his or her findings. (Denzin, Lincoln, 2008, p14). The next stage was to search for other pieces of literature related to West Asian queer refugees to eventually attempt to create a theory. Analyzing the data in autoethnography is a Product and Process. (Ellis, Adams& Bochner,2011, p1).

- Process: Seeing, witnessing, observing the injustice.
- Product: exposing, defining, problematizing the invisibility.

In different stages of my analysis, I applied strategies for data analysis inspired by Chang's guidance in autoethnography data analysis (Chang, 2008) These are some of the I used the steps mentioned below in relation to my research:

- Identifying: themes and patterns.
- Comparing oneself with other people's cases; contextualize broadly.
- Comparing the social science in constructing the ideas.
- Framing theories.
- Connecting the present with the past.

Personal narrative: First, I wrote my personal narrative, which is my story of the interaction of different entities that I encountered, which impacted me as a West Asian queer refugee in different societies in the critical autoethnographic style. My personal narrative it is organized chronologically based on my journey from Iran to Turkey and then Canada, which started in 2012.

I applied the maximum use of any documentation that I had, from official to non-official, my court documents, my refugee documentation and even copy of hospital bills and prescriptions that were reflections of my life from West Asia to Canada. This self-narrative Although focused on my journey, I am in the direct and consistent connection with other West Asian queer experiences to achieve a broader understanding than myself. As a result, my personal narrative does not exclude others, yet it intimately involves, invites, and includes different voices in my own story.

Self-observing and self-reflecting: Because I was dealing with the invisibility of myself first and most, I needed to fully emerge in my own observation process and how I was treating and reacting to the visibility and invisibility of my sexual identity in different circumstances that I have faced. By my own self-observing allows me to be seen and see others as well in the frameworks of an auto-ethnographic study. The individual observer is permitted and encouraged to be free to be involved in the observation process completely uncluttered by theoretical rules and regulations on what is to be seen and how the “seeing” does not mean no rules (Dey,2002). My personal narrative and observation were constructed based on the three main stages that I had experienced and lived as a West Asian queer, which are:

- As a queer person in Iran
- As a queer refugee in Turkey
- A West Asian queer refugee in Canada

I analyzed all three major events with triggering feelings, reactions, and meanings to find common themes and patterns. Through each stage, I asked what happened, why, and how did it impacted me and compared it with others with similar experiences. I believe there is a meaning behind the challenges of West Asian queer refugees that need to be heard and exposed to the rest of society. “Interpretation involves making sense of the data” (Creswell, 1998, p195). Interpretation of my

findings is based on the invisibility in three societies, cultures, events and perspectives about queer and queerness and the clash of all identities with constant loss and gaining a new identity, influenced by culture, religion, immigration, and refugee laws by different entities such as Turkish government United Nation and the Canadian government.

Developing Theory

I tried to develop and create a theory to guide my study and summarize my research purpose, which can be a road map without losing the research focus. Finding key themes connected and confirmatory works of literature generated a theory by connection to the existing data and pieces of literature; the theory emerged from all critical lenses that I used in my autoethnography such as:

- Queer theory
- Race theory
- Moral exclusion
- Intersectionality
- The theory of stigma (Goffman)

The first commitment of critical autoethnography is to explore the dynamic relationship between theory and story (Adams & Jones,2018). Theory asks about and explains the nuances of an experience and the happenings of a culture; a story is a mechanism for illustrating and embodying these nuances and happenings. Because theory and story exist in a mutually influential relationship, the theory is not an add-on to the story. “Theory is a language for thinking with and through, asking questions about, and acting on the experiences and happenings in our stories” (Holman Jones,2016, p 229). Therefore, I challenged all injustices, inequalities, and assumptions against West Asian queer refugees under multilayered oppression, their vulnerability and invisibility can produce this theory that (Invisibility of vulnerable populations is one of the highest

levels of injustice) to explain a social and personal phenomenon of invisibility of West Asian queer refugees.

Ethical Concerns and Limitations

For any project, there are concerns and limitations that researchers might face; I am aware that my study was only one story. Although my critical autoethnography is an important instrument which allowed me to expose an unknown and invisible injustice against West Asian queer refugees, they are a diverse population in race, religion, nationalities and, without any doubt, with a variety of perspectives about the experience of a queer refugee and battle of visibility and invisibility of their sexual identity. Thus, with this diversity, many others might have a different interpretation of the events they experience. This study might be so little regarding the severity and complexity of the discrimination; however, my goal is to open the dialogue, depicting and verbalizing this multilayered oppression by invitation for other West Asian queer refugees to share their insight and create a place to reflect.

One of the criticisms of autoethnography and studies such as mine is the excessive focus on self in isolation from others; (Chang,2008). While I used the first person, the use of the first person in my research is an inclusive approach in the space of oneness for accountability, ownership of the experiences in the path of self-determination, and not self-centred. That is why in one chapter, I explained my own personal narratives about my journey, while from the beginning, I had in my mind to use my own voice and story as an inclusive approach to engage and include other West Asian queer voices as well. Another concern is the exclusive reliance on personal memory, especially in my case that is happening in different settings and at least three countries that I have lived which I tried to gather as much as possible to bring official or non-official documents

attached in support of my personal memory claims and finding accompanied with other related pieces of literature.

Regarding the generalizability and validity of my study, after finishing my research, I intent to present my finding in the presence of other West Asian queer refugees to open the dialogue and be open to the different perspectives I may encounter while presenting my research in public settings. In autoethnography, the focus of generalizability moves from respondents to readers and is always being tested by readers as they determine if a story speaks to them about their experience or about the lives of others they know; it is determined by whether the specific autoethnographer is able to illuminate general unfamiliar cultural processes (Ellis & Ellingson, 2000). It should be noted that I did not allow the concern about the generalizability and validity of my story and research to stop me from conducting this study. The urgency of addressing the issue of invisibility of West Asian queer refugees taught me that perfectionism would stop me from addressing the injustice. I confronted myself with all my limitations but did not use them as an excuse to stop the development of this study and other similar attempts for research.

This is a lifelong commitment toward the visibility and equality of West Asian queer refugees and other queer refugees that face similar injustice. However, I was limited to the timeline of my graduate program Interdisciplinary Studies for two years. I did not receive a major scholarship in my two years of studies, and therefore, with all vulnerabilities that I have (social, economic, and emotional) in addition to the global pandemic, I managed to not give up and continue my journey toward the path being the change that I want to see and take further steps toward the creation of external aspects and impacts around me for other queer refugees.

After All, Life As An Activist

Any step toward the empowerment of West Asian queer refugees outside their home countries is being considered a threat by their states. Visibility and speaking up about the experiences of the West Asian queer refugees come with consequences even outside the home countries. Even I often find myself fearing for my safety and the safety of people close to me when I try to expose my story. Oppressions from the home country to Canada often have a parallel relationship that often extends to each other. Local governments closely monitor activists and queer activists in other countries. There is a great deal of concern about the safety and security of West Asian queer refugees which limits or prevents their visibility because of the risk that might bring on the individuals, their families, and people close to them. I realized that the conflict between visibility and invisibility of my sexual orientation is not completely resolved, even with access to rights and laws that protect me in Canada.

Activism toward the rights of West Asian queer refugees is increasingly difficult, especially with the absence of recognition or lack of action locally and globally about the injustice against this population. The ironic situation of being a West Asian queer refugee who wants to be visible and free is while being oppressed and denied, our lives are linked to many regional and global policies that come with direct impacts on our daily lives, even in a country like Canada. The internal battle of visibility and invisibility of a queer person based on the time and place is a draining process, and the level of visibility is being decided between the amount of protection in Canada and the sharpness of threats from the home country, which define the space for a West Asian queer people who want to have a voice. These are all reasons that place the West Asian queer refugees at a higher chance of discrimination that I tried in this and other chapters to explain that creates further obstacles and distance to justice, visibility, and equality for this population.

With my background in queer activism, pressure and forces still cause second thoughts and negotiations about my sexual identity and how and where I can express it.

In summary, to break the cycle of invisibility and unknown discrimination against West Asian queer refugees, critical autoethnography was a framework and research method that allowed me through my story and expose my vulnerable self, make the invisible visible and be a voice for the voiceless. In the chapter on methodology, I explained the evolution of the qualitative research method process; I started with a personal narrative and told my personal narratives for two purposes to understand the self while understanding and relating to others with similar stories. Then starting the data collection and data analysis in forming a theory regarding discrimination against West Asian queer refugees that invisibility of vulnerable population is one of the highest levels of injustice, Also I explain the concern about generalizability and validity of my study, with the hope that even critics about my work help them open the discussion about the struggles of West Asian queer refugees.

Chapter 3 Summary:

Introducng critical autoethnogrphy

Research questions: why invisible and reasons behind it.

**Critical autoethnography and chractriscts of the injustice
agaist West Asin queers**

**Why my story? reflectin with legal background , poet and
activism**

Research Aims: creation of sense of viisblity and community

Research design: steps based on the methodology

**Data collection
personal memory , offical and non offical documents...**

Data analyst: self reflectin and narratives

Limitations

Poem 2:

Chapter 4- My Journey
Island of the "Self"

I gambled on life and death
from all sides bombard of Threats
your wars are just a noise
I dropped the sword
put all angels and demons to rest

peacekeeper of the fight no one can afford
All these fears were just illusions
being a victim was your conclusion
building a home from ashes was the only solution
never be a bagger of inclusion
I found the island of the "self."

here I am with no time and place
mother nature is in my defence
Nothing left for you to take
everywhere I go I am free from all risks
even in your little box I still Survive like a Contortionist

Mehdi Ghorbanizadeh

Introduction

In 2007 All local and international news covered the speech of the president of Iran, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, at Columbia University, saying: "In Iran, we don't have homosexuals like in your country. In Iran, we do not have this phenomenon. I do not know who has told you that we have it." (Hond, 2007). This much ignorance was unbearable to me. The denial was not only by President Iran but by the rest of the society. The systemic denial is officially being declared against the queer community on the local and global stage. I felt humiliated and invisible.



Figure 6. Ahmadinejad's speech in Colombia University, From Daniella Zalcman ,2007

The injustice against the queer community in Iran is at its extreme level, which includes all institutions, from family to government. I believe this is one of the highest levels of injustice that when you are in front of society, yet society denies your existence. In this chapter, a West Asian queer refugee and one of the few people who fully lived and experienced all levels of oppression

and intent to tackle the injustice, I will elaborate on my journey and my battles against discrimination based on my sexual identity as a queer man in three parts: Iran (country of origin), Turkey, and Canada.

Part 1. Iran

As a child, I felt different and could often see myself with same-sex attractions; however, I did not have any language or even imagination about being gay. It was like carrying a dark secret. For most of my adolescent years, I thought I was the only one in the world with these thoughts and desires. There was not any information about homosexuality. All I knew was the stories from some religious leaders and teachers about the prophet Lot mentioned in the Quran, which said same-sex desire is punishable by God to death by “shower of stones of clay” (Surah Adh Dhariyat, verse 33, Quran).

When I was in middle school was the beginning of the internet era in Iran, with minimal access to dial-up internet connections in the city. However, my family illegally had access to satellite TV to international tv channels in the region and Europe. That was my window to the world and the beginning of discovering that other people like me were there. I was already in multiple minorities. One because of being in an ethnic minority [from an Arab father] second, I am a gay man in Iran.

This is my reality, my lived experiences that have not been seen or heard yet, and the side effects of these discriminations live with me. As a homosexual man, you are under severe systemic denial to the extent that queer individuals face an existential crisis. Many times, I asked myself do I exist? Is there anyone else like me? I wanted to scream that I am here, we are here, we matter. These events made me more rebellious and determined to come out to people around me slowly.

