

# The caged bird sings for freedom

How do the cultural performances of formerly detained Syrian women in the diaspora shift the victimhood paradigm from 'pathetic' to 'heroic' after their release from al-Assad's prisons during the Syrian revolution from 2011 to 2017?



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The caged bird sings  
with a fearful trill  
of things unknown  
but longed for still  
and his tune is heard  
on the distant hill  
for the caged bird  
sings of freedom

Poem by Maya Angelou

'I met many women who were able to defy the brutality of society with only their own strength and determination' <sup>1</sup>

'When women overcome the issue of sexual violence and speak out about it, they are able to make a real change in society'<sup>2</sup>

'Imprisonment has liberated me'<sup>3</sup>

'I will never forget the religious woman who took off her hijab in the middle of a crowded street to bandage a bleeding man; in that moment politics, religion and ideologies disappeared and the only thing that remained was our humanity'<sup>4</sup>

'A victim is anyone whose rights were violated and who suffers from injustice, in this case all Syrians are victims'<sup>5</sup>

'I learned in the prison more than I learned in medicine faculty'<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Author's interview with Almoutassim Al Kilani, real name. A Syrian lawyer Paris, France on 17 April 2018

<sup>2</sup> Author's interview with Anwar Al Boni, real name, a Syrian lawyer, Berlin, Germany 03 May 2018.

<sup>3</sup> Author's interview with Nada.Sharif, pseudonym, a woman detainee, Paris, France 19 April 2018.

<sup>4</sup> Author's interview with Lana Mustafa, pseudonym, a woman detainee, Paris, France 21 April 2018.

<sup>5</sup> Author's interview with Rania.Kamel, pseudonym, a woman detainee, Paris, France 24 April 2018

<sup>6</sup> Nawal el Saadawi, an Egyptian writer, will be introduced later.

## **Abstract**

*This thesis is written in response to the stereotypical images of female detainees as weak and powerless.*

*I will explore the burdened agency - the agency despite the constraints and restrictions they experienced in detention and from society, to subsequently analyse the shift in perceived victimhood from pathetic to heroic.*

*I will do this through using symbolic inversion, meaning I will analyse how former Syrian female detainees acted in a way that defies social norms and expectations.*

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It is also dedicated to all detainees who were arrested due to their principles, especially the Syrians who are suffering and dying in silence.

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# Contents

	Page
Introduction	7
1. Context	10
1.1 Syrian context	10
1.1.1 Al Baath coup 1963	10
1.1.2 Security	11
1.1.3 The Syrian Revolution	12
1.1.4 Current situation	13
1.2 Status of Women	13
1.2.1 Legal	14
1.2.2 Political	14
1.2.3 Social	15
1.3 Detention	15
1.3.1 Detainees	15
1.3.2 Female Detainees	16
1.3.3 Counter Terrorism Courts	18
2. Situating the theory	19
2.1 Victimhood, Agency Controversy	19
2.2 Burdened Agency	22
2.3 Symbolic Inversion	22
3. Concepts and analytical framework	26
3.1 Definitions	26
3.2 Research Puzzle	27
4. Methodology	29
4.1 Research Strategy	29
4.2 Sampling Method	29
4.3 Research steps	30
4.4 Data Collection Technique	32
4.5 Data Analysis	32
4.6 Challenges	33
4.7 Ethical considerations	34
5. Analysis	36
5.1 Before Detention	39
5.1.1 Expressive Behaviour	39

5.1.2 Breaking the rules	40
5.1.3 First protest	40
5.1.4 Agency and heroic victims	41
5.1.5 Guilty Victims	41
5.2 During detention	42
5.2.1 Lack of knowledge	42
5.2.2 Torture	43
5.2.3 Forms of agency in the prison	45
5.3 After detention	47
5.3.1 Restrictions	47
5.4 Symbolic Inversion	48
5.4.1 In Syria	48
5.4.2 In the diaspora	49
5.4.3 X Adra	50
5.5 Politicization and publicization of private choices	51
5.5.1 Still have a voice	52
Conclusion	55
Bibliography	57

## Introduction

The world has finally woken up and is watching Syria with eagle eyes. The international community is preoccupied with its 'War on Terror' and attempting to find a political solution to the conflict, while tens of thousands of detainees are dying in silence. Global news on Syria often focuses on the refugee crisis or on the number of civilians that have been killed, yet behind these facts there is a critical, and often forgotten, issue at hand. For decades, Syrian people have been arrested for political activism, yet since the start of the Syrian revolution this has dramatically escalated to the point where people are arrested if they are even just suspected of participating in protests, if they know or are related to someone who participated, or sometimes for no reason at all. The conditions inside the prisons are inhumane, with a lack of nutrition and basic medical services. Some detainees are tortured to death, and their families only find out years later. The majority of people in Syria know somebody who has disappeared, with no information where they are or if they are even still alive. In March 2011, at the beginning of the peaceful protests, one Syrian mother's son was arrested for his involvement on the streets. After bribing the government, and applying many times for news of his whereabouts, in July 2018 she was finally notified that her son died on the 15th January 2013. This is not an exceptional case, but the daily reality for many. There have been few in-depth studies on the situation of detainees, yet it is essential that this issue is brought into the public conscience.

This research focuses on female detainees as they face increased gender-based threats inside the prison and, even more importantly for this thesis, further suffering after they have been released. The scarce reports that have been written have mainly focussed on male detainees, such as Amnesty International's report on Saydnaya prison in 2017, and the Caesar Photos which showed how do/did prisoners live inside Syrian prisons (Human Rights Watch 2015). The situation of female detainees is highly important and in need of attention. The estimated number of Syrian female detainees is 14,000, and the huge majority of whom have been arrested by the regime. Up until 6th February 2017, 8,400 documented women including 300 underaged girls, are still in Al Assad prisons and 2,400 are forcibly disappeared (Al Jazeera 2017). I worked at the Violations Documentation Center when I was in Syria, an organisation that works relentlessly hard to document all the human rights violations that have happened since 2011. I used to follow up on cases of women who were arrested. These arrests were mostly illegal and often vague as to why they were detained. These women were arrested by undercover security services and taken to unknown locations. They were held in security branches for long times, with no information given to their families.

Unlike men, when women are released from prison, they remain behind bars in their family and society. Razan Mohammed, a former detainee, was trying to provoke the investigator to lead him kill her because she was afraid of facing her family and husband (Al Jazeera Mubasher 2016). These women will be stigmatized for the rest of their lives because of the shame linked to sexual assault and rape. They will face the risk of divorce, rejection from their families, or being single for the rest of their lives because society and social norms dictate that no one will marry a woman who has been raped or sexually



assaulted as mentioned by Hanada Al Refaei in an interview by Al Arabia (Arabic Documentary 2015).

Discussing this issue is important for several reasons. First, aside the obvious negative effects that detention has on women, they also gain some leverage in helping to reveal the violations of human rights made by the regime by their testimonies (Mckernan 2017). Second, there is no specific information or accurate number concerning this issue and all the information available is based on testimonies of the released women. This is largely because the international community is silent on the issue. Carla del Ponte, a distinguished international war crimes prosecutor, expressed her frustration with the inability of the UN's investigative panel into human rights abuses in the civil war to hold criminals to account. She told the media after her resignation: "I give up. The states in the [UN] Security Council don't want justice," (Mckernan 2017). It is worthy to research how these women were able to get agency again after their detention, as it is expected that the conservative social norms would prevent them from doing so. Empirically, there is no specific academic debate regarding former Syrian female detainees as it is an ongoing phenomena that is currently under-research. However, some academics have discussed the issue more generally and referring to different contexts. We learn from Shalhoub-Kevorkian (1999), that the common knowledge about instances of abuse and rape could stigmatize and silence women, and it is very much related to the society and culture. She states that the notion of rape in Arab countries stems from the perception of women's status and sexuality. Virginity is something sacred and women cannot have sex out of marriage because they will bring shame and scandal to their family honour (ibid 159). In addition, the subordination of women in Arab countries, and their inferior treatment in society, reinforces this thought (ibid). In their article Alsaba and Kapilashrami (2016) point out that detention of women has increased since the beginning of the Syrian conflict and continues to. The detention was not merely because of their activism, rather as a tool of negotiation and exchange, or to put pressure on their male counterparts, especially fighters and activists. They also mention that women are suffering inside and outside the prison: "experiences of women detainees, however, reveal cultural stigmatisation due to the widespread prevalence of sexual violence in detention centres" (ibid:11-12). This is the empirical knowledge that I will contribute to.

In 2012 I, a Syrian woman, was arrested by the military security services for distributing flyers calling for young people to deter from joining the regime's army. By that time, the number of detainees was increasing day by day. This personal experience, in addition to my work for the Violations Documentation Center, motivated me to focus on detainees for my research. The complication I witnessed that led me to focus more specifically on female detainees, was when watching a French documentary about the issue made in 2017. In this documentary, Syrian women who had formerly been detained were interviewed. One of these women was Mariam. Mariam, unlike all the other female interviewees, spoke very bravely about her detention, torture, and above all, rape. The other women all spoke behind shadows, cautious of being revealed on camera. To talk openly about these issues is considered taboo in Syrian society as they are associated with shame and social stigma. Intrigued by Mariam, I started to search for other interviews or articles about her. Since the release of the French documentary in 2017, she has become a social media icon among Syrians. However, I soon came across an earlier interview with her from 2016 where she appeared very differently. In this video, her performance was very reserved and helpless (Al Jazeera Mubasher 2016). This led me to start questioning what could have caused this change in her attitude.