A. Coming Out

Coming out is significantly difficult and different in West Asian countries because of the risk and danger of exposing sexual identity to others. In the simplest terms, coming out has been defined as the public sharing of one's sexuality (Waldner and Magruder,1999). However, by considering the consequences of disclosing the sexual identity to society, I find this definition more aligned with my coming out experiences. The social, psychological, or political process and the act of recognizing and acknowledging a sexual or gender identity within oneself and disclosing this to others. (Bell,2013). Although some West Asian countries are witnessing very little progress, toward understanding LGBTQ rights, by no means has that created a path to equality and justice. From my experience, there are several scenarios when a queer individual tries to come out in the West Asia:

- Coming out means applying for a death sentence by family, community, or government.
- Coming out will be ignored and denied.
- With rare exceptions coming out will be accepted and supported.

I had several coming-outs throughout my life, First to my sister, then to my brothers. Still, it took so much longer for me to come out to my parents because of the religion, culture, traditions and, most importantly, systemic denial. The hesitation was because I knew there were no resources to get help, therapy, or consultation. Also, I often think some parents, like my parents, did not want to experience being minoritized due to having a gay son. The impact of systemic denial is so embedded in society. For instance, even when I explained my sexual identity to some of my friends and family members, they pretended that they did not hear me the next hour or the next day. I have observed several times that some people even changed their Tv channels if the topic was related to the queer community.

I think denying reality was one way of coping with fear-based ideas about my queer and queerness by people around me. Systemic denial does not allow the growth of anything related to queerness, such as questions, language, or any other thoughts; all will dry before blossoming in our minds. It was not until recent years that I was able to feel free and liberated by talking openly about my sexuality. In the past, each time I came out to people around me, it wasn't a sense of celebration; it was more of a loss and finding myself in a state of nothingness.

B. Starred Student

Higher education within Iranian society and government has always been defined as a source of power and privilege. Yet if an individual's ideas or actions are not aligned with the governmental agendas, in that case, the advantage of higher education will be taken away. The system of exclusion and depriving students of higher education is known as "starred students." (Center for Human Rights in Iran CHRI, 2021). In the second year of university, I became brave enough to open the discussion about LGBTQ rights based on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. I started to open the debate very carefully about the rights and freedoms of a gay individual refers to articles such as "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights..." (Article 1, UDHR) or "Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person." (UDHR Article 3). In those discussions, I could hear loudly from some professors or students that I am not even a person who exists or matters. If I was lucky and successful, I could reduce the negativity of ideas about homosexuality from being evil to a person with psychological differences. Expressing these ideas caused me to be considered a student who is not fit and ideal for secondary education in Iran.

The amount of disgust and hate was even among law professors, and although some graduated from prestigious universities such as London and Paris, it did not change their mindset about queer and queerness. One professor talked about his memories of how he felt to vomit when they saw

two men holding hands or kissing. After, he said: "I thank God we don't have this in Iran." One day in a heated discussion about rights and freedoms and personhood, one of my professors said to me in front of 50 students: "Who do you think you are? Sit down boy. Who do you want to become? The lawyer of faggots?" I said: real lawyers take the oath to advocate for human beings in-discriminatory. The right to live is a fundamental right who are we to deny that from a person?

That was the milestone; I somehow declared who I am. That was the beginning of getting the nickname "Fag's lawyer." Everyone excluded me, usually in my classes. One or two chairs around me were empty. This was an act as a sign of not being associated with me in any form. To cope with this exclusion and surviving the heaviness of the university environment, I started working with different charities as a volunteer for children with autism and an orphanage under the university supervisor. I could see the increase in hate and disgust. One day, three people came to the university, one from my university and two from government authorities. I was being targeted. They point at me in the yard of the university one day. They asked for my student ID, and they took it. Even though I predicted this day yet, I asked again why? He said: be silent. You won't be allowed to come back to university until further investigations, no more questions. He pushed me away. With a less aggressive tone, the other one asked me to attend a committee meeting that is involved members of intelligent military service in partnership with the university.

I attended the meeting the day after. In the office, there were three people, and I could see they were governmental guards from their appearances. I sat down. One of them asked me: "How come you are so bold about people who praise evil? We heard you advocate fags". I knew there was no way to return, so I said: I am advocating for anyone who is being discriminated against. All human beings are equal. I am nobody to judge others. Judgment is only by the god. Isn't that, right? One of them said: who is sponsoring you in spreading these morally corrupt ideas? Who do you want

to be a "The West's Soldier "? (Which means that Western countries' views brainwashed me). I knew I wouldn't be able to continue my studies. I found out during their discussions; that they had already decided to ban me from university. The committee believed that I did not deserve to be in the Sharia law program. By coincidence, someone recognized me while passing the office where she was the link between charity that I was volunteering and the university. She was influential and came to defend me because of my charity work and said that she would be the guarantor. With her support, I was allowed to return to my studies under some conditions. They put me on the so-called "Starred students," a term and policy applied during Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's first presidential term in 2005. It refers to students deemed politically unreliable or undesirable by one or more of the Islamic Republic's numerous intelligence apparatuses (Center for Human Rights in Iran CHRI, 2021). This policy still strongly exists in academia in Iran. No matter how much I put in the hard work and focus on my studies, they will reduce my grades. This is evident in grades such as five or below 5 out of 20 in university. (Refer to figures 8 and 9).

Second Page

STUDENT TRANSCRIPT

Scanned photo of the holder
This is to certify that **Mr. MEHDI GHORBANIZADEH**, [redacted], issued in Shiraz, Iran, born in 1985, has graduated on 18/02/2009, in the field of "**Judicial Law**", and having completed the Part-time academic system and has qualified to be awarded a Bachelor's degree. The student's transcript is as follows:

Course Title	Type	Credits		Grade	Point
		Theo.	Prac.		
<u>2nd Sem. 2005-2006</u>					
Commercial Law II	Main	2	0	07.00	14.00
Civil Procedure I	Main	2	0	10.00	20.00
Civil Law IV	Main	2	0	10.00	20.00
Principles of Islamic Jurisprudence II	Main	2	0	11.00	22.00
Islamic Jurisprudence Texts III	Main	2	0	11.50	23.00
Social Security	Elective	1	0	13.00	13.00
Administrative Law II	Main	2	0	13.00	26.00
General criminal law II	Main	2	0	16.00	32.00
Islamic Thoughts I	General	2	0	17.00	34.00
<u>1st Sem. 2006-2007</u>					
Private International Law I	Main	2	0	11.00	22.00
General criminal law III	Main	2	0	12.00	24.00
Civil Law V	Main	3	0	12.00	36.00
Islamic Jurisprudence Texts IV	Main	2	0	13.00	26.00
Commercial Law II	Main	2	0	13.50	27.00
General English	General	3	0	14.00	42.00
Civil Procedure II	Main	2	0	16.00	32.00
Islamic Thoughts II	General	2	0	18.00	36.00
<u>2nd Sem. 2006-2007</u>					
Civil Procedure III	Main	2	0	05.00	10.00
Specific Criminal Law I	Main	3	0	09.50	28.50
Commercial Law III	Main	2	0	10.00	20.00
Islamic Jurisprudence Rules I	Main	2	0	10.50	21.00
Private International Law I	Main	2	0	12.50	25.00
Registration Law	Elective	1	0	13.00	13.00
Legal Texts I	Main	2	0	15.50	31.00

Figure 7. My BA transcript translated in English, 2009

One of the consequences of this policy is to stop and limit "Starred Students" from any opportunities in the country and abroad. For instance, I often lose opportunities such as scholarships or applying for employment based on my academic background. I had to explain and prove what had happened to me each time, which is incredibly draining.

Third Page

STUDENT TRANSCRIPT

Scanned photo of the holder
 This is to certify that **Mr. MEHDI GHORBANIZADEH**, [REDACTED], issued in Shiraz, Iran, born in 1985, has graduated on 18/02/2009, in the field of "**Judicial Law**", and having completed the Part-time academic system and has qualified to be awarded a Bachelor's degree. The student's transcript is as follows:

Course Title	Type	Credits		Grade	Point
		Theo.	Prac.		
2nd Sem. 2007-2008					
Evidence for substantiating Claims	Main	2	0	05.00	10.00
Labor Law	Main	2	0	08.00	16.00
Civil Law VII	Main	3	0	10.00	30.00
Specific Criminal Law II	Main	2	0	10.00	20.00
Commercial Law IV	Main	2	0	14.00	28.00
Scientific Police	Elective	1	0	14.00	14.00
Legal Texts II	Main	2	0	15.00	30.00
Forensic Medicine	Main	2	0	16.50	33.00
Research Project II	Main	0	1	16.50	16.50
Physical Educations II	General	0	1	17.00	17.00
2nd Sem. 2008-2009					
Decree verses	Elective	1	0	14.00	14.00
Labor Law	Main	2	0	16.00	32.00
Evidence for substantiating Claims	Main	2	0	17.00	34.00
Specific Criminal Law III	Main	2	0	18.00	36.00
Criminology	Main	2	0	18.50	37.00
Civil Law VIII	Main	3	0	18.50	55.50
Human Rights in Islam	Elective	1	0	19.00	19.00
Islamic Jurisprudence Rules II	Main	1	0	20.00	20.00
Comparative Law	Main	1	0	20.00	20.00

Figure 8: My BA transcript translated in English, 2009

C. The Arrests

One day I saw on the breaking news on tv that multiple men were arrested. Some of these groups were my friends, especially one who was like a little brother to me. It was like a volcano of fear and trauma. Every day I had a pattern of thoughts and feelings. Images of myself or my friends being arrested, executed publicly, the expansion of punishment to my family or being shunned by society. Are we all being exposed? Are we going to be hanged on the Street? To what extent will our families be punished? how about my life? And all the injustice against us was maneuvering in my mind.

My activism, being a “Starred Student” in the university, and often my legal advice to my queer friends who needed legal help and being in the ethnic minority all created the best criminal case to be arrested and punished to death. My friend, who I adored like a brother, was discharged earlier from prison, alone, without proper clothes or shoes. He called me, and I knew I was under investigation and closely monitored. But I responded to the phone. By answering the call and meeting up, I said bye to all other opportunities. I was ready to lose everything and did not want to live with fear anymore. My queerness was not invisible anymore. I was exposed and visible enough to be punished. My information was already disclosed to security guards who were investigating my friends. They disappeared for at least two months. No news, no one knew anything. This famous case is documented by Ahmad Shaheed, the Special Rapporteur of the Human Rights Council, about human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran. In the section related to the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Cases in Iran:

44.... The source was arrested again at an airport with a group of friends after dropping a friend off there. The group of men were charged with “the creation of a prostitution center to facilitate the occurrence of sexually illegal activities” and with “committing sinful acts like cross-dressing, wearing makeup, and lustful kissing”. (Shaheed, 2013).



Figure 9. (Ahmad Shaheed special Rapporteur of the Human Rights Council about human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran, 2011 UN Website)

I was being watched and getting threats, often by unauthorized phone numbers or people on motorcycles following me. Many of the people in my circle of friends who related to the criminal case had already fled the country, and I was one of the few who still was undecided. I was in a dual with myself: To stay and die or to get disappeared and live. Eventually, I decided to leave. I told my family that I had to go to Turkey without explaining why. Passing the gate of the airport was like a guillotine. I did not bring anything with me. Some clothes for a week may not create any suspicion that I only want to go for a short trip. I said bye to everything that loved, sensed, lived, and accomplished and left. It has been ten years, and I still have not been able to meet my family. I often asked myself why they had allowed me to leave. They prefer queer activists to leave the country. They were monitoring me to give me time for exposure to other people. They know that it is almost impossible to overcome challenges and live in another country with the severity of exclusion and denial. There is no language, dialogue, or documentation about the region's

injustice against the queer community. This makes it extremely difficult to claim as a refugee or prove the severity of unrecognized discrimination.

Everything around the West Asian queer population is in denial and invisible. The government's hidden agenda in the region is to put pressure on activists to leave the country. Being an activist outside the country makes it easier to accuse queer activists as "the enemy" and "the other" by the West Asian states. Therefore, I can summarize the injustice against the West Asian queer people in the following sentences:

Some disappear in their own countries, some disappear in other countries, and others disappear in themselves. But I do not allow our stories to get lost.

Part 2. Turkey

A. Flee by Flight

In 2012, I arrived in Turkey by a roundtrip ticket which could be a death sentence on the way back this road. In this path: giving up on destiny is the highest level of security that someone can afford. I have survived the persecution, but I have started a long journey and am not alone in it. This is the last station of survival in life. This state, for some people, can bring a sense of pride as a sign of resilience and shame and stigma for others or even can be used in political agendas in different countries to create “The Other.” Becoming a refugee is my journey, my lived experience that made me a survivor who is rejecting victimhood by living in a constant state of resistance.

By fleeing to Turkey, I escaped the persecution and a potential death sentence, but it didn’t take long to understand that Turkey is not a paradise for queer people. Our struggles as West Asian queer people had different levels but were aligned. Before being a refugee, I had to introduce myself to the United Nations office as an asylum seeker. The irony was that for a country (Turkey) that does not support and protect LGBTQ rights, I became a queer asylum seeker.

I can identify four stages that I went through in Turkey as an asylum seeker till the moment that I left the country:

1. Claiming as an asylum seeker (I immediately went to the United Nations office in Ankara at the time of arrival to record my claim.)
2. One or several interviews about reviewing the claim whether individuals meet the asylum seeker's definition and conditions or not.

3. Becoming a refugee after the approval as an asylum seeker in one or several interviews with limited rights and protections that are shared responsibility of the United Nations and the Turkish government.

4. Choosing the available countries that accept refugees.

The entities involved in this process are the Turkish government, United Nations and the 3rd countries that eventually host refugees. Some NGOs or local or non-local organizations generally assist LGBTQ refugees in Turkey.

B. UNHCR Turkey, Ankara

I was in the long line of asylum seekers in front of the UNHCR office in Ankara. I was silently observing. I would say that my appearance was not considered visibly gay look, At the same time, other queer individuals, especially Trans women, were getting harassed by other asylum seekers in front of the United Nations office.

The queerphobia was bold. Outside the UN building, the Turkish police force was indifferent about the verbal or often physical attacks against queer asylum seekers. Some people in the line were coming from war zones, comparing us with prostitutes. Therefore, queer rights and protection did not have any priority for them at all. A man yelled at a gay asylum seeker in the line: “You came this far just to prove that you want to sleep with another man?”

I asked myself if in front of the United Nations office in Turkey we get harassed, where we might find safety and security? I knew it would be an endless fight in my life; we would always be a minority with incredible vulnerabilities. There were refugees from all over the region Syria, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, and even Somalia. I was witnessing a scene that was a summarization of the traumas in the region. Death, desperation, and displacement:

- A man covered in blood on a wheelchair alone.

- A mother who cries and whispers in Arabic, which I understand. She left some of her children in the war, while others were beside her with the shame of survival on their faces.
- An older man who needs medication, and his prescription is the only identification that he has with him.

Between all these pains and suffering, we as queer asylum seekers were colourful, full of life and love, even with all the threats. I still remember an Iraqi trans woman who lost half of her face because of an organized attack against the queer community in Iraq, yet she was able to bring her soul together with a red lipstick and a big smile on her face.

In front of the UN office, there is a small window where each person has to say their name, country of origin, and why they want to be an asylum seeker. This small window of the United Nations expects the maximum visibility from a queer person to get the right and protection. I had to summarize 26 years of denial and discrimination in 30 seconds. She took my documents, and passport and asked me the reason that I wanted to claim as an asylum seeker with the interpreter. I said, “I am gay.” That was the first time I declared my sexuality publicly to an official entity to get support and protection. “I am gay” this sentence in many places can be a slogan of celebration such as pride parades, marketing, or advertisement, but these three words could cost my life. I wasn’t invisible anymore. I am visibly documented in the United Nations.

Date of Issue (Veriliş Tarihi): 22/01/2013

ASYLUM SEEKER CERTIFICATE
SIĞINMACI BELGESİ

Name of Applicant (Başvuru sahibinin Adı): **MEHDI GHORBANIZADEH**

UNHCR Registration No. (BMMYK Kayıt No.): [Redacted]

Date of Birth (Doğum Tarihi): [Redacted]

Place of Birth (Doğum Yeri): [Redacted]

Nationality (Uyruğu): [Redacted]

Date of Entry (Ülkeye giriş tarihi): [Redacted]

Place of Entry (Ülkeye giriş yaptığı yer): [Redacted]

This is to certify that the above-named person, national of **Iran, Islamic Republic of**, is an asylum seeker whose claim for refugee status is being examined by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. As an asylum seeker, he/she is a person of concern to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, and should, in particular, be protected from forcible return to a country where he/she claims to face threats to his/her life or freedom, pending a final decision on his/her refugee status. Any assistance accorded to the above-named individual would be most appreciated. Questions regarding the information contained in this document may be directed to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees at the address above.

Bu belge ile yukarıda adı geçen **Iran, Islamic Republic of** uyruklu kişinin, sığınma başvurusu Birleşmiş Milletler Mülteciler Yüksek Komiserliği Ofisi tarafından incelenmekte olan bir sığınmacı olduğu tasdik olunur. Bir sığınmacı olarak, söz konusu kişi Birleşmiş Milletler Mülteciler Yüksek Komiserliği Ofisinin ilgi alanı altındadır, ve özellikle, sığınma başvurusu hakkında verilecek nihai kararı beklediği süre içerisinde, yaşamına veya özgürlüğüne yönelik bir tehditle karşılaşacağını iddia ettiği ülkesine isteği dışında geri gönderilmeye karşı korunmalıdır. Yukarıda adı verilen kişiye göstereceğiniz her tür kolaylık için teşekkür ederiz.

Bu belgede verilen bilgiler hakkındaki sorularınızı yukarıda adresi verilen Birleşmiş Milletler Mülteciler Yüksek Komiserliği Ofisi'ne yöneltebilirsiniz.

This Document is valid until: **22/01/2014**
Bu belge **22/01/2014** tarihine kadar geçerlidir

Yours sincerely / Saygılarımla,
[Signature]
Carpi Bachelor
Representative / Temsilci

Important Note:
This is not a residence permit. Such document can only be obtained from the Turkish Authorities. Temporary asylum applications are always to be decided by the Turkish Government.
Açıklama:
Bu bir oturma izni değildir. Bu gibi belgeler sadece Türk Makamları'nda düzenlenir. Geçici sığınma başvuruları hakkında daima Türk Hükümeti'nce karar verilir.

Figure 10. My asylum seeker certificate 2012/ United Nations / Turkey

After a short interview at the United Nations office in Turkey, they chose a city for asylum seekers to settle for the rest of the process. Big cities such as Istanbul are excluded, only under rare circumstances, for instance, if a Turkish employer needs the specific skill of refugee employees.

The provinces where refugees can reside in Turkey are indicated in green:

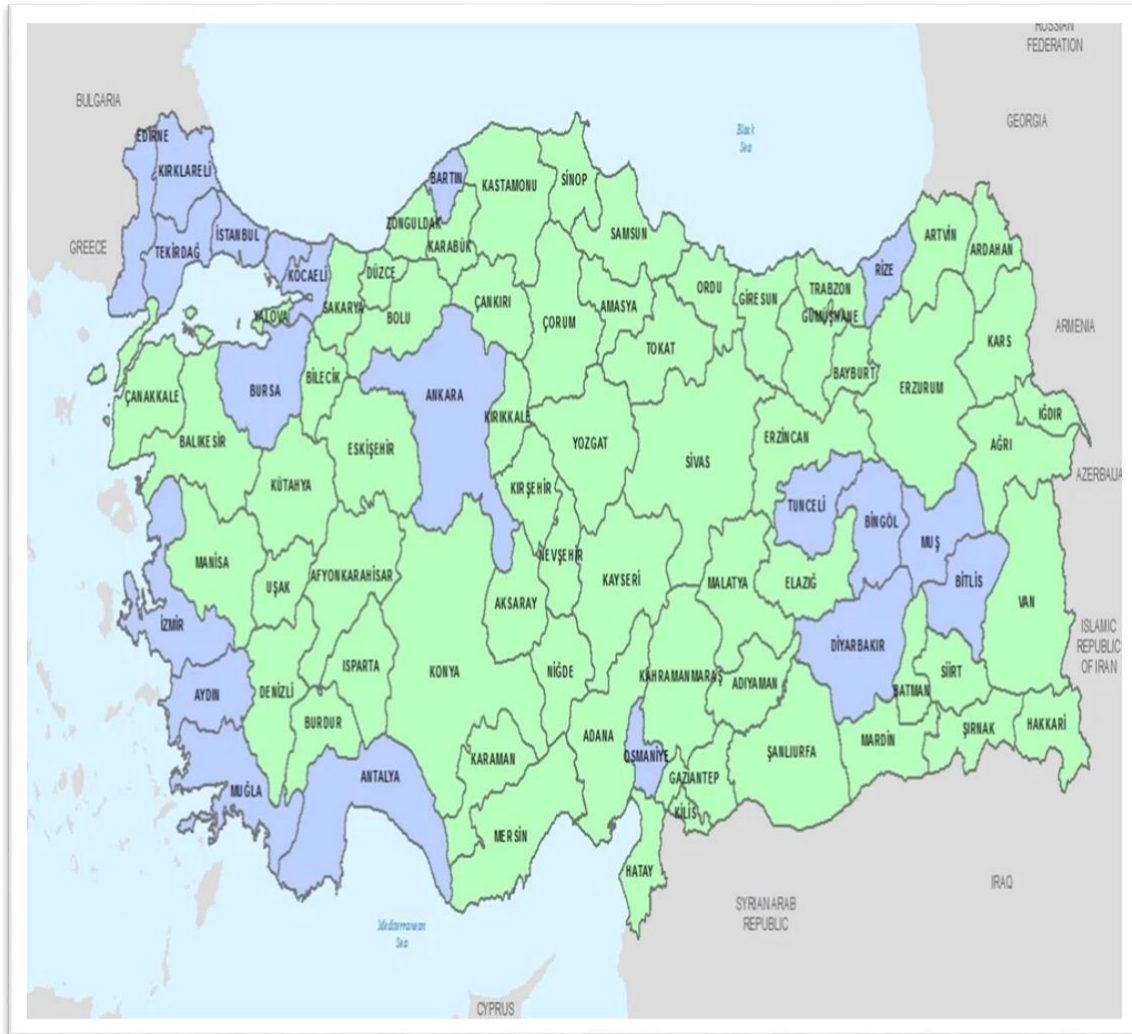


Figure 11. Cities in green for refugees to settlement, From UNHCR Website in Turkey/Ankara,2021

By the region's standards, the West side of Turkey is easier for queer people but not ideal. However, on the east side, close to the border with Iran, people are more traditional, religious, and conservative, with little or no tolerance for the LGBTQ community.