While the overarching aim of this research is to give voice to female detainees, I more specifically want to explore the factors that help former female detainees gain agency after their release, and subsequently transform themselves from being perceived as pathetic to heroic victims. The above information about female detainees raises some questions: What capacities for choice and action did the women have that led to their arrest? What level of agency did the women have, or, what capacities did they have to initiate the change? What are the direct and indirect consequences of their detention? How did they deal with the reactions from society to their detention? And, how has a woman like Mariam, in such a conservative setting, gained the agency to talk about such issues, and how has she become to be seen as heroic in the eyes of many? Furthermore, how have her public performances changed so significantly?

In this research, I will look into the victimhood paradigm shift of formerly detained Syrian women, from pathetic victims to heroic. I will try to understand how the perceptions of these women has changed. In order to do this, the first chapter will first explain the Syrian context; from the al-Baath uprising of 1963 to the current conflict situation, to the position of Syrian women politically, legally and socially, and the latest circumstances for female detainees. After the context has been outlined, I will situate the theory in wider academic debates. I will look into the controversy around victimhood and agency, and then focus more deeply into the relatively under explored concepts of burdened agency and symbolic inversion. Based on this theoretical chapter, the third chapter will introduce the analytical frame and concepts that this research is centered on, and then present the research question. Next, chapter four will outline how I practically conducted the research and the methodologies used. I will also reflect on the challenges and limitations that the research presented. Then, chapter five will connect the theory with the interviews I conducted in the analysis in order to understand the victimhood paradigm shift. In the final chapter, the conclusion, I will provide the main findings of the research, highlight shortcomings, and make recommendations for future research.

## 1. Context

Many people are not aware of the background and history that characterises the current conflict in Syria. Media reporting has a tendency to focus on images and events that stir emotions and sympathy within the audience: refugees fleeing by sea, children displaced, and terrorist acts from ISIS. What is not so often shown, is the ongoing political struggle that many Syrians are going through, the dictatorship that the Syrian president, Bashar al-Assad, imposes among the people and, related to this thesis, all the tens of thousands of forgotten people that have been detained, tortured, and killed in prisons across the country. In this chapter, I will dive into the context of Syria to increase understanding of the historical events that contributed to the onset of the revolution in 2011. As my puzzle states, I am studying the shift in victimhood paradigm from pathetic to heroic of formerly Syrian female detainees who were arrested after 2011, therefore it is necessary to draw a full image of the context surrounding this phenomenon and the circumstances that contribute to it. I will then go deeper into the past and current situation of women in Syria and, more specifically, the situation of female Syrian detainees so that the reader has increased knowledge about the significance of this research.

### 1.1 Syrian context

#### 1.1.1 Al Baath<sup>7</sup> coup 1963

After the *coup d'état* on the 8th of March 1963, which brought the Baath party into power, a state of emergency was declared and subsequently lasted for 48 years. Since then, the authorities suspended almost all the independent newspapers and began to control the media (Rabinovich 1972). Article 4a of the Emergency Law states that persons' freedom of meeting, residency, movement and passing by certain places are restricted. The military ruler has the right to issue an arrest warrant against those suspected of being a threat to state security and public order (Al Jazeera 2011). Under this law, prisons began to be filled with political prisoners who dared to criticize the regime. Moreover, even just discussing or criticizing topics that might threaten or embarrass the Syrian regime such as "the president and his family, the ruling Baath Party, the military, the legitimacy of the regime, the sectarian question" were forbidden and considered taboo (Ghadbian 2001:76). Citizens, including children, knew that they were not allowed to mention these taboo issues. From my own personal experience as a child, I remember my mother exhorting me every morning before going to school not to tell any jokes or raise any questions about the regime. 'Walls have

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<sup>7</sup> The Arabic word "Baath" means renaissance or resurrection. It was a rallying cry for the reaffirmation of Arab culture and Government after the subjugation of empire and colonialism. The same word was chosen for the main party in Iraq.

ears' is a saying that every Syrian knows and keeps. Topics which were not forbidden were strongly censored by the Ministry of Information, including "the government's human rights record, Islamic opposition, allegations of involvement of officials in drug trafficking, the activity of Syrian troops in Lebanon, graphic description of sex, materials unfavourable to the Arab cause in the Arab Israeli conflict" (ibid:76).

After the emergency state was imposed, a following law was introduced in 1964 named 'Opposing the aims of the Revolution'. This law suppressed all free voices through prosecutions and arbitrary provisions such as the death penalty and life imprisonment. This situation led politicians, intellectuals and economists to leave this inferno. After that, and based on the state of the emergency law, came the Supreme State Security Court (SSSC) decided by Legislative Decree No. 47 of 1968. These courts replaced the military courts that were founded in 1966. The process in the SSSC was described as not being judicial, but rather political; "you're sentenced if your political thinking is wrong" (Western diplomat, Human Rights Watch 2009). Al Baath party has the absolute power to control all aspects of life and the political movements in the country, and this is guaranteed by the Syrian Constitution of 1973. The 8<sup>th</sup> article of the Constitution clearly stated that "The leading party in the society and the state is the Socialist Arab Baath Party. It leads a patriotic and progressive front seeking to unify the resources of the people's masses and place them at the service of the Arab nation's goals". This article was only recently removed in 2012 when the new Constitution was established. It was removed in response to public pressure (BBC News 2012).

### **1.1.2 Security**

The Syrian regime, including Hafez Al Assad and Bashar Al Assad, has used repressive methods as a securitizing policy in order to control people and enforce their power. Hafez al Assad came to power after his coup in November 1970, and he built his rule on security services which were, and still are, his first hand to spread fear and to control "security, politics, culture, the economy, and even religion" (Tallaa 2016). This was also Bashar Al Assad's policy. This apparatus of oppression and fear was formed from four security agencies; Military Intelligence, Air Force Intelligence, State Security, Political Security, and their branches (Al Hendi 2011 ). Formally, the structure of these agencies is not important because in practice these agencies are monopolized by Al Assad Family, the president, his brother, his brother in law and other relatives (ibid). Furthermore, there is no coordination or collaboration between these branches. This was clear at the checkpoints where, as a Syrian person, I experienced separate stops for each branch. Also, in detention facilities this lack of coordination between the branches was also notable as many Syrian activists were released from one security branch to then be arrested by another one, with the repetition of the same interrogation and torture methods (ibid). This is of course the detainees most horrible nightmare, and also one of the reasons that leads them to leave the country.

Permission or authorisation from a security branch is an inevitable precondition for almost everything in Syria, even for personal affairs such as marriage or renting a house. For instance, the permission of the Military Intelligence is an essential requirement for men to be able to apply for a passport, a job, or to pursue studies. More recently, since the

revolution escalated, for most people just thinking of going to a security branch is impossible due to safety concerns or fears of conscription and detention. This has paralysed people's choices and freedom of movement.

'Wasta', meaning corruption in Arabic, is a well-known and commonly used word in Syria. Nepotism and corruption are two distinct features of the Syrian regime, and it is widely known that the Syrian government is sectarian based, and this is linked to the high growth of corruption and nepotism. Bashar Al-Assad, himself, has even acknowledged the high level of corruption within the country (Al Arabiya, 2011). Living in Syria, I witnessed how people in charge are manipulating their power and using their position for personal purposes. This personalization of public office was common and was obvious after 2011, especially at the checkpoints. 'You could be arrested at a checkpoint if one of the officers is in a bad mood, and likewise you may also be released if he is in a good mood'<sup>8</sup>

### **1.1.3 The Syrian Revolution**

The Syrian revolution was a turning point for the lives and roles of Syrians', especially for my focus group: former female detainees. Motivated by the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions, due to the rising public resentment, and as a reaction to the situation that was described in the above sections, the Syrian uprising began in March 2011 (Kahf 2014). It stemmed from the country's grassroots movement, and soon spread all over the country with the involvement of many different people. Most documenting dates of the onset of the revolution go back to March, but the first protest took place in February 2011 by local tradesmen in Old Damascus. Inspired by the Arab Spring, in March children in Daraa wrote revolutionary slogans on the wall. They were quickly arrested and tortured by the Syrian government. In response, thousands of people in the same city demonstrated in the streets, calling for justice and freedom. Then, people of other minor cities joined the revolution (Slim and Trombetta 2014).

This awakening of Syrians was the moment of change and liberation that Syrians had been dreaming about and waiting for, for years. After decades of oppression and suffering, Syrians were united and they called, thunderously, for their freedom and dignity. This call for freedom was echoed by people across the country, posing a real threat to an authoritarian regime like the Syrian one. Moreover, it was the first real attempt of people daring to collectively defy the regime: "for the first time in Syria's contemporary history, people demanded real and concrete political and economic reforms" (ibid:16). The regime has always tried to portray the protests as sectarian based, but that was not the case because people's religious identity was not a triggering factor for this action (Kahf 2014). Footages of demonstrations show the peaceful demonstrations. As a participant in the demonstrations myself, most of the protests I joined started with the slogan "peaceful, peaceful, peaceful". Sometimes the protesters raised their hands or held olive branches to show that they are disarmed (ibid). However, the regime's initial response to these protests was violent, including the arrest and killing of people. On the 18th of March 2011, the regime killed three protesters in Daraa during the demonstration (ibid). However, these arrests had the adverse

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<sup>8</sup> Author's interview with Almoutassim Al Kilani, real name. A Syrian lawyer Paris, France on 17 April 2018.

effect intended, as the brutal methods that the regime used, with the help of the security forces, only encouraged more demonstrations to the streets.

Despite the insistence of a large number of activists to keep the revolution peaceful and nonviolent, an armed faction emerged and “overshadowed the nonviolent resistance” (ibid). In autumn 2011, the revolution became militarized. This was because the Free Syrian Army was created mostly by defectors from the government army. Later, it became a brand name for anyone with a gun who claimed to be fighting Assad, and this consequently this gave the regime a concrete reason to fight (Slim and Trombetta 2014). Demonstrations increased and were spread all over Syria, and the regime continued its brutal tactics of repression, through killing and detention.