C. Turkish Queer Community

There was an underground alliance and network between LGBTQ refugees and the Turkish queer community. They knew us and often admired our bravery in the fight against injustices, but

they had to be closeted and invisible to protect themselves. Their admiration was silent, often with constant locked eyes and nods.

After living in Turkey as a refugee, I directly witnessed the struggles of the Turkish queer community. Although Turkey did not have capital punishment against the Turkish queer community, it has other severe discrimination legitimate by the state. These injustices intersect with culture, religion, and tradition and appear in punishments like losing jobs or crimes such as honour killing or death and disappearance of gay and Trans individuals. Same-sex sexual activity is legal in Turkey, but Articles 225 and 226 of the Penal Code on 'obscenity' and 'indecent behaviour' have been used regularly by prosecutors and judges against LGBTQ people. Simultaneously, judges have used Article 29 to reduce the sentences of the individuals who have been found guilty of killing LGBTQ people. (Yılmaz,2019). This silent alliance a year later became one of the foundations of the biggest Turkish pride parade, including of local queer community, queer refugees, and other supporters of LGBTQ rights 2014. This unity made the Turkish authorities and other political and religious leaders of the region extremely concerned and fearful. As a result, since 2014, each year, the response of the Turkish government to any activity related to the pride parade has been an iron fist.



Figure 12. Turkish Pride Parade 2015, From KAOS website,



Figure 13. Turkish pride parade in Istanbul attacked by police 2021, KAOS website

I settled in Southwest Turkey. While the structure of the city was so modern, ideas about queer and queerness were so negative. in the whole period of staying in Turkey as an asylum seeker or refugee every week we had to attend the police station to confirm we were physically staying in the city. We all had to carry a permanent residency card issued by the state with about 150 Liras fees about 75 dollars each year. This is how the Turkish government monitors the mobility of refugees in the country. In my all document my queerness was exposed and visible to any entity that I wanted to go to. All our documents were written in the Turkish language “VATANSIZ” which means stateless. I was officially stateless in exchange for only being myself.

T.C. PAMUKKALE ÜNİVERSİTESİ HASTANELERİ LABORATUVAR SONUÇLARI	
Adı Soyadı : MEHDİ GHORBANIZADEH	Protokol No : 3623061
Yaş/Cinsiyet : 27/BAY	Hasta No : 610495
Kurum Türü : VATANSIZ VE SİĞİNMAC	Tanı : H52 ; M25 ; R51

Figure 15. My document from hospital that uses (Stateless) in yellow, 2013

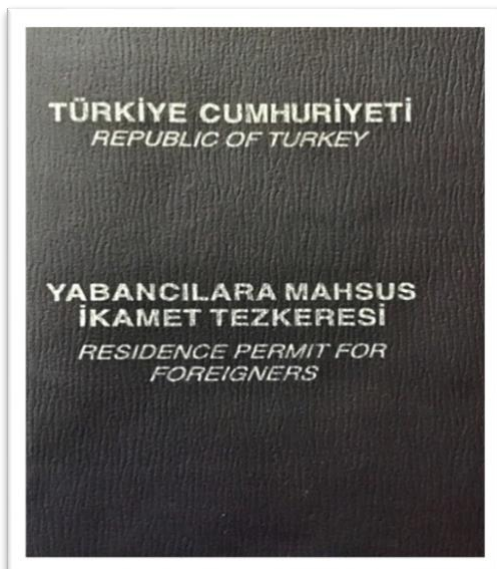


Figure 14. ID card and my Turkish residency as a refugee, 2013



Figure 16. The details of my Turkish residency permit and its fee for each year about 100 Canadian dollars 2013

D. Interview- Straight until Proven Queer


Some of my friends related to our criminal case in Iran fled the country earlier and were already granted refugee status. After about a month, the remaining people related to the case (the arrest of queer people in Iran) got an appointment earlier than usual for the first interviews in the UN. This case was famous and already documented in the United Nations as a clear sign of discrimination and abuse of LGBTQ rights in Iran.

In my interview, there were 4 participants:

1. A human rights lawyer, primarily from Turkey.
2. An interpreter mainly from the country of origin of the asylum seeker,
3. One United Nations employee.
4. The asylum seeker (myself)

The interview varies from 2 hours to one full day long with a couple of breaks. Here is the plan of maximum visibility for minimum protection under the assumption that I called it “Straight until Proven Queer,” which means now, as a queer refugee under systemic denial and moral exclusion, I am considered a straight man first until I prove my queerness in a court like setting. I had to be bold with maximum visibility about my sexual identity, with the best vocabulary and terms updated under international standards about queer and queerness, while the interpreter from Iran did not know much about sexual identity.

This is a huge transition. All barriers as a queer asylum seeker and refugee, language, not having access to enough vocabulary related to the queerness and sexuality by the queer individuals or the interpreter can increase the refusal of the claim. As it is reported by United Nations, some LGBTQ persons have no adequate access to information about how and where they can claim asylum or often feel unable to approach or discuss their situation, or they frequently perceive those authorities or other actors have no experience or exposure to LGBTQ issues (Ottosson, 2010). Because I had several strong legal documents, my interview was about 3 hours, focusing on the legal aspects of queerness in Iran and how the government of Iran is targeting queer individuals. For the UN, I was one of the few people from Iran Who was publicly gay and had a legal background.

 **UNHCR**
United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
Haut Commissariat des Nations Unies pour les réfugiés
BMMYK Birleşmiş Milletler Mülteciler Yüksek Komiserliği Sancak Mah. Tiflis Cad. 552. Sokak No3 06550 Ankara
Tel: (312) 409 7000 Fax (312) 441 2173 Email turan@unhcr.org

Date of Issue (Veriliş Tarihi): 23/04/2013

UNHCR REFUGEE CERTIFICATE
BMMYK MÜLTECİ BELGESİ

Name of Applicant (Başvuru sahibinin Adı):
UNHCR Registration No. (BMMYK Kayıt No.):
Date of Birth (Doğum Tarihi):
Place of Birth (Doğum Yeri):
Nationality (Uyruğu):

To Whom It May Concern


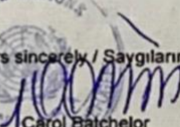
This is to certify that the above-named person, has been recognized as a refugee by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, pursuant to its mandate. As a refugee, (he/she) is a person of concern to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, and should, in particular, be protected from forcible return to a country where (he/she) would face threats to his or her life or freedom. Any assistance accorded to the above-named individual would be most appreciated.

Questions regarding the information contained in this document may be directed to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees at the address above.

İlgili Makama

Bu yazı yukarıda adı verilen kişinin, Birleşmiş Milletler Mülteciler Yüksek Komiserliği'nin yetki alanı dahilinde, mülteci olarak tanındığını belgelemek üzere düzenlenmiştir. Bir mülteci olarak, söz konusu kişi Birleşmiş Milletler Mülteciler Yüksek Komiserliği Ofisinin ilgi alanındadır ve kendisi, özellikle, yaşamına veya özgürlüğüne yönelik bir tehdit ile karşı karşıya kalacağı bir ülkeye zorla geri gönderilmeye karşı korunmalıdır. Yukarıda adı verilen kişiye gösterilecek her türlü yardım memnuniyetle karşılanacaktır.

Bu belgede verilen bilgilere ilişkin sorularınızı, adresi yukarıda verilmiş olan, Birleşmiş Milletler Mülteciler Yüksek Komiserliği'ne yöneltebilirsiniz.


Yours sincerely / Saygılarımla,

Carol Batchelor
Representative/Temsilci

This document is only valid in the original when bearing official UNHCR stamp
Bu belge, yalnızca üzerinde resmi BMMYK kaşesi bulunduğu anda geçerlidir

Figure 17. My refugee certificate, 2013

For many others, their interview primarily was based on their sexual identity and explicit and often graphic questions and information such as:

- How did you know that you are gay?

- Any document to prove your queerness?
- How many queer people do you know in your life?
- Have you ever been in a queer relationship? How many, how long? document to prove it?

(Video, images, ...).

E. Second interview: Choosing Country

The first interview and all coverage about this specific case in the local and global queer magazines helped us get refugee status faster and enter the next step of choosing countries available to refugees. At the time, very few countries were accepting refugees besides USA and Canada. I knew a well-known Iranian queer activist in Canada who assisted me a lot in my application process. While I knew about LGBTQ rights in Canada, there were other reasons that I chose Canada, and one of them was my access to a better healthcare system as a West Asian queer refugee.

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

This is to advise that MEHDI GHORBANIZADEH.....
has an application for
 immigration to Canada now being processed by Canadian authorities. His/Her departure will take
 place once all our requirements are met. We trust that this information will facilitate the above
 person's temporary stay in Turkey.

SAYIN İLGİLİYE

Size bu yazı ile MEHDI GHORBANIZADEH.....
'nın Kanada'ya
 göçmenlik için başvuruda bulunduğunu ve bu başvuru formalitelerinin şu sırada Kanada
 makamlarınca işlendiğini bildiriyoruz. İstenen tüm işlemlerin tamamlanması halinde Kanada'ya
 gitmeniz gerçekleşecektir. Size verdiğimiz bu bilginin, söz konusu kişinin Türkiye'deki geçici
 ikametini kolaylaştıracağına güveniyoruz.

Immigration Office
 Göçmenlik Bürosu

Figure 18. Referral letter to send my application from United Nations to Canadian embassy in Turkey

After my second interview and receiving the refugee status and processing my application to the Canadian embassy in Ankara-Turkey was the period that I suddenly lost my health. My health, the only thing I had confidence in that would not leave me alone, left me. I lost the ability to stand on my feet. I had swelling all over my joints and face. This was the beginning of my long, challenging interactions with healthcare in Turkey as a refugee. Medicines in Turkey are not totally free and imported medicines cannot be covered by the Social Security Institution. As is the case for all Turkish citizens, you would have to pay 20% of the total cost of medicines as a contribution fee. (Grungras, Levitan, & Slotek, 2009). I have been diagnosed with a high probability of bone cancer or MS. In either case, as a refugee, neither my doctors nor I have faith that I would overcome this health crisis alone, without any support. The high price of treatments and medication was a significant challenge, and the UN's insurance for refugees is limited. Asylum seekers and refugees in Turkey are required to pay their medical expenses. This is only one of my weekly prescriptions out of many that I had to cover by myself, 61 Liras which was 32 USD dollars at the time, which was significant financial pressure on me. The little support provided by UNHCR is often insufficient to cover the full cost of medical treatments.

[illegible]

Figure 19. My prescription that was not covered by any entity as a refugee

Queer refugees were double stigmatized in the Turkish healthcare system. Once as a refugee, then as an individual with risky behaviour, less moral and diseased, which were synonymous with HIV virus. For instance, each time a gay refugee had to go to the hospital, even for a cold or cough, we were sent to the lab to get an HIV test. Although I complained about my joint pain and swelling, they first started with an HIV test and questions about my sexual partners and history.

It seemed and felt that I lost once again in my battle with life; I was faced with another form of a death sentence. I lost my country, family, language, and all sense of belonging and now my health. I did not disclose the diagnosis to others around me or my family in Iran. Only to my Turkish friend, who came with me toward all steps as a friend, family, and interpreter. As I continued my battle with my health issues, I began to live and witness that LGBTQ people with

visible or invisible disabilities are the most vulnerable among all other refugees. Healthcare systems were so biased against us because of queerphobia. The stigma around being queer in the region, was evident even among some doctors who expressed to me that my illness might be part of my punishment by God. Therefore, I did not deserve to be offered even a sense of pity for their idea. Now the invisibility of my sexuality intersects with the invisibility of my disability.