Commonly, the escalation of violence continues if collective protests are met with state repression (Azar 1990: 12). Syria was no exception. Nearing the end of 2013, the country witnessed the rise of jihadist groups. By this time, there was no longer a clear vision of who was fighting who; what began as the opposition fighting the regime, evolved into a myriad of militias all fighting for slightly different causes and under different umbrellas. In 2015, Russia carried out its first airstrike, marking a significant development in the conflict as international actors became more visibly involved (BBC 2018). Syria can no longer be called a civil war, as much of the world is now somehow involved. Over the years, the world has seen Al-Assad consistently violate international law by conducting chemical weapon attacks, bombing hospitals and schools, and specifically targeting civilians (Brooks et al 2018)

#### **1.1.4 Current situation**

After seven years of conflict in Syria, the death toll from 2011 until April 2018 was 470,000, with another 6.6 million internally displaced people and over 5.5 million people seeking refuge abroad (UNHCR 2018). As of the end of 2017, there were more than 117,000 detainees (UNHCR 2018). The numbers are ever increasing, and these figures are just the official recorded numbers. It is suspected that in reality they are much higher. The complexity of the conflict made it very difficult for researchers to cover all the sides of the conflict; their main focus was on the direct consequences like death, conflicting parties and refugees. The Syrian conflict can no longer be defined within the borders of Syria. The world is not only a bystander looking in on the violence and injustice that is happening, many countries also have their own stakes and interests in how the situation evolves. This further complicates possibilities for a cessation of violence, and makes the search for a peaceful solution seem even further away.

#### **1.2 Status of Women**

I tried in the previous section to situate my topic in its broad context, but in the following section I will zoom in at the stipulated rules and norms that specifically define women’s lives and roles in Syria by elaborating on women’s legal, political, and social status. It is clear that both men and women in Syria have been suffering from human rights violations for decades. Human Rights Watch stated in its 2010 World Report, that the Syrian government continued to violate the civil and political rights of citizens, arresting activists and

bloggers and imposing travel bans. (2011). However, women face gender- based inequalities both in law and society that contribute to further violations of their rights.

### **1.2.1 Legal**

Legally, women are able to participate in everyday life in the same way as men are. Since 1949, when Syria adopted its civil and commercial codes which granted the right for women to own property and manage their own businesses, gender equality should have been ensured (Hilton 2017). The Syrian Constitution of 1973, which until 2012 was the country's constitution, women and men were considered equal in the eyes of the law. Article 45 states that women have "all the opportunities that enable them to participate fully and effectively in political, social, and cultural life" (ibid). However, in reality, this has not been the case.

In the Penal Code, it allows for men to prevent and restrict their wives from working outside of the household (ibid). Unequal rights to divorce and custody, and permitting polygamy for men, has normalised the submission of women and gender inequality. Women are able to file for divorce but the process for doing so differs compared to men. If a woman applies, she must present evidence that she was neglected or abused from her husband. For a man, on the other hand, he simply must go to court and orally demand a divorce. The legal age for girls to get married is 17 years, and for boys it is 18 years yet child marriage is still relatively common (UN Women 2017: 11). In urban areas, like Damascus or Aleppo, early marriage is not ordinary yet in rural areas and small villages it is still commonplace. If a male legal guardian gives permission, and a judge approves, boys may marry at the age of 15 years, and girls at 13 years (ibid). Young girls who are married off are at higher risk of domestic violence and restricted movement (Al Jazeera 2018).

Sexual violence is not sufficiently protected against in Syrian Law. There are no specific laws that prohibit domestic violence, and marital rape is explicitly not included in the Penal Code's definition of rape (Rutgers 2016: 1). Furthermore, a rapist is able to avoid punishment if he marries his victim.

### **1.2.2 Political**

Compared to other Islamic countries in the region, Syria is known to be progressive and open in terms of women's rights and their political participation (Marsi 2017). However, women's presence in the political arena remains minimal. In 1990, women occupied 9 percent of seats in Parliament which, considering in the same year in the United Kingdom this number was just 6 percent, is significant (ibid). More recently, in 2016 women held 13 percent of seats which is considerable as in neighbouring Lebanon women held only 3 percent. In Syria's 427 local councils, this number is not so high; with estimates ranging from 2-4 percent.

While legally, as seen above, women face no barriers in accessing politics, cultural and social reasons refrain them from doing so. Lama Kannout, a Syrian human rights and political activist, blames this on the tendency for people to be elected based on their ethnicity or their connection to certain families (ibid). As mentioned previously, Syria's society is characterised by corruption and this is a clear example. In the local councils, military groups have an influence over who is nominated and elected (Aljundi 2014: 32).

### **1.2.3 Social**

Even though the Syrian constitution guarantees gender equality, and women are legally able to participate in everyday life, they are not guaranteed positions in many parts of society and their opportunities are far fewer than that of men. For example, Syria achieved gender equality in universities long before many countries in the Arab world, yet the opportunities for graduated men and women are not mirrored (Locke 2017). Syrian women face social restraints related to entrenched attitudes and cultural norms that dictate their behaviour (Hill 1997). For instance, as shown above, women are legally able to seek divorce (albeit, with difficulty), yet the societal consequences and social stigmatisation often prevent them from doing so. A divorced woman is seen as 'damaged goods', and she would experience many challenges in finding a new partner. Again, while there are technically no formal barriers for women finding employment, their obligation to work in the informal and unpaid sector, such as domestic work or socially necessary work can restrict them. Society and culture confine women's roles and responsibilities largely in the home (Hilton 2017).

Sexual violence is another stigmatising issue that has social consequences far beyond the physical and psychological harm inflicted in the incidence. As noted above, the law does not adequately protect women against sexual violence, especially if it occurs within a marriage. If a woman does experience such violence, few come forward and report it because of the shame that would become attached to her and even her family. Virginity is seen as sacred, and it is socially prohibited for women to have sex before marriage. If she does so, her family's honour will be ruined (Shalhoub-Kevorkian 1999).

Since the onset of the revolution in 2011, women's multifaceted roles have changed considerably. Women played an important role during the protests, organising and leading demonstrations. And, women have been essential in ensuring the continuation and sustainability of relief efforts. Whether it is due to the fact that many men have either been killed or fled from Syria or from a shift towards greater gender equality, it is undeniable that women are now taking more active positions in society, in politics, and in the job sector, and becoming 'agents of change' (Marsi 2017). Barriers that once stopped women entering into certain sectors, especially the media and government institutions, are slowly chipping away due to the conflict (Hilton 2017).

## **1.3 Detention**

### **1.3.1 Detainees**



As mentioned before, Syria has been living under dictatorship since 1963, and under the control of al Assad family since 1970. Political detention is not a new phenomenon or a result of the conflict, its roots go far back. However, the Syrian conflict, which started in 2011 as a revolution against the authoritarian regime of Bashar al Assad, led to a considerable rise in the number of people detained. Since the onset of the Syrian revolution, the Syrian regime has used detention as a tool to repress the peaceful protests. Political detention in Syria is not something new or related to the conflict, rather it has its roots in the sixties of the last century.

The issue of Syrian detainees is critical; they are living in inhuman conditions, with a lack of nutrition and basic medical services. Moreover, they are being tortured to death; it is reported that authorities use thirty five torture techniques in their prisons with an average of 300 deaths happening each month in custody (Amnesty International 2017). A report by Amnesty published on February 2017 reveals the inhuman conditions Syrian detainees are living in. It shows the campaign of extrajudicial executions by mass hangings at Saydnaya Prison that took place between 2011 and 2015.

Not one of the detainees condemned to execution at Saydnaya Prison have been given anything that even closely resembles an actual trial (Amnesty 2017). The judge will ask the name of the detainee and whether he committed the crime. Whether the answer is yes or no, he will be convicted. This court has no relation with the rule of law, according to a former judge from a Syrian military court (ibid). On 23rd March 1976, Syria signed and enforced the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Article 14 of the Covenant states that 'Everyone charged with a criminal offence shall have the right to be presumed innocent until proven guilty according to law.', and that everybody is 'To be tried without undue delay' (United Nations 1966: Article 14). Despite ratifying this Convention, the Syrian regime does not abide to these standards. Most of the detainees are deemed guilty, sometimes only because of their name or their place of birth. Lawyers cannot have safe and easy access to detainees. Moreover, courts in Syria are used as means to intimidate and subordinate society and suppress opposition voices especially the counterterrorism courts. Nadim Houry, deputy Middle East director at Human Rights Watch said "The new Counterterrorism Court is providing judicial cover for the persecution of peaceful activists by Syria's security agencies," (Human Rights Watch 2013).

### **1.3.2 Female Detainees**

When I was in Syria documenting the violations of human rights by the Syrian regime with the Violations Documentation Center (VDC), I was following up cases where the processes of arresting women were illegal and vague. They were arrested anywhere and anytime without an arrest warrant, most of the time by unknown security forces to unknown destinations without providing them with any legal justifications. In their article, Alsaba and Kapilashrami (2016) point out that detention of women has increased since the beginning of the Syrian revolution and continues to do so. The detention was not merely because of their activism, rather as a tool of negotiation and exchange, or to put pressure on their male counterparts, especially fighters and activists. They also mention that women are suffering inside and outside the prison; "experiences of women detainees reveal cultural

stigmatisation due to the widespread prevalence of sexual violence in detention centres” (ibid:11-12).