In grappling with my health, I was almost on my knees, and eventually, I received a call from the Canadian embassy. I have gotten the flight date to Toronto-Canada in mid-February. I had mixed feelings. The heaviness of duplicate departure was hunting me, I was in love with Turkey with all its difficulties. Somehow, I was ashamed that I was leaving my other queer friends alone in the battle of all the discrimination that we were facing. I did not know what might be unfolded in the next chapter of my life, but I had to say bye to whatever I had built in Turkey and welcome a new unknown journey to Canada as a West Asian queer refugee.

Part 3. Arriving in Canada

In 2014, I arrived in Canada with the collaboration of international organizations such as The UN and IOM (International Organization for Migration) and the Canadian government, which were involved in the transition of refugees from Turkey to Canada. It was my first time facing such freezing weather, about -27 in mid-February. None of my clothes were suitable for Toronto's ice storm. Clothing for winter here needed some skills, especially for someone like me who always lived in moderate temperatures. About 13 hours of direct flight costs about \$1800 per ticket without interest, which refugees must pay back to the Canadian government through monthly payments after the first year of settlement.

Loan activity during the past month Activité sur le compte pendant le dernier mois		Loan details Détails du prêt	
Opening balance - Solde d'ouverture	1,831.83	Total amount of the loan Montant total du prêt	1,825.29
New loan - Nouveau prêt	0.00		
Payment received - Paiement reçu	0.00	Total payments applied to loan principal Total des paiements appliqués au principal du prêt	0.00
Chargeback - Rejet de débit	0.00		
Bank charges - Frais bancaires	0.00	Total payments applied to loan interest Total des paiements appliqués aux intérêts du prêt	0.00
Accrued interest - Intérêt couru	2.68		
Other - Autre	0.00		
Closing balance - Solde de fermeture	1,834.51	Current interest rate - Taux d'intérêt courant	1.740%
Scheduled monthly payment - Paiement mensuel établi			1,834.51
Arrears - Arriérés dûs			1,834.51
Total amount due for this month - Montant total dû pour ce mois			1,834.51

Figure 20. My flight ticket considered as a loan which refugees after one year of arrival time must pay to Canadian government

After arrival at the airport, we temporarily Settled in the COSTI immigrant services residence in Toronto. I departed from the rest of the group because I knew someone in Toronto who could stay with him until I found a place to rent. But we needed to attend every day in COSTI to finish our settlement programs. Other queer refugees who stayed in the COSTI residence expressed high tension between queer refugees and non-queer refugees. For any visible queer individuals in the environment, the pressure and harassment by other refugees were twice more. COSTI workers were trying their best to reduce the tension, talk and educate, yet the queerphobia was so embedded that it could be naïve to think that there would be a sudden change by coming to Canada. Only because of fear of consequences by the Canadian government in their immigration and refugee process, some were afraid to take bolder action against their hatred.

After overcoming the challenges of a queer refugee in Turkey, now in Canada it will be a series of new challenges that I must face. Refugees were under the Resettlement Assistance Program (RAP) for 12 months and with limited financial support, about \$500 (Immigration Canada, 2020).

The cost of living and challenges such as language barrier, clothing, housing as a refugee finding housing, and employment make the first year significantly difficult and stressful. Here there was a difference between queer refugees and other refugees. Non-queer refugees had a less complex settlement process in housing and employment than queer refugees. We did not have the support of community or religious entities that other refugees could benefit from them. With significant difficulty, I found a place to rent. I used to google-translate to write an email in English for landlords. My education and degrees weren't acceptable here in Canada; therefore, finding employment was almost impossible. By going to ESL classes in adult school, I became more fluent in English to express myself better and set more goals.

In the first two years, I had several moves in Toronto because of discrimination based on my race, religion, or sexual orientation. I rented the basement of two floors house, and my landlord lived on the top floor. At the end of the first year, I started dating someone. I was feeling free and empowered gay man. One day when I had a greeting kiss with the person I was dating in front of the building, my landlord saw me; she looked at me with disgust. At night she wrote a note on my door that we needed to talk. She mentioned that if she knew that I was gay, she wouldn't want to rent this place. The whole dynamics of tenant-landlord changed. It meant my gayness to her was invisible, and I was different and discriminated against when it became visible. I was exhausted by the dual between the visibility and invisibility of my sexuality and the different consequences that each time might bring in my life.

My English at the time was not that great to have a high-level legal discussion with her; that is why I shared the incident with the person I was dating. He wanted to go to court, but I had no energy to go to the judiciary system in Canada. Eventually, I decided to write a note in advocacy of myself. I wrote back to her that I am a free gay man, and she can't deny or discriminate against

me; I am protected by law. Later, I noticed she was more worried about the reaction of the person that I was dating, not me. Between the power and privileges of a white gay Canadian who was outraged and my queerphobic landlord, I was completely forgotten and denied as a vulnerable queer tenant.

Eventually, she apologized not based on the recognition and respect for me but on fear of privileging the person I was dating. She gave me some excuses based on her religion and belief system. Still, I did not find her words of apology sincere, and I had already decided to move out. That was the first painful realization of the reality of my new positionality in Canadian society, in the intersection of my race, gender, sexual orientation, country of origin, and immigration status all combined. It felt like I was almost faded.

A. Invisible among Visible Minorities

Through my daily interaction in school, work, and society in general, I found I have been minoritized and categorized in new sets of labels that I must learn and adjust. I always worked part-time during all these years, whether I was an ESL learner or a university student. I worked in a grocery store, an early childhood educator assistant, or a restaurant. I had some paperwork for each job, such as forms related to the rights and responsibilities at work, policies, or hazards. It was my first time faced with the term visible minority. Equity Act defines visible minorities as "persons, other than Aboriginal peoples, who are non-Caucasian in race or non-white in colour." The visible minority population consists mainly of the following groups: South Asian, Chinese, Black, Filipino, Arab, Latin American, Southeast Asian, West Asian, Korean and Japanese. (Agocs,2002). I am a West Asian queer refugee, a person of colour, from a Muslim majority country Shia noticeable by my name (Mehdi). I felt my sexual identity, which was why I became a refugee, got lost among other identities and categories that Canadian society has chosen for me.

Depending on each entity that I am interacting with, my identities clash, and I am being judged, categorized, and discriminated against without my opinion and right to self-determination about my own life. With lists of labels that I have in Canada based on race, gender, immigration status, sexual orientation, and ability, I ask myself:

- Which part of my identity is visible? Which part is invisible?
- Visible or invisible to whom?
- Why just being me is not good enough?

B. Stigma of Being a Refugee

Due to some errors by immigration Canada in my documentation, it took about two years to have a permanent residency card as my official identity card in Canada. During this time, without the actual card, I could only use my landing paper and other immigration documents to prove my identity. I started to notice the stigma around being a refugee I was faced with rolling eyes, mistrust, and a series of unnecessary questions when I provided my documents in housing-related matters, employment or even Service Ontario and bank. It was always a shame, stigma, and pity. "Those People " was a coding language referring to refugees. While many people come to Canada each year with the same status, history, and hardships, they prefer not to disclose their refugee backgrounds. Here and there, someone at work or school was whispering to me that I understood your struggles. I am proud of you. It was illogical for me to be embarrassed about my struggle as an asylum seeker, refugee, and survivor. Our bravery as West Asian queer refugees can either bring shame, stigma, or pity in the best scenario, but I chose not to deny my life story and resilience.

C. Gay Community in Toronto

Learning how to interact with the gay community in Toronto was not an easy task. There were many things to learn and adjust linguistically and culturally in addition to the dynamic of power

and privilege between queer people of colour and other white queers. By coming to Canada as a free gay man, I expected to be visible and bold about my sexuality without facing obstacles, especially in a gay neighbourhood and in places such as bars and cafes. However, the first thing that I slowly became aware of was the tendency to use online applications and dating websites, which is more evident among the younger generation of queer people in Toronto. That is why I still can relate to older queer people because of our similarities in historical injustice in Canada against the LGBTQ community.

Saying hi and starting small talk around the Toronto gay neighbourhood was not something many people were willing to be open to it. Although the assumption is that Toronto is a queer-friendly city. Not all neighbourhoods have the same tolerance of Toronto gay village. That is why online dating applications on phones are more convenient. I thought this digitalization in the queer community was rooted in some inequities that the queer community faces in Canada. For instance, if a gay man mistakenly pursues a straight man in public, there is a high risk of violence or at least offence due to simply having a crush by a gay individual on another straight person. The reality is that complete visibility and bold actions to express queerness still bring some concerns about safety and security for the queer community in Toronto. I lived in a world where I became so keen about my intuition and whether someone was gay or not. For a long time in Iran, I had limited access to the internet, and many websites related to queer and queerness were blocked by the state, and if I had access, online gay dating was not safe and could be easily tracked by the government. Thus, all skills that I developed to read another gay man in public could be applied with a couple of clicks here in Toronto.

D. Racial Preferences

With all LGBTQ community resources, there is not enough knowledge about West Asian queer people here in Toronto. There is a lack of understanding of our race, ethnicity, and religious diversity. Unfortunately, the racial injustice that marginalized communities faces in Canada mirror itself against the West Asian queer refugees within the queer community in Toronto. I already come from a diverse family called the rainbow family. My background has been mistaken almost all the time. Just in one family, my cousins and I are from blonde to black, and we may look like we are coming from different continents. These diverse family roots reflect on my face, skin colour, hair, or accent. Many people try to find my origin by looking at me; thus, it became a guessing game in Canada to place my community. I found out I can pass for biracial, Cuban, or South American. Because of these similarities, I often had an easier time connecting with different individuals in Toronto; however, I am getting multiple layers of racial slurs. By knowing more people and interacting with the queer community, I found a direct link between racial background and desirability.

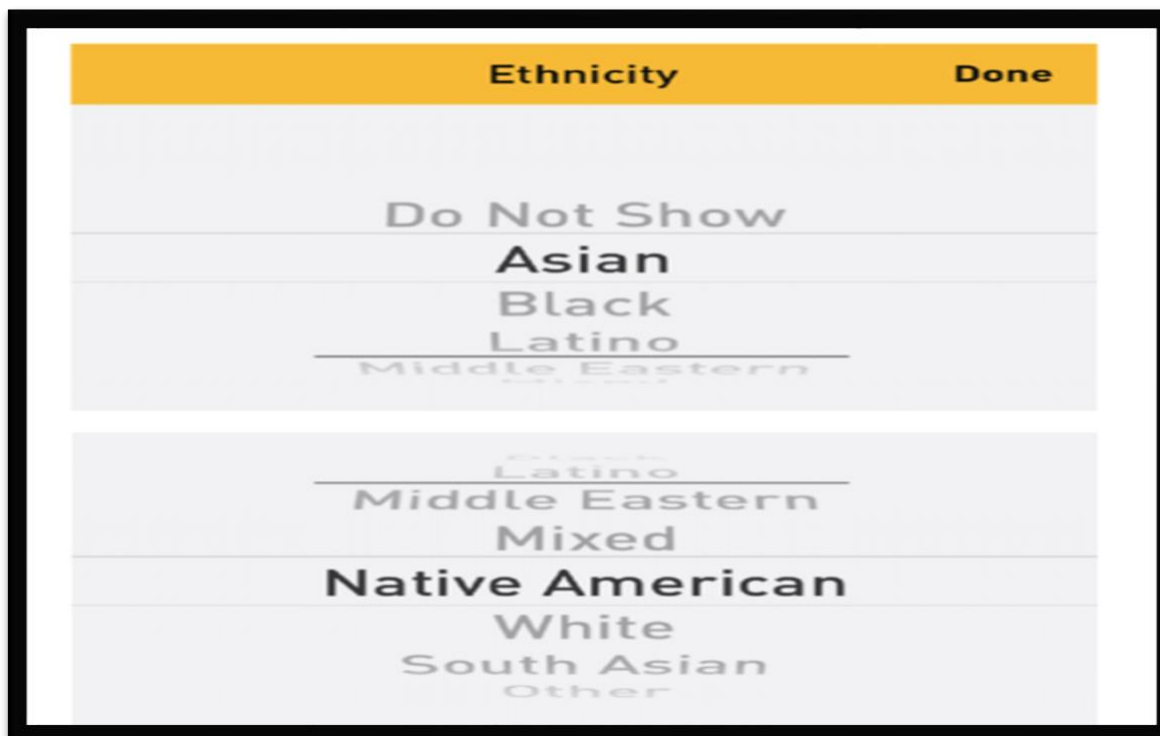


Figure 21. Race based filters in online dating applications, ResearchGate.net

As a West Asian queer person, often being fetishized was the only way of acceptance by other gay men. One day, I passionately started to talk about the sense of freedom as a gay man and its importance in my life that I heard from the other person: "Actually, closeted gay men are a turn-on for me; that is why I am into Middle Eastern gay men." In my dating experience, predominantly white gay men wanted to know me based on their preferences, and they were not interested in my history and story. This is a shared experience among my other friends, which sometimes seems to be a common attitude in Toronto's gay community. Our life stories as West Asian queer refugees are too depressing or too much for some of the local LGBTQ people. Each time I wanted to say something about my experiences as a queer refugee, the reaction was: "can we change a topic?" in exchange for something lighter. I call this the escape phrase "Let's just have fun," meaning I am only looking to respond to my desires without any interest in who you are. I believe it can signify

the underlying issue of racial inequality in Canada under racial preference inserted and internalized by the queer community.

E. Missing Gay men in Toronto

The news related to the missing gay men spread in the gay village in the same neighbourhood where I live. We had a similar language, From the same region, religion, and racial backgrounds. Some names and pictures were familiar. I quickly found out I had something significant with most of them.



Figure 22. Names and images of victims from *Toronto Sun*, 2019

The missing queer men started to get more attention and headline at the national level. But the covering resulted from years of denial and dismissal of these gay men because: perhaps they were considered "The other." They were not privileged and did not have the support of family, country of origin, community, and government of Canada. This case exposed the multilayers of injustices that I am living and experiencing in my daily life here in Canada as a West Asian queer man. As

mentioned by justice Gloria J. Epstein in the Missing and Missed report, victims were marginalized and vulnerable in various ways, and their disappearances were often given less attention or priority than they deserved by police (Missing and Missed report, 2021). Yet again, we were dismissed, denied justice, and invisible to society. I always believed that the invisibility of vulnerable populations is the highest level of injustice. I felt and still feel defeated and lost. Once, we were invisible under systemic denial in the home country; now, we are invisible in Canada, which supports LGBTQ rights and freedom.

Our identities are created based on multilayers of oppression without access to the right of self-determination. The pressure of this multi-marginalization resulted in the painful reality that the sexuality of West Asian queer refugees like me to be evaporated and disappeared from Canadian society. Our queerness and existence become invisible to the new communities and countries we arrive at, even with advanced LGBTQ rights and protection.

Closely I followed the development of this criminal case and witnessed the trauma created between the West Asian queer refugees. The dismissed injustice and denial weren't something new to me. It was twice more painful here to live it again in Canada. With all the vulnerabilities that I embody, I promised myself to invest my life in breaking the silence, even as one voice or in a small step, to honour our journey and the cost we pay just to be ourselves. I came from the death sentence and arrived at the conclusion state of radical acceptance of myself to raise awareness and prevent further denial and discrimination. Therefore, this research is conducted to claim my story and identity by taking ownership of the narratives about our lives as West Asian queer refugees and before ending this chapter, I need to explain how my critical autoethnography is connected to works of literature, theories, ideas to elaborate on my research problems.

The Allyship of Critical Autoethnography with Existing Literature

In summary, my critical autoethnography with existing literature reflected in chapter two assisted me in various ways, from exposing the injustice to conducting an independent study and raising awareness about the nature of oppression against West Asian queer refugees.

Exposing the injustice: From West Asia to Canada as an insider allowed me to break down the complexity of the injustice through my story that occurs in different settings, such as Iran, Turkey, and Canada, for a broader audience. By theories such as moral exclusion by Susan Opatow, I was able to expose the structure of systemic denial and invisibility in Iran and the impacts on the queer community around these two notions:

- Invisibility while having the most visible punishment
- Trans visibility for denial and elimination of homosexual

These attitudes are expressed by government officials locally and globally in the speeches, such as the former president of Iran's structure of denial Ahmadinejad with additional examples in criminal codes that criminalize homosexuality with all details however strongly resist admitting the existence of the queer community. Also, another aspect of the theory of moral exclusion in my critical autoethnography was to be able to depict how the Iranian state uses trans identity with the use of sexual reassignment surgeries in excluding and denying the existence of homosexuality as something unique as a tool of oppression and a unique way of moral exclusion. Moral exclusion occurs when individuals or groups are perceived as outside the boundary in which moral values, rules and considerations of fairness apply (Opatow, 1990).

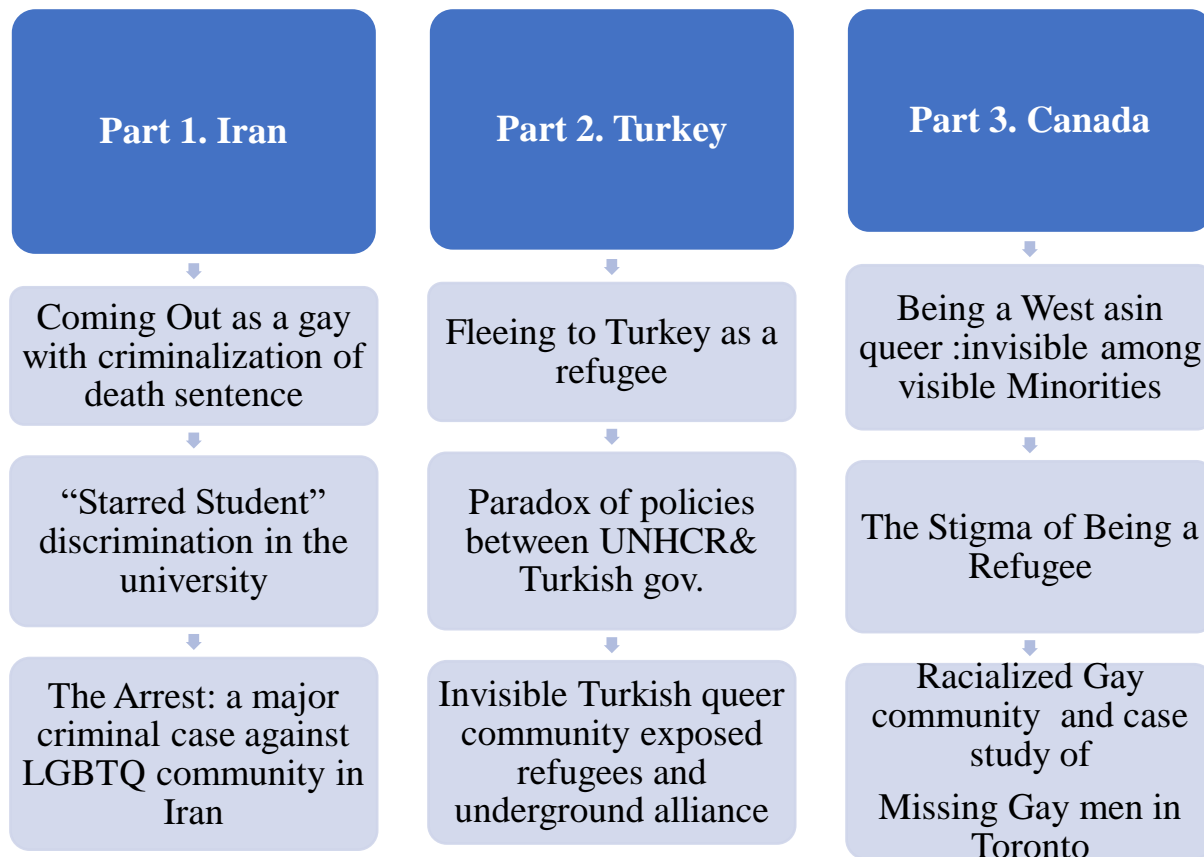
Exposing the injustice in Canada by intersectionality: after exposing the injustice in West Asia, West Asian queer refugees face expansion and extension of oppression in Canada based on a series of new labels and categorizations based on race, gender, immigration status, and sexual orientation

are aligned. They can be an example of the theory of intersectionality. Intersectionality is a lens through which you can see where power comes and collides, where it interlocks and intersects. (Crenshaw, 2017). With this theory, I applied all my identities as a lens in exploring and analyzing the nature of oppression without this theory, through my autoethnography, I was not able to offer my perspectives about the clash of identities. Additionally, by the theory of Homonationalism by Puar, I elaborated on tension causes sexual identity to get lost or become invisible among new identities living in Canada. My queerness was the main reason for being a refugee in Canada, yet in Canadian society, my race and ethnicity were more critical in determining my destiny in social interactions. Another example was linking my lived experience as a West Asian queer refugee with the victims of a Toronto serial killer to show the nature of oppression in Canada, vulnerability and invisibility linked to the multi-marginalization of this population with higher risks of discrimination. I used the theory of stigma and its process and effect in society by Goffman and applied it to the relationship between invisibility and visibility of West Asian queer sexual identity in society in relation to stigmatization based on several factors such as race, gender, and immigration status.

Study as a Bridge: My research creates multiple bridges between my experience with other West Asian queer refugees and a broader audience in academia. By comparing contrast with other works of literature, I wanted to introduce a new perspective and an independent study in a West Asian queer autoethnography to the research works in academia with a specific focus on the issue of the West Asian queer refugees to fill the gap and address the problem of being under-researched regarding this population. I could not reflect on My lived experiences as a member of this population by most of the social science methodologies because my lived experiences might not

have been valued in a way that is possible with critical autoethnography. Adding to research works with a West Asian queer perspective is an essential step to breaking the injustice and oppression.

Raise awareness: Living under severe discrimination and multi-marginalization from West Asia to Canada could easily make me discouraged to be silent and get lost in society; however, by witnessing the level of injustice and another form of invisibility in Canada, I could not wait for someone else to do something; I gathered all my energy and time to take steps in this study to raise awareness about the West Asian queer refugees' injustice to Canadian society, and to show how invisibility vulnerability and systematic discrimination against West Asian queer refugees locally and globally is interconnected. Therefore, this critical autoethnography through my story expresses and embodies the resistance in an attempt to prevent further reproduction of inequities and injustices. Eventually, after exposing the injustice and research problem, I wanted to come up with a solution in a separate chapter compatible with the characteristics of discrimination against West Asian queer refugees toward breaking the structure of invisibility, empowerment, and equality. By speaking out my truth and being bold and visible, I am only taking the first step against all forms of oppression we carry daily. I believe in the power of self-acceptance over denial; thus, I do not need permission to exist; and I relentlessly live; that is how I resist.