According to former detainee, Majd Shurbaji, 90% of female detainees who she met during her detention were neutral and were arrested not because of their activism or relations to the revolution, rather to use them as a pressure to force their family members to surrender and confess. An example of this case is Rasha Shurbaji. Rasha was seven months pregnant with twins and arrested with her three children in an attempt to force her husband to surrender in May 2014. She gave birth in prison and afterwards was separated from her five children. Her children were put in an orphanage and were not allowed to meet their mother or relatives. Another reason is to use these women in prisoners exchange operations instead of releasing the real activists. Some women are also arrested as collective punishment because they are from a certain place such as Daria or Al Houla. In all of these above reasons, women are not arrested for any crimes they have committed, but as a tool in the ongoing war; they are used for strategic reasons, to evoke fear, and to bring shame. Women are used as a commodity, as a weapon of war.

Women who are arrested can be held in security branches for unlimited time without informing them or their families about the charges against them or the place of detention. In April 2011, one former detainee was held for three months in pre-trial detention, violating both international legal standards and legislation passed by the Syrian government that limits detention without judicial review to 60 days (Human Rights Watch 2013).

After their arrest they could be transferred to several security branches for interrogation where they are physically and psychologically tortured in several ways like rape, electricity, *shabeh* [being hung from the ceiling by one’s wrists with feet dangling or barely touch the ground], burning with cigarettes and hitting with metal rods. (Human Rights Watch 2013). They could also be detained in solitary cells alone or sometimes with a dead body (Al Jazeera Mubasher 2016), or being interrogated while torturing other inmates. After being in security branches, these women are transferred to Adra Damascus Central Prison where they have to wait their trial. The conditions there are no better, they are suffering from extortion and lack of nutrition and medical care; “some prisoners were pregnant, elderly or sick and were denied proper treatment.” As a result, female political prisoners started hunger strikes on 1st July 2013, to protest their treatment in Adra. They demanded a right to a fair trial, proper medical care and contact with family members”(Abu Rached 2014).

As previously mentioned, women face a number of inequalities in Syria solely based on their gender. When they are detained, however, prison seems to be the one place where they are treated equally to men. As a former detainee, Noura Al Jizawi, said: ‘there is full equality between men and women in the prisons’ (Al Jazeera Arabic 2017). They share the fear of being arrested again, losing their jobs, expulsion from university, and the prevention from travel. However, female detainees face further, more serious complications. One of most damaging consequences for these women are the babies that are born in prisons as a result of systematic rape by the prison guards. Rape has become common practice in the security detention centres as a torture technique (Human Rights Watch 2013) . These children will not be registered by the government and not be accepted by society. The Syrian

Civil Code stipulates in Legislative Decree No. 26 of 2007, Chapter IV Article 28, paragraph c: “in case of children born to unregistered marriages, they cannot be registered until the marriage itself is registered” (Aladdin and al-Ibrahim 2017).

Moreover, when women are released from prison, they remain behind bars in their family and society, Razan Mohammed a former detainee was trying to tease the investigator to lead him kill her because she was afraid of facing her family and husband (Al Jazeera Mubasher 2016). These women will be stigmatized for the rest of their lives because of the shame linked to sexual assault and rape. They will face the risk of divorce, rejection from their families, or being single for the rest of their lives. As Hanada Al Refaei reports in an interview for Al Arabia, society dictates that no one will marry a woman who has been raped or sexually assaulted (Arabic Documentary 2015). Fadel Abdul Ghani, the chairman of Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), says: “It is not easy for a woman to reveal publicly, even under an alias, the violations she suffered in an environment that can turn the victim into the defendant, and look at her unnaturally”(SNHR 2016). In addition, there are no programmes to help them reintegrate again in society, or psychological support.

### **1.3.3 Counter Terrorism Courts**

Courts in Syria are used as a means to intimidate and subordinate society and suppress opposition voices; in brief they are tools to protect the regime, not the country or the people. This is typical in authoritarian systems like the Syrian regime, which has been monopolizing the political power for more than fifty years and abolished the national institutions, and formed its own constitution to ensure its everlasting rule. In Syria, courts and laws are used to support the regime, not the people.

Due to the public pressure after the start of the Syrian Revolution in 2011, president Bashar al-Assad lifted the Emergency Law in an effort to calm down the public anger. He did this through the Legislative Decree No 161 of 2012, and the SSSC by the Legislative Decree No 53 of 2012, and replaced them with starker laws and a Counter Terrorism Court (Euro News 2011). This court ignored the Judiciary Act and, similar to the SSSC, meant that judges can only be appointed by the President. Nadim Houry, deputy Middle East director at Human Rights Watch, said that “The new Counterterrorism Court is providing judicial cover for the persecution of peaceful activists by Syria’s security agencies” (Human Rights Watch 2013).

The first article of the Syrian Counterterrorism Law defines a Terrorist Act as any action aimed to cause panic among people, disturb public *security* or harm the state's' infrastructure, that is committed by means of arms, munitions, explosives , flammable materials, poisonous or burning products, epidemic or bacteriological agents, regardless of the form of these means , or by means of any tool that serves the same purpose. However, most of the peaceful activists are tried under this unjust law.

## 2. Situating the theory

### 2.1 Victimhood, Agency Controversy:

The aim of this thesis is to understand the shift from pathetic to heroic victims among former Syrian female detainees. In order to do this, it is necessary to understand the controversial relationship between victimhood and agency, especially the debate related to women. Two main aspects characterize writings that focus on the abuses against women. The first one portrays women as passive victims who have no capacities for choice and action, while the other describes them as agentic figures who are resisters and responsible for their own lives (Schneider 1995, Dahl 2009, Pelak 2005& Povey 2003 *in* Dahl 2009). A professor of law at Brooklyn Law School who is particularly interested in gender law and domestic violence, Elisabeth Schneider, criticizes this view and describes it as “static and incomplete” (1995: 387). These notions have their roots in the binaries constructed in our societies. Both women’s victimization and agency are known only by the absence of the other; meaning there can only be a victim when there is an agent, and vice versa (Mahoney 1994). I agree with Mahoney’s criticism of this narrow and exclusive notion which defines people as agentic if they are not victims or victims if they are in no way agents. This means that people are living in perfectly platonic societies where there is no oppression, so agency in this sense does not mean acting under repression (*ibid*). I believe that being a victim is not an identity, but a temporary state which does not completely deprive people from their agency. Moreover, there is no full agency, but rather a spectrum.

Since the seventies, lawyers and feminist activists have tried to constitute a legal definition of harms against women, basically, rape, sexual harassment and pornography. However, all these definitions of different abuses of women have always viewed women as victims (Schneider 1995). Also, feminist work has portrayed women as either victims or agents and this, according to Schneider, is a “false dichotomy between women’s victimhood and women’s agency (Schneider 1995: 387). In her work *‘describing and changing’*, Schneider reviews cases of battered women’s self-defence (Schneider 1986). The cases she reviewed looked at women, who killed their assailants in a self- defence action, as victims. She believes that victimization and agency are “not extremes in opposition” (1993:395), and that acknowledgment of victimization is important. On the other hand, ignoring their agency to act in a way to protect themselves and their children despite their victimization is also important, because both of them are part of women’s experiences (*ibid*:220, 221). She considers the common perception of why a battered woman accepts violence and does not leave the relationship as a “trivialization” of the victimization of women. She also criticises that this perception does not take into account the circumstances

of the relationship; “the woman's action has to be put in the context of her victimization<sup>[S3]</sup>” (Schneider 1995: 389).

On the other hand, recent writings of anthropologists and sociologists, demonstrate the moral stance they take, by stating “ These people are not victims, but agents” (Dahl 2009: 392). Dahl refers to them as Agents Not Victims (ANV) (ibid: 392). Moreover, ANV has been used in some official discourse, for example the statement by the former Swedish Minister of Foreign Aid, Jan Carlsson, about refugees: “They are not victims but people who seek to govern their own lives” (ibid: 392).

Gilligan does not deprive victims of their agency as he defines victim as “a diminished agent par excellence” (2003:29 *in* Dahl 2009: 393). For Dahl, “a ‘victim’ is basically a person suffering for reasons unrelated to his/her own agency” (ibid). According to him, ‘victim’ is a “relational term referring to a particular misfortune” (ibid). This notion for me is more humane and realistic because it shows that everyone could be a victim under certain circumstances, and this does not inevitably mean that they are passive, like for example, when a person is interrupted in her active work by the bullet of a sniper (ibid 396). A large body of feminist literature replaced the term “victim feminism” with “power feminism”. Wolf criticises the former vision which “idealises women and demonises men” (ibid) and it is “when a woman seeks power through an identity of powerlessness”. This notion has slowed women's self-improvement and recognition (Wolf 1993). On the other hand, power feminism encourages a woman to claim her individual voice (ibid). She believes that women should gain equality because they deserve it and are entitled to it as human beings, not because they are better or worse than men or passive or weak as portrayed by victim feminism. This idea is connected to a very crucial concern which is raised by Stringer about the term victimization, because it might turn into “ a performative identity”. So, in this sense, a victim is not only a person who is innocently hurt, but a person who considers this as an integral part of his/her personality.

The victimization of women is strongly connected to society's stereotypical vision of women which considers them as passive and in need of protection. Therefore, victimization is related to women subordination (Schneider 1995: 395) which, according to Minow, has contradictory connotations. For her, victims demand “sympathy, solidarity compassion and attention”, while on the other hand victimization claims can be understood as an “attempt to avoid responsibility, emphasize a fixed and limited identity and to undermine capacity of individuals” (Minow 1993 *in* Schneider 1995: 395). To avoid the fate of victims, people tend to define victims as “radically different” (Leymann 1986 and Lindgren 2004 *in* Dahl 2009: 395) or, as Dahl points, “othering is a way to escape responsibility” (ibid). Rorty situates the idea of escaping responsibility in a larger context by stating “ we perceive people caught up in the crises through schemas that render all of the parties despicable, thereby freeing us to guiltlessly ignore their plight” (Rorty 1993 *in* Meyers 2011: 270).

All the above mentioned authors criticise the one way of dealing with abuses, and they try to justify that notion. For instance, Schneider states that victimization is important to gain a legal status and thus have more rights. Similarly, Dahl acknowledges that ANV implied a moral message (Dahl 2009: 406). However, both of them fail to find an alternative

that combines both victimhood and agency, thus I will use the concept of burdened agency with its two victimhood paradigms (Meyers 2011). It is a more inclusive approach to look at the relationship between victimhood and agency, and this will be explained in the following section.

### **Heroic and pathetic victims**

Meyers (2011) distinguishes between two victimhood paradigms: pathetic victims and heroic victims. The former she describes as being “innocent of any wrongdoing relevant to their treatment, utterly helpless in the face of insuperable force, and subjected to unspeakable suffering” (ibid). She associates this paradigm with femininity, namely purity and passivity, and she argues that pathetic victims deserve pity. She states that pathetic victims have no agency and are undeniably innocent since their capacities for choice and action have been seen neutralized (Meyers, 2011:258). Heroic victims, on the other hand, are idealistic, courageous and moral exemplars; they are agentic figures who engage in public dissent for their beliefs and have commitment to justice and peace (ibid: 259). The agency of heroic victims is not morally compromised and she associates this paradigm with masculinity. She argues that the notion of victimhood should be redefined, for example a public human rights defender who is imprisoned is a heroic victim, but a sex worker making money so her family will survive is not seen as such. She says this is to do with the differences in public and private life; men dominate the public sphere and it is prized over the private sphere, where women reside. Even though heroic victims are tortured, they are still seen as heroes and imprisonment actually increases their agency - because they can inspire and affect people.

The pathetic victim is a person who is incapable of autonomous choice and action (ibid:267). Both pathetic and heroic victims are controlled by higher powers, however their agentic capacities are still existing, in other words they have agency but it is constricted or burdened (ibid: 268). Burdened agency unites pathetic and heroic victims since both of them are suffering of illegitimately constrained agency. (ibid:296). Burdened agency also bridges the gap between the two victim paradigms through focusing on the similarities they share on the basis of humanity. The concept of burdened agency also defies the above mentioned genderfication of victimhood, especially the feminization of pathetic victims, as it recognizes that they need not be helpless and naive. Likewise heroic victims experience suffering.

These victimhood paradigms by Meyers offer a new perspective to the commonly held definitions of what a victim is. She gives agency to pathetic victims which, for my case, I find very interesting because many people see female detainees as inherently pathetic. This is also true for women in conflict in general - often they are portrayed in the media as helpless and with no agency. However, Meyers does not talk about the transition or interaction between pathetic and heroic victims; she uses burdened agency to highlight their shared features, but not if or how one could transform to the other. For this part of the theoretical framework, this is the gap I intend to try to fill.

Meyers argues that the inclusiveness of the Amnesty International definition of 'prisoners of conscience' is misleading since it includes a broad range of human rights violations. It includes people who are imprisoned for their political, religious or other conscientiously-held beliefs or because of their ethnic origin, sex and colour. Being arrested for your ethnicity or race is different from being arrested for your decision to be politically engaged in a certain situation (Meyer, 2011: 257).

## **2.2 Burdened Agency**

'Burdened agency' is defined by Meyers as "illegitimately constrained agency" (Meyers 2011: 268). She posits that this form of agency is embodied by people who are unable to escape from the powers that are threatening them, for example somebody trapped inside jail that has no ability to leave or escape. People in this position may be experiencing needless suffering, yet their agency has not disappeared. Meyers says that they are not "stripped of the agentic complexity and resilience that are characteristic of humanity".

It was Meyers who coined this term, and though there is no other literature that dives into this specific theory, the concept of burdened agency could prove important in this research as many of the women interviewed face political and societal restrictions out of their control, yet their agency has not been compromised.

## **2.3 Women in Prison**

As I am researching female detainees and after reviewing literature about women's victimhood and agency, it is necessary to present some opinions about women in prison, which, not surprisingly, view the experiences of the incarcerated women within the same binary oppositions of victimization or agency (Fili 2013).

Studies of women's imprisonment have increased since the 1980s as a result of the growing number of women inmates and the influence of feminism (ibid: 1). Women prisoners have moved from being considered as "mad and dangerous" in the early literature (Giallombardo 1966 in Fili 2013: 1) to being portrayed as "passive victims of patriarchal oppression" (Carlen 1983, 2002; Mandaraka-Sheppard 1986 in Fili 2013). Together with feminist work, sociological studies of women's imprisonment have also promoted the assumptions of "passive femininity" and ignored "active subjectivity" (ibid). Again, the black or white view in research and theory which has a deep impact on the direct policy that affects women imprisonment and then reintegration, situates women in prison between two contesting concepts (forms); victimization or agency. Fili argues that women are always portrayed as vulnerable and less dangerous than men and more connected to societies through their children, therefore they need more compassion. According to these studies, controlling women's lives in the prison stem from the same ideological path as the ones defines women's lives outside the prison, therefore penal control is seen as only "one form of social control, but in women prisons it is structured on traditional notions of the ideal woman in an ideal family" (Carlen 1983:59 in Fili 2013:4), this consequently leaves a little if no space for agency.

The victimhood agency paradigm, heroic and pathetic victims, and the concept of burdened agency is what I am studying, but in order to that I will use the analytical framework of symbolic inversion, which is an element of cultural performances.

## 2.4 Cultural performances

Jeffrey Alexander argues that cultural performances are part of our lives and have their origins in rituals (2004:527). He argues that the effectiveness of a performance depends on its plausibility and is measured through the fusion between performer and audience. This idea of fusion will be later discussed, but first a broader look at his theory.

Alexander defines cultural performance as: “the social process by which actors, individually or in concert, display for others the meaning of their social situation” (Alexander 2004:529). He further argues that this meaning is not necessarily the one which they themselves want to fulfill. Rather it is the meaning that they consciously or unconsciously want to convey (ibid). He stresses the importance of symbols in our societies at both the micro and macro levels (ibid:528). He differentiates between the practical pragmatics of performances and the cultural logic of texts by quoting Boulton: “literature that walks and talks before our eyes” (Boulton 1960:3 in Alexander 2004: 530). I think this relevant to my case because with performance there is more interaction between the performers and the observers than that with the writer and the readers in the texts. He identifies six elements of cultural performance which are: Systems of collective representation, actors, audience, mise-en-scene, social power, and means of symbolic production. Systems of collective representation are the background symbols and scripts that are easily recognisable and symbolise emotional, moral and existential concerns. The actors are the performers themselves, and the audience are those who are observing the performers. Means of Symbolic Production are the material objects or any other “standardised expressive equipment” that the actors need in order to “dramatize and make vivid the invisible motives and morals they are trying to to represent” (ibid:532). Mise-en-scene is related to the importance of where and when the performance occurs and to the process of “putting text into scene”. Social power, with the nature of its political and economic hierarchies is important because it affects how and who can perform, and what audience members can observe the performance, thus having a significant effect on how successful the performance. (ibid: 529-533).

Alexander also speaks about ‘fusion’ and ‘re-fusion’. Fusion is when the audience can relate with those performing, and re-fusion is when the performer uses cultural performance to try and bring a society back together. This idea helps to explain how some performances can be more successful than others. He argues that in complex and divided societies where there are multiple identities and citizenry is fragmented, convincing the audience is not an easy task because the audience may perceive the performance in different ways. However, simple societies provide an easier opportunity for performers to resonate with their audience because they are generally more fused and systems of collective representation are more widely recognised. A critique of Alexander’s work is that he fails to define which are the most effective elements of the performance, and which are the most important aspects for audience resonance and successful performances.



He develops this theory to deal with the issue that rituals are based on beliefs and repeated cultural symbolic communication while unbelief is a feature of our time. The most important elements of his theory that I will focus on, are the actors and the audience.

## 2.5 Symbolic Inversion

Symbolic inversion is essential in this research, because it provides a way to increase the understanding of Syrian women's unexpected performance. It can be seen as one manifestation of cultural performances. Symbolic inversions were prevalent in rituals, which has been shown in anthropological studies. These inversions come in a form of nonnormative or contrary behaviours which challenge, ridicule and debase the conventions and "contradict the normative cognitive or social structure of society" (Pandian 2001: 557). Sherry Ortner (1973) points out to certain symbols as "elaborating Symbols" because they function as "ordering or sorting out of conceptual experience" and for "providing cultural strategies" (Ortner 1973 in Pandian 2001: 557). "Rituals of rebellion" is an important idea for my topic because as Gluckman states: " they help to resolve conflict and antagonism between men who hold political authority and those who have no political power" (Gluckman 1954 in Pandian 2001: 559). Gluckman saw in these 'ritual reversals' a cathartic experience which furthered social cohesion and stability (ibid). Social cohesion may ultimately result, but this 'ritual rebellion' can be seen as empowering those who are systematically excluded from office, enabling them to criticize office-holders and publicize their claims to benefit from the political order (ibid).

Babcock defines symbolic inversion as "any act of expressive behaviour which inverts, contradicts, abrogates, or in some fashion presents an alternative to commonly held cultural codes, values, and norms, be they linguistic, literary or artistic, religious, or social and political" (Babcock 1978). In order to build up their "self-worth" within their societies, people look for a "collective way" (Demmers 2017:47), so they resort to these kinds of actions or behaviours when they feel that they are constrained in their societies or when they aim to adjust their social identity by "changing the relationship between in-group and out-group". This is what Demmer calls "*a social change belief structure*" (ibid). Symbolic inversion is one of these demonstrations of this social change belief and it happens when people try to reproduce the "negative" aspects into "positive" strong ones (ibid). The inter-group comparison, among indigenous groups, when they contrast their spirituality or native wisdom with the greed and emptiness of the urban-middle classes, is a good illustration of symbolic inversion (ibid).