Chapter 4 Summary:

Chapter 5- Self-Acceptance

Introduction

As West Asian queer refugees, we go through many transitions from one society to another. The constant injustice causes us to gain and lose many identities imposed by different countries. Personally, I did not know how to adjust to all changes in the journey of who I was becoming. As a refugee, excluded and marginalized, and in survival mode, it was increasingly difficult to find a moment to reflect on my journey and other West Asian queer refugees.

On one side, the statelessness in my life journey was a legal fact, and on the other, it was a force on spiritual evolution. With all these rejections and exclusions, there was nowhere to go except into my inner world and (Self). As time passed during these years, especially since 2012 when I left Iran, upon my lived experience within different societies, losing and gaining new identities, overall life and my approach toward queer activism have changed.

As I explained in previous chapters, West Asian queer refugees face multilayered discrimination in their journey from West Asia to Canada. With all the complexities of oppression, the question was, what are the ways of resistance and empowerment toward equality and justice? With this question in mind, I developed the idea of self-acceptance for breaking the invisibility of West Asian queer refugees in this chapter.

The Idea of Self-Acceptance

As a member of the West Asia queer population, I am aware of the history and severity of injustice and coming up with a solution does not mean minimizing the impacts of inequalities. I have often witnessed a sense of hopelessness in creating a change among West Asian queer people, making it seem that justice and equality for us might have a very minimal possibility or even impossible.

I decided to look at our struggles, recognize our journey, and create solutions that are compatible with the characteristics of discrimination against West Asian queer refugees who face many losses and detachments from the familiarity and belonging that one person develops in their lifetime. For instance, attachments and identifying with family, country, language, nationality, race, sexual identity, employment status, health, physical body, and appearance that one can develop in their life, yet being refugee crushes all sense of belonging to these attachments. I have faced this loss, which pushed me toward existentialistic questions such as who am I?

With this identity crisis, before any activism, I needed to bring myself to birth from denial and non-existence, discredit all the credentials posed by the oppressors on me, name the unknown and call out the unspoken discriminations. After more than a decade of thinking about how I could challenge the power and oppression and trying legal, social, and political activism and publishing poetry, legal articles, and journalism, gradually, my focus started to change from the outside world to the inner world and the concept of the “self” and interpersonal skills.

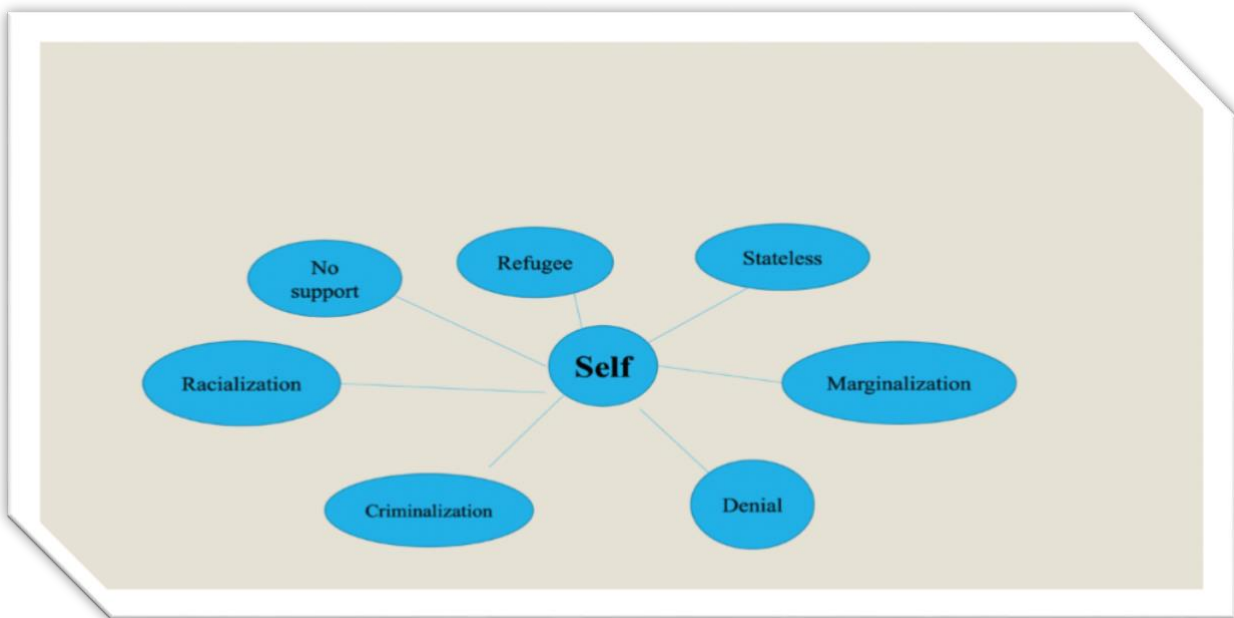


Figure 23. The self among clash of identities

In the battle of invisibility of myself and other West Asia queers, I need first to redefine my purpose and who I became after living under all these forms of oppression. As a result, my fight against oppression and toward LGBTQ rights and equality started being a spiritual evolution, a journey into the inner world and being inspired by Buddhist teachings and Sufism and drawing on findings of psychology in developing the idea of self-acceptance. As Rumi said: Yesterday I was clever, so I wanted to change the world. Today I am wise, so I am changing myself (Rumi, Barks & Moyne, 2018). I think this method is more effective because I am coming from a population that struggles with invisibility and does not have the tools to speak up and expose the injustice. Coming with solution is result of a sense of advocacy and imagination of a poet in creating and transcending the probabilities to the possibilities that currently do not exist.

Suffers as Fuel of Freedoms

Buddhist teachings. The severity of injustice against West Asian queer refugees gives all reasons to be a victim; however, my inner advocate was not satisfied with accepting the state of victimhood for the rest of our lives. All I knew was to liberate myself from within. That is what opens the door of Buddhist teaching in front of me. Instead of seeking the approval of others to validate my struggles, I have learned to develop self-acceptance and self-compassion to take ownership of my life journey and its challenges.

This idea was inspired by Thich Nhat Hanh, a global spiritual leader, poet, and peace activist who was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. called him "an apostle of peace and nonviolence." As he says: If we take good care of ourselves, we help everyone." (Plum Village website,2022). His thinking about suffering in life is explained in the mud and lotus analogy from "No Mud, No Lotus" about transforming suffering: If you know how to use the mud well, you can grow beautiful lotuses. When we suffer, we tend to think that suffering is all there is

at that moment, and happiness belongs to some other time or place. People often ask, why do I have to suffer? If there's no right, then there's no left. Where there is no suffering, there can be no happiness either. (Hanh,2014)

What if there are lessons behind my struggles to push me toward liberation? I started to look at my suffering as fuel for of creating my own liberation. If I fearlessly face the structure of oppression, I might be able to find freedom in the opposite direction. By exploring the injustice against West Asian queer refugees, I created a formula based on the idea of self-acceptance to break the structure of invisibility. These steps are an inspiration based on all my lived experiences, my studies, activism, and listening to many West Asian queer refugees to create the self-acceptance formula:

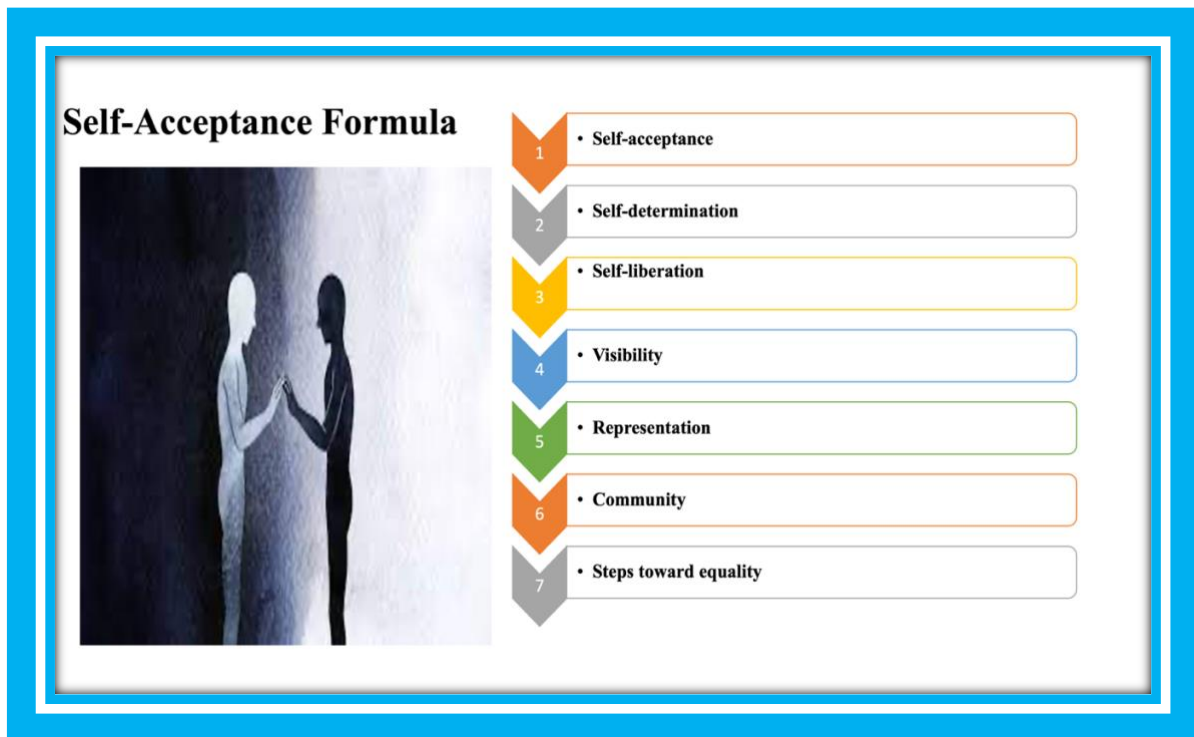


Figure 24. My formula of self-acceptance

- Self-acceptance
- Self-determination
- Self-liberation
- Visibility
- Representation
- Create sense of community
- Elimination of injustice caused by invisibility

There are several definitions of self-acceptance; however, in my research, I am looking at the teaching and works of literature in Buddhism and psychology, and I have noticed that In Buddhist teachings with slight differences, there is not a significant tension in the definition of self-acceptance self-love and self-compassion. West Asian queer refugees, even with all injustice that they face, deserve, and are entitled to dignity and freedom, and self-acceptance is the foundation of this path. It is almost impossible to imagine healing and empowerment without self-acceptance; without it, it may only increase the victimization and complexity of the different forms of oppression.

The self-acceptance formula, I believe, overall, might be compatible with the queer individuals who struggle with invisibility. For many queer people having access to the queer identity needs a series of searches into the inner world in the absence of a safe place and support to express and explore their queer identity. Based on the process of coming out and the characteristic of injustice and oppression against West Asian queer people, I found a potential to apply them in interpersonal development, which brought me to the idea of self-acceptance as a path toward equality and justice for this population.