Tijfel argues that individuals try their best to obtain satisfactory images of themselves (1981:254). Doing so could lead, to what Festinger calls, a "social comparison" (ibid). This social comparison could be between individuals or inter-individual (Festinger 1954 in Tijfel 1981: 254). However this inter-individual evaluation could conflict with the individual's self-definition which, in terms of social identity, is being a member of a social group. This membership eventually helps to shape his/her image of themselves. Tijfel suggests that if

people do not accept their situation they have several options. One of these options, that is relevant in this research, is that they “accept the situation for what it is and engage in social action which would lead to desirable change in the situation” (ibid: 256).

This chapter has outlined the broad theory that will be used to analyse the data I have collected. Despite not being the focal point of my theoretical framework, I will be using other theories at relevant times of my analysis. These include Azar's theory on collective action, which understands that 'a collective recognition of individual grievances...naturally leads to collective protest' (1990:12). This is important when analysing the first protests in Syria in 2011. The next chapter will define the specific concepts that I have chosen within these theories to use.

### 3. Concepts and analytical framework

As mentioned in the previous section, multiple analytical frameworks will be used in this thesis at different contextual stages, the common element among them is the focus on individuals and their agency. The overarching frame will be symbolic inversion, because it helps understanding Syrian women's unexpected performance which eventually leads to the shift in victimhood paradigm. In this section, I will clarify which parts of the above theory I will use, and what definitions I have chosen to guide this process.

#### 3.1 Definitions

I have purposefully specified 'burdened agency' in my theory. Agency can be defined as 'the individual's capacity to initiate change' (Demmers 2017: 16). While I use this definition to an extent, I don't think it fully defines what it means to have agency. It implies a very binary view of either having agency or not having it, whereas I see it more as a continuum, and something that can either be restricted or furthered. Therefore, I take Meyer's definition of 'burdened agency' to aid my analysis of the victimhood/agency paradigm. Burdened agency, as described by Meyers is 'illegitimately constrained agency' that 'acknowledges that victims cannot escape from powers that inflict or threaten to inflict needless and terrible suffering on them, but it doesn't strip them of the agentic complexity and resilience that are characteristic of humanity' (Meyers 2011:268). This definition is particularly relevant for my research as the women I interviewed may not seemingly have agency when stuck behind bars, but actually this is just a *restraint* on their agency, rather than something blocking it entirely.

Similarly, to be a 'victim' is not a black and white label. There are many different characteristics of victimhood. Meyers distinguishes between pathetic and heroic victims, both definitions are useful for this research. Pathetic victims are "people whose capacities for choice and action have been so completely neutralised and there can be no doubt but that they are innocent". She goes further as to describe them as "claimants who have undergone severe, documentable, humanly inflicted harm that they are not responsible for incurring" (Meyers 2011:258). Heroic victims are "idealistic and courageous", and to qualify as one "it is important that your agency may not be morally compromised" (ibid: 259). She talks about heroic victims not being passive, but rather "stunningly agentic figures" whose "symbolic power of their personal sacrifices...may inspire others" (ibid). These distinctions are significant for my research as they allow me to defy stereotypes of victimhood and agency, and to show the agency of female detainees even if restricted by their detention. I will also use Azar's definition of collective action which is 'a collective recognition of individual grievances...naturally leads to collective protest' (1990:12). When talking about resistance, I perceive it as a form of agency, that is made up of discursive and material expressions (Bosworth 1999:125).

For performance theory, I have decided to focus on Alexander's cultural performances. He defines cultural performance as "the social process by which actors, individually or in concert, display for others the meaning of their social situation. This meaning may or may not be the one to which they adhere; it is the meaning that they, as social actors, consciously or unconsciously wish to have others believe" (Alexander 2004:529). It is important that I focus on cultural performances because this concept enables me to analyse the former female detainees as social actors, and to see how they try to portray themselves to others, and also how others perceive them. Alexander distinguishes six elements of cultural performances, which are explained in the previous chapter.

While there is limited literature on symbolic inversion, it is an important concept for this research and plays a central role in the analysis stage. I use Babcock's definition, which is "any act of expressive behaviour which inverts, contradicts, abrogates, or in some fashion presents an alternative to commonly held cultural codes, values and norms, be they linguistic, literary or artistic, religious, or social and political" (Babcock 1978 in Kruger). Symbolic inversion is directly linked to the shift in victimhood that I will study. As the definition implies, it allows me to explore how the former female detainees act in defiance of the social and cultural codes and norms usually assigned to them as women.

### **3.2 Research puzzle**

With the above mentioned definitions in mind, I have formulated the following sub questions:

#### **1. Defining victimhood**

- 1.1 What were the expressive behaviours that led to women's imprisonment by the Syrian regime?
- 1.2 What capacities for choice and action did the women have that led to their arrest?
- 1.3 What level of agency did the women have, or, what capacity did they have to initiate change?

#### **2. Burdened agency**

- 2.1 How did the women inside the prisons practice their agency and resist the persecutors?
- 2.2 How did the powers in charge of the prison constrain their agency?
- 2.3 How did they escape the restrictions that they were posed on them?
- 2.4 What are the difficulties they face after their release?
- 2.5 How do they cope or reintegrate after their release?
- 2.6 How do they deal with the pressure of the society?

#### **3. Symbolic inversion**

- 3.1 What are commonly held cultural codes, values and norms regarding female detainees in Syria?
- 3.2 How do the women's symbolic expressions invert, contradict, or abrogate these cultural codes?

#### **4. Cultural Performance**

- 4.1 What is the social situation that former female Syrian detainees are displaying?
- 4.2 How do they display this social situation?
- 4.3 What messages are they conveying consciously in their performance?
- 4.4 What messages are they conveying unconsciously in their performance?
- 4.5 How do these conscious and unconscious performances relate to each other?
- 4.6 Who are the audiences?
- 4.7 How do they perceive or react towards the performances of the former detainees?
- 4.8 How do the performances change or not change their opinion towards Syrian women in general and Syrian female detainees specifically?

With these in mind, my research puzzle is:

How do the cultural performances of formerly detained Syrian women in the diaspora shift the victimhood paradigm from 'pathetic' to 'heroic' after their release from al-Assad's prisons during the Syrian revolution from 2011 to 2017?

## **4. Methodology**

### **4.1 Research Strategy**

Ontologically, this research focuses on the agency of my target group, detained women, which necessitates taking the individualist stance. Epistemologically, I am going to take an interpretative stance in order to understand the agency spectrum of the detained women while moving from pathetic to heroic victims. Because there are not so many women that can be interviewed, I am going to depend on qualitative data to investigate the phenomena under research. Moreover the theoretical nature of the research puzzle focuses on performance and victimhood paradigms that entail taking individualist actions and their meanings. I used an inductive method which allows for 'data to speak', as it naturally emerges. It must be noted that there are few academic sources on detained women in Syria, and much of the contextual literature comes from reports and news articles.

### **4.2 Sampling Method**

The sampling selections is explained by the when, where, what and who questions. I use purposive sampling where "the cases selected can teach me a lot about the issues that are of importance to the research" (Coyne 1997 *in* Boeije, Hennie R 2010: 35), and can represent a "wide range of perspectives and experiences (Ziebland & McPherson, 2006 *in* Boeije, Hennie R 2010: 36). I use the snowballing interview technique because former detainees have contact with each other, especially in the diaspora where they can have more meetings and activities together. As my topic is very sensitive, people are not open about once detained so the snowball technique is absolutely necessary. I use my own experience of observation which stems from knowing the context and culture well, and also of course being proficient in Arabic. I attended a play called X Adra in Mülheim, Germany, which was written and performed by formerly Syrian female detainees, because it is a concrete manifestation of their symbolic inversion and also it clearly shows the shift in victimhood paradigm. The fact that former detainees are in a theatre performance in Europe is significant in itself, given the social stigmatisation they would have experienced if they had done the same in Syria. Yet, furthermore, X Adra is a performance actually about their experience in the prison, thus making the play even more significant for my research.

In my case, the place of research is not significant because my informants are spread across many areas. Therefore, I mentioned diaspora in my puzzle. Moreover, using the principle of maximization which means that the chosen place should be determined where the case study "manifests itself most strongly" (Morse and Field 1996 *in* Boeije, Hennie R 2010: 34), is not possible because it means conducting my research in Syria. I did my interviews in Germany (Mülheim, Hannover, Berlin) and France (Paris). The significance of these places lies only in the fact that there are many potential participants there, not because of the places themselves. It would have been more fitting to conduct my research in

a neighbouring country of Syria, such as Lebanon, but due to visa and financial restrictions that was not possible. I therefore looked into which European countries were accessible for me, and which were home to former detainees. To give more reliability to my research, I had one skype interview with a Syrian lawyer who has been working on this issue for a long time, even prior to 2011. The 'when' is between 2011 and 2017 where detention was regular and common. The 'what' question will be interviews, documentaries and organisations, which will be explained later in this chapter. The 'who' will be individuals, mainly Syrian women detainees and lawyers, as well as other people who could be considered the audience. To do this, I conducted phone interviews with three people, and I interviewed two people in the audience of the play, X Adra.

### **4.3 Research steps**

Contextualizing my research puzzle is essential in the first phase of my research in order to have a full image about the conditions that are surrounding my topic. Part of this phase is to generate greater understanding about the history of Syria as a police state, the Syrian revolution and then the subsequent conflict, women's activism in the revolution, and the role that they had during the conflict. This last point about women's roles are particularly significant as they were the direct reasons for their detention, and by explaining their roles it clearly differentiates between criminal prisoners and political ones, showing that their detention was illegitimate. This contextual research was obtained by using naturally occurring data, such as NGO reports, online videos and journalistic articles. Since the conflict in Syria is still young, there are a few academic resources. I sought information about the detention conditions and the release procedures in Syria between 2011 and 2014. Again, to do this I used naturally occurring data such as reports, documentaries, and former interviews with women detainees. It is also important to know the reasons that led to the detention of women and this was done by looking into legal reports that were made by Syrian lawyers and documentation centers such as the Violation Documentation Center (VDC). The status of women in Syria and the inequalities they are suffering, both formally in Syrian Law and informally related to social norms, are also essential to be mentioned in order to demonstrate the symbolic inversions they have experienced through their actions compared to what is socially expected from them. We should understand the stereotypical images that society casts on them, to be able to see how they challenged these images. I used my background as a Syrian woman, reports from local and international NGOs, and the Syrian Constitution.

After contextualising and situating my research, the necessary second step is to explore the theory. After gaining a comprehensive overview of the situation and circumstances of the women in the Syrian context, I then delved deeper into the paradigms of victimhood; namely pathetic and heroic. I did this by observing their performances, body language and the language they use. The first part of this observation was done through watching online interviews and documentaries such as 'Le Cri Etouffe: The Cry Smothered' which was my motivation to study this side of the phenomenon, as well as other documentaries and interviews with formerly female detainees. These observations helped me see the different performances of these women and compare them in order to understand how the pathetic victims talk about themselves, their experiences in prison, and

their experiences after they were released. I observed what images they tried to portray of themselves, and also looked at how heroic ones did the same. I also watched footage of demonstrations and women's participation in the revolution. In this stage, I also used my memory to recall the protests I participated in, and how women were performing during those times.

After gaining insights on the phenomenon in the first two stages, I had to examine the people who went through the experience of detention. To do this, the third stage entailed conducting in-depth interviews with former female detainees. My first round of interviews was in Paris where I had already established some contacts. To do so, I used facebook pages that are working on detainees issues. And then, through the snowballing technique, I met other women there. During the interviews I asked open-ended questions so I did not direct the conversation too much, and to leave space for the interviewees to talk about what they deemed important. I used a voice recorder to record the interviews, so I did not have to write down everything the interviewees say and could pay attention to their performances, their body language, and the way they are talking. After the first round of interviews I made a comparison between the naturally occurring data that I have explored in the first step and the generated data in this step in order to have typology in both sources. Also I interviewed a Syrian lawyer who is based in Paris and is working for Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression to get legal information.

After finishing the first round of interviews in Paris, I went to Mulheim in Germany to attend a play called "X Adra", which is a Syrian play that was performed there in April 2018. It is based on true stories of former Syrian women detainees, who were also the actresses in this play. It is about their experiences, their lives after detention and in the new host countries. The women were free to choose the incidents they wanted to talk about. Adra is a Syrian prison where a lot of women spent most of their detention period, and the 'X' refers to the unknown detainees who are still behind bars (Info Migrants 2018). The interesting thing about this play is that it is written and performed by former female detainees. The significance of this play is that it shows the messages the women want to display as well as how they portray themselves as strong unbroken women and how they want others to see them. Moreover, the play itself contradicts the stereotypical images about Syrian female detainees. It shows the direct connection between actors and audience, and this was done through an open discussion between the two. An advantage I have is being able to speak Arabic and knowing the culture. This helped me analyze their discourse and performance. At this stage I had the opportunity to have the second round of interviews by interviewing the cast of the play, the director and the actresses in order to examine their motivation to do this performance, and gain insight into how it helped them transform their image from pathetic to heroic. After that, I continued my in-depth interviews in Germany (Hannover, Berlin and Dresden) because interviews were my building block of my exploration of the shift in the victimhood paradigm from pathetic into heroic. Furthermore, I am exploring the concept of burdened agency by examining the restrictions they had before, during and after their detention. This round of interviews was important to triangulate the data I collected in the previous stages. In addition to the female detainees, I interviewed a Syrian lawyer in Berlin who runs the Syrian Center for Legal Studies and Research, and I had a Skype interview



with another Syrian lawyer who is still living in Syria in order to triangulate the legal data I got.

Transcribing, and subsequently translating, my interviews was a time and energy-consuming process. I took into account that it would take time, not to the extent that it did. In addition to the practical restraints this caused, it was also an emotional process to do so, which will be explained later in the challenges I experienced. After transcribing and translating, my focus was mainly on analysing the data I have collected. This helped identifying occurrences and recurrences of the narratives from my informants. I coded my interviews manually, and this allowed me to clearly identify patterns and structure my analysis.

#### **4.4 Data Collection Technique**

Part of collecting data for this research was based on my personal knowledge and experience as a Syrian woman. Living in Syria and participating in the demonstrations myself helped me to understand the environment surrounding the phenomenon I am researching, thus introducing the historical, social, political and legal conditions of my topic. In addition to that I could observe, in practice, the role of Syrian women in the protests and how their agency was burdened. Moreover, working with the Violation Documentation Center put me in direct contact with formerly female detainees and lawyers. In addition to this personal experience, I was also once arrested due to participating in the peaceful protests. This arrest, though only for a few hours, gave me a deeper understanding of the regime and the situation of women in Syria. However, this information was basic and insufficient to complete this research, therefore I used other data collection techniques which will be explained in this section. I used naturally occurring data and generated data. Naturally occurring data include reports from Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, Facebook pages and accounts, online interviews and documentaries, as well as some academic articles and books. The play *X Adra* which was introduced before, was also an important event which allowed me to observe women's performance. Generated data was in-depth interviews which are defined by Kvale as "a specific form of conversation where knowledge is produced through the interaction between an interviewer and an interviewee" (2007: xvii). I used open-ended questions to allow my participants to speak freely. Interviews were incredibly important in my research as they not only gave me rich and personal information about the experiences of the participants, but they also allowed me to observe the women's performances. The oral interviews allowed me to triangulate the data collected with the performance observations and the literature review.

#### **4.5 Data Analysis**

To analyse my data and examine the cultural performances that led to the shift in the victimhood paradigm, I used symbolic inversions as an element of cultural performances. I took the definition of Babcock of symbolic inversion as "any act of expressive behaviour which inverts, contradicts, abrogates, or in some fashion presents an alternative to commonly held cultural codes, values and norms, be they linguistic, literary or artistic, religious, or social and political" as my starting point and used the expressive behaviours

which abrogate the norms as my indicators to look at the shift of victimhood paradigms among women. In a previous stage, I provided the reader with the notion about women and their status in Syria in order to show how I perceive their actions as symbolic inversions. I also used burdened agency to look at the illegitimate restrictions that my informants faced and how they defied these restrictions through their behaviours. Since I am using cultural performance, which depends on the individual and the messages she wants to convey, I used narrative analysis which focuses on “the way an account or narrative is constructed, the intention of the teller and the nature of the audience” (Riessman 1993 in Spencer and Ritchie 2013: 200). I also used discourse analysis to explore the regime and society narratives about this phenomenon.

After transcribing and reading my transcripts of interviews, I manually coded them by highlighting some words, sentences and actions. Then I created categories and subsequently labeled them. I depended partially on sensitising concepts, which were my guide through the interviews, in forming those labels. I used a general inductive approach (Thomas 2006), which is a “systematic procedure for analyzing qualitative data in which the analysis is likely to be guided by specific evaluation objectives” (ibid:238). Thus, I did accurate reading of raw data to derive concepts and themes (ibid). I chronologically divided my analysis into three stages; before, during and after detention. In each stage, I looked at the restrictions that were posed on them as well as the actions they did in order to explore their agency and the burdens it had. As symbolic inversions are part of cultural performances (Abrahams and Bauman in Babcock 1978: 193) thus it entails the elements of cultural performances which this thesis focuses only on actors and audience as mentioned before. So I also analysed the audience’s reaction to the women’s symbolic inversions.

#### **4.6 Challenges**

Being a Syrian woman means that I share the same language, culture, background, difficulties, and opportunities with my informants. This is an advantage because it provides me with a deep understanding of the context and a good network inside and outside Syria. However, this thesis was written with tears, because describing every single detail, collecting data, listening and transcribing the interviews were heartbreaking. The process of conducting research was very emotional for me as I not only have experience with detention myself, but I was also very actively involved in the demonstrations and I worked for the Violations Documentation Center in Syria which documents statistics on detention. I chose to study this topic of female detainees because I strongly feel that their plight should be revealed to the world, and I want to give a voice to these strong women who otherwise may not have the opportunity to speak. This personal attachment to the research topic made it a very challenging process to go through, especially when hearing the horrific stories of women’s experiences inside the prisons. Even though my questions did not focus on torture in the detention, this part could not be avoided. Their talks were, what is called in psychology, “Free Association” where they spoke freely about whatever came to their minds. This flow of their thoughts was so important to get more information but on the other hand the interviews became so heavy and lasted at least two hours and a half.

After finishing my fieldwork, I had the Survivor's guilt<sup>9</sup> or syndrome. I felt guilty because I did not have the same experience and I enjoyed freedom while they were behind the bars. Surprisingly, I also felt that my participation and activism in Syria were worthless and meaningless as I did not spend time in the prison. It made me question my own role in the revolution. I aimed to make this thesis more representative but that was impossible, because I could not reach non-activist women detainees in Europe, and going to Turkey or Lebanon was not possible because of my status as a refugee which makes getting a visa very difficult. Avoiding bias in social science is very difficult because they cannot be neutralized, and because studying people is different from studying molecules or ants (Ragin 2010). Furthermore, and since one of the purposes of this thesis is giving Syrian female detainees voice, being objective is even more difficult. However, Ragin argues that "almost all research gives voice in the sense that it enhances the visibility of the the thing studied" (Ragin :45). Furthermore, choosing women who were arrested by the regime for their activism against it will absolutely be considered biased by the pro- regime audience. So, bias is in the eye of the beholder and is very subjective from person to person, or from group to group. I tried to not let my own feelings and experiences steer the interviews or the research as a whole, but inevitable they played a role.