Self-acceptance is accepting oneself unconditionally regardless of whether the person behaves competently or correctly and whether others are likely to express approval or respect (Davis, 2008). My intention in bringing the concept of self-acceptance is to introduce a space for West Asian queer people to see, define, and accept themselves with the totality of their positive or negative experiences. This is a step against all the labels, identities, and conditions that many societies place this population without guaranteeing acceptance and inclusion. It is vital for West Asian queer refugees under all these oppressions to create an opportunity to face and accept themselves regardless of all rejections and exclusions. West Asian queer refugees are mostly in constant survival mode country after country. West Asian queer identity is not imagined, recognized, or respected; if there is a discussion, it is often ideas by others that are imposed on them. Therefore, there has not been an opportunity for this population to negotiate and decide in determining their own sexual identity and rights. Self-acceptance can be a door, an opportunity that allows a person to redefine and reinvent their lives without needing any system or entity to deny or validate their existence. After all, oppression and invisibility can be a birthplace of liberation for West Asian queer refugees.

Self-Acceptance and Self Actualization

Self-acceptance and self-actualization are correlated, and this is significantly important for queer people because the improvement of self-acceptance leads to the easier process of self-actualization. The coming out process is the process through which LGBTQ individuals first recognize their sexual orientation. The coming out process consists of complex cognitive, affective, and behavioural changes (Reynolds & Hanjorgiris, 2000). By looking at the concept of coming out in the process of the identity development of queer people, I believe there is a special dependency on the external and internal life of a queer person, which means behind any coming

out, it has been a long silent negotiation of a queer individual in their inner world. Forming the LGBTQ identity is challenging because it means adopting a non-traditional identity, restructuring one's self-concept, and altering one's relations with others and society (de Mon- Flores & Schultz, 1978). Self-actualization is an essential stage of the development of queer identity, and it is when an individual realizes their difference regarding sexual identity in order to achieve this, a person is required to have an understanding of oneself. (Davies,2006)

It is proven that self-acceptance improves psychological well-being, and that greater self-acceptance may reduce mental health difficulties by buffering the negative impact of heterosexism (Elizur & Mintzer, 2001). Still, for many queer people, the process of self-actualization is not easy. This process is much more difficult for a vulnerable population such as West Asian queer refugees. Accepting one's sexuality and being comfortable with this part of the self is a key milestone in sexual identity development.

Self-Determination

The successful process of self-acceptance improves the sense of self-determination of one's sexuality, a right that has never been given to West Asian queer refugees. Even though, on the contrary, West Asia has a long history of the existence of queerness in the region, because of all oppressions and constant political instability, it is always overshadowing the queer identity, resulting in disconnect or obstacles to develop and relate with the contemporary LGBTQ rights and equality with other parts of the world.

Self-Liberation

The right to self-determination of one's sexuality creates the foundation of liberation within the person. By self-liberation means freedom from oppression, shame, guilt, and sin. Access to freedom and equality is an active effort by the LGBTQ community, and still, this is a right that is

not guaranteed. These recent years, even in countries with protection for LGBTQ rights, queerness and queer rights often come under attack, and it still proves that queer rights are fragile globally. This is evident in the concept of Gay free zone in Poland that These rights can easily be denied or ignored. Around 100 towns and regions across Poland, nearly a third of the country, have passed resolutions declaring themselves free of LGBT ideology (Żuk, Pluciński, 2021). This case shows that even with advances in laws and policies, the members of the queer community face discrimination or some conditional rights that I use the term "seasonal rights" and protection depending on the campaign of the different political parties or new elections which place queer people in the constant state of vulnerability regarding their rights and protections.

Representation

With all recent works and improvements in LGBTQ rights, lack of representation is a challenge for the queer community because of the history of discrimination and negative biases in different societies. For West Asian queer refugees, representation needs a significant sacrifice under all these threats and intimidation by the local state and abroad, and this representation builds community. We live immersed in representation: we understand our environments and each other. It is also how we know ourselves; representation is implicated in the process of me becoming me. (Webb, 2009) The presence of a few role models in recent years and representation comes with a high cost for West Asian queer in their home countries, which makes it impossible because of systemic denial or significant punishments such as the death sentence. In countries like Canada, marginalization and racialization and the impacts of foreign policies toward the region after 9/11 make the potential presence of a representation for this population increasingly difficult. At the same time, representation for West Asian queer refugees is critical to address and create a broader understanding of the unspoken inequalities.

Visibility

After all these stages, visibility will result from the previous steps, and a consequence of representation is breaking the tall wall of invisibility. Visibility signifies both the possibility of being seen and the possibility of seeing under certain general and special conditions, visibility always encompasses two processes: being identifiable and recognizable on the one hand and identifying/recognizing on the other. (Kohnen,2015). In my research, storytelling with the critical autoethnography methodology was used for the process of visibility by identifying the injustice and verbalizing it, in an effort to be introduced and recognized by the West Asian queer people themselves and the broader population and then of if someone tells the story, others can feel that they are being seen and find themselves in that story as well. By visibility, West Asian queer people can find each other and create a space for finding common interests and a sense of belonging even through their struggles.

Sense of Community

The next goal is a sense of community that will be created by visibility and participation in society as West Asian queer. However, as this population currently struggles with invisibility in a country like Canada does not meet the definition of a community's infrastructure. Thus, these populations are separate individuals and unit that does not have access to the advantages of having a community. "Community is a social group with a common territorial base; those in the group share interests and have a sense of belonging to the group" (Stebbins, 1987, p. 534). Also, the broader gay community in Canada, with all divisions under sexual identities between racialized and non-racialized, was not successful in being open toward the vulnerable and marginalized. The same inequalities regarding race, gender, immigration status or socioeconomics that bring different segregations in Canadian society reappear in various forms in Canada's queer

community. Therefore, I am careful and hesitant about using the word community regarding the realities, division, and disconnection among queer people. That is why I did not consider the West Asian queer refugees in Canada as a community; this is more of a realistic reflection of the lives of this population in Canada because the use of the term community might bring inaccurate assumptions about the existence of an organized group moving toward advocacy and equality while they are still struggling with invisibility which is a real threat and obstacle against creating a community.

Living as an Act of Resistance

Finding the ways of resistance usually is closely related to the forms and levels of the oppression; queer community globally created its ways of resistance depending on the society that they are living in, for instance, how the word queer was used as a tool of oppression and exclusion being reclaimed again by LGBTQ community which is the production of "Reverse Discourse" introduced by Foucault's analysis about power and resistance. (Foucault,1990). Another form of resistance recently being identified by researchers is the concept of everyday resistance, and it begins with a two-step identification of something as being part of every day and that part as an expression of resistance to power, such resistance that is done routinely, but which is not politically articulated in public or formally organized (Scott,2016). Therefore, based on concepts of reverse discourse and everyday resistance, I believe that simply living and thriving under self-acceptance and self-compassion for the West Asian queer refugees is a significant act of resistance. It is mainly based on the level of oppression and their limited access to support and advocacy locally and globally. Compared with other communities in creating a movement toward justice and equality, they have the advantage of support from their members, even if it is small, but it makes a significant difference. As a member of this population myself, I want to have an opportunity to acknowledge

all these silent efforts that are often lost among other pressures of daily life that are invisible to the eyes of the local and global community.

Conclusion

In the end, it should be noted while I wanted to expose and distinguish the struggle of West Asian Queer refugees, I do not have the intention to create new labels or identities for this population and separate them from the whole movement of LGBTQ rights. I operate based on unity and oneness to not create a distance and division yet based help this population transitioning from the state of victimization and all other labels and identities created by the oppressors to empowerment, liberation, and equality. As Persian poet, Sa'adi, in his book Gulistan says:

Human beings are members of a whole,

In creation of one essence and soul.

If one member is afflicted with pain,

Other members uneasy will remain.

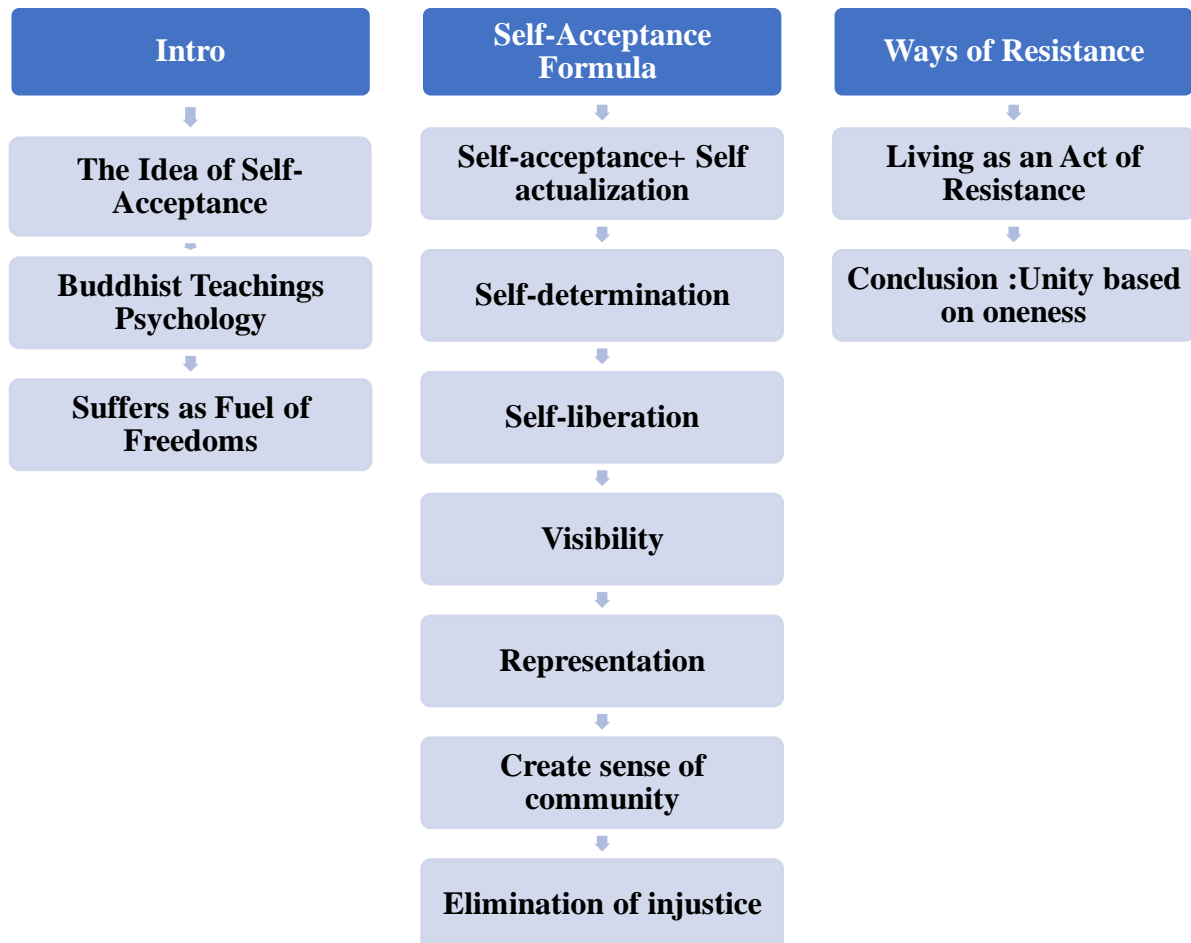
If you've no sympathy for human pain,

The name of human you cannot retain

I have always tried to find common ground within the shared experiences to make the unknown and excluded, familiar and included. This opens doors to other people's lives that we do not know about them. One of the purposes of this research is to express my story and shine a light on our collective struggles. It will be my honour of life to witness other West Asian queer refugees will be inspired to break the silence and invisibility as well. This study emphasizes interpersonal skills resilience by self-acceptance to create an inner home that no one else can take it away. This project is a step toward opening a door for future complex studies to maximize the visibility and protection

of the West Asian queer refugees in Canada, introduce policies, and raise awareness to prevent further injustice and inequalities.

Chapter 5 Summary



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