The most difficult challenge was the scarcity of academic references, especially related to the Syrian situation and background. This is quite logical because first, the conflict is still young so very few academic articles have been written about it. Second, conducting academic research in a police state is a life threatening venture. However, there are plenty of NGO reports and news articles. This lack of references made my progress slow as a lot of time was spent searching for them. Another challenge was the financial issues I had to cover my travel and accommodation costs. I managed to get a small fund for this purpose, and I cooked and sold lunch meals for three weeks to an NGO in Utrecht to get some extra money. Transportation and the long distances I had to travel were also an issue, since the women I met live in different places. I overcame this problem by planning in advance and ensuring flexibility in my research methodology. The last challenge was convincing some of the women to meet me, because the interviews were about sensitive and sad issues which required the participants to recall difficult memories and painful experiences, and because they have already talked so much about their experiences to NGO workers, lawyers and journalists. Luckily, they liked the idea of my topic as, unlike other interviews they have gone through, where they can talk about their heroic acts which give them more strength.

#### **4.7 Ethical considerations**

Researching such a delicate topic raises several ethical considerations. First, I am studying a topic which is not politically neutral and since the situation in Syria is still escalating, the safety of my informants is so important. Ensuring the safety of participants is always crucial, but due to the sensitivity of my research topic, it is even more important. Anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed for my participants. I did this through

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<sup>9</sup>Survivor's guilt: Survivors enmeshed with the victims in the combat or disaster scenario. Those who perished personally known to the survivors." often in close personal, dependent, or team relationships before the fatal episode. Some believe that high altruism as part of the premorbid disorder is a specific stressor.

assuring them that their real names would never be revealed, I used instead pseudonyms, and I only recorded the interviews when they permitted me to do so. Luckily, all my participants allowed me to do so, which meant I could focus on observations too. Even though my participants live in Europe, they still have families in Syria. This was another reason why I had to ensure their names or whereabouts were not revealed in this research. Doing so could have jeopardized not only their security and safety, but also that of their families.

Retelling personal and painful stories can be a difficult process for participants to go through, so it was essential that I built trust between the women I was interviewing. Due to my own identity as a Syrian woman, I was able to gain their trust quite easily. It has helped that I am writing a research topic to give voice to their struggles and heroism, which made gaining trust easier. I also tried my best to protect them from the emotional harm that could be aroused during the interviews, by giving them the freedom to talk about what they wanted to express about their experiences.

## 5. Analysis

Before diving into the interviews themselves, I will first shortly introduce all my informants as they all have a significant and personal background which contributes to their level of agency and influences their performances. For security reasons and their own safety, I will not mention their names as mentioned in my methodology. I will instead use pseudonyms.

My first informant is Manal.Hamdi, 27 years old, from Atareb, Aleppo countryside, currently living in Paris. She studied psychology in Damascus University, and was working with the Syrian Red Crescent when she was arrested. She was arrested on the 10th of January 2015 in Damascus for unclear reasons, but it is suspected that she was detained because she was visiting and financially supporting other detainees. She spent a year in detention; first in the criminal security branch, then she was moved to Adra prison. She was expelled from university after her detention.

'We were celebrating 2014 New Year's Eve in Damascus. That night I wished for something crazy. I said "God, let me live an experience this year, that I never had in my life". And for real, I was arrested ten days later, I stayed a year in prison! In Paris, three New Year's Eves have passed, and whenever I wish for something, I remember my 2014 wish. I smile and I say "God, let me live an experience this year that I never had in my life'<sup>10</sup>

My second informant is Noura, Bader, 57 years old, from Homs . She is a civil engineer and a writer, currently living in Paris. She was arrested three times. The first time was in the eighties for her membership in the Communist Labor Party, it lasted for four years. The second time was in 2005, for participation in one of the political forums. The third time was on the 16th of March 2011, for participating in a sit-in for releasing political detainees in front of the Ministry of Interior. This time she was arrested by the Military Security Branch and was directly transferred to Douma's prison This last detention was for two weeks.

'Asylum, or living in another country reminds me of the prison. People and relationships here are very similar to the ones inside the prison. These relationships are changeable, because you meet people not because you have chosen them, but only because they are present at the same place.'<sup>11</sup>

My third informant is Nada.Sharif, 38 years old from Quneitra. She studied English translation and is currently living in Paris. She was arrested two times. The first one was from a demonstration in Damascus on the 20th of July 2011 until the 1st of August 2011.

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<sup>10</sup> Author's interview with Manal.Hamdi, pseudonym, a woman detainee, Paris, France 18 April 2018

<sup>11</sup> Author's interview with Noura, Bader pseudonym, a woman detainee, Paris, France 19 April 2018

The second one was at the Syrian/Lebanese borders, on the 27th of November 2011 until the 5th of January 2012, by the Political Security Branch when she was coming back from Lebanon to attend her sister's wedding. She was asked to leave her job after her detention.

My fourth informant is Lana .Mustafa, 36 years old from Damascus. She is a journalist and currently living in Paris. She was arrested two times. The first one was from a demonstration while she was filming it. She was arrested on the 2nd of May 2011 by . She stayed for 16 days and was moving among three security branches. She spent 11 days in solitary confinement. The second one was on the 12th of April 2012 when she was participating in a sit in in front of the parliament. It lasted for a week. She spent five days in a solitary confinement. After that she was working in Ghouta<sup>12</sup> She was forced to leave Syria in November 2013 after arresting her brother and many people from her close circle.

'The whole way, from the place where I was arrested until the security building, the guards who accompanied me in the car were trying the electricity stick on me, its degrees. Putting it all over my body. The feeling I had was difficult to describe. I felt that they were doing that as an orgy masturbation, as if nobody was watching them, just them and me. The secret joy they had and the fear of the reaction of their boss gave me that feeling.'<sup>13</sup>

My fifth informant is Rania Kamel, 40 years old from Damascus. She is a mathematics teacher and currently living in Paris. She was arrested five times, but she only spoke about three of them because, according to her, the other two were very short and do not worth mentioning. The first detention was in August 2011 from a demonstration and lasted for four days. The second one was in February 2012 for humanitarian relief, this detention was for a month. She was expelled from her job after this detention. So she started working in documenting and making reports for some agencies that supported the revolution. Then as a result she was arrested for ten months. She spent three weeks in the solitary confinement in one of the security branches then transferred to Adra prison.

'In Adra we were not prisoners, we were hostages and we had price. I was a famous activist so my price is higher and they can exchange me with more pro-regime prisoners. And that what happened, I was released in an exchange procedures with the nuns who were imprisoned by Al Nusra Front.'<sup>14</sup>

My sixth informant is Widad Jaber 25 years old, Aleppo countryside, was a communication engineering student in Aleppo University. Currently living in Hannover, Germany. She was arrested in Aleppo at a checkpoint in 2014 by the State Security Branch for two months and a half then was transferred to Adra prison in Damascus and stayed there

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<sup>12</sup> Ghouta: Is located in Damascus countryside and was besieged for a long time and was under the control of Islamist parties.

<sup>13</sup> Author's interview with Lana .Mustafa, pseudonym, a woman detainee, Paris, France 21 April 2018

<sup>14</sup> Author's interview with Rania.Kamel, pseudonym, a woman detainee, Paris, France 24 April 2018

for another month. ‘ I did not try to resist the interrogator verbally because I did not feel that my words were listened to’<sup>15</sup>

My seventh informant is Amal Amin 28 years old, Damascus, a mother of two children, was a French literature student in Damascus university. Living currently in Toulouse, France. She was arrested three times. The first one was by the Military Security Branch in 2009 before the revolution and stayed for nine month. She was subjected to all kinds of torture including rape. She was arrested at the university for distributing leaflets. Her father was a pro-regime professor and diplomat. The second detention was in April 2012 and lasted three months it was for providing humanitarian aid. The third detention was in 2014 at a checkpoint and lasted for two weeks. After that she was also kidnaped for 15 days by some proponents for an exchange deal. She moved to Gouta when she was threatened by detention again, where she was also imprisoned by one of the islamist parties for a month for her contact with men. After her release in the first time, she was expelled from university, denied her political and civil rights without an ID and with a travel ban.

‘My father had always reminded me of Bashar Al Assad, he is a small copy of the regime. As Bashar Al Assad sold the country to keep his rule, my father also sold me and abandoned me after my detention, in order to show his loyalty to the government and keep his position.’<sup>16</sup>

My eighth informant is Alaa Hamwi, 28 years old, Damascus, a driving trainer, currently living in Berlin. The youngest girl of a very rich and pro-regime family. She/He<sup>17</sup> was arrested for helping army dissidents get fake IDs and driving them to the Jordanian borders in order to flee the country. She was arrested by the Military Security Branch at an ambush, organised especially for her, on the way to Daraa. She stayed in one of the security branches in Daraa for one month and twenty days, and then was transferred to the Palestine Security Branch in Damascus, which is the most infamous branch among the several branches related to the Military Security Branch. She stayed there for one year and a month, three of those months were spent in solitary confinement where she experienced all kinds of torture and then was condemned to death. Then, after paying a lot money and due to the relations of her family, she was transferred to a civil prison ‘Adra’. She lost all her money for her freedom and the she was given a ten day notice to leave the country. She left in 2015.

‘I have never been a girl, and will never be. I am in a place of humiliation and torture, it is miserable and indescribable. This place teaches a person who they are and what they want to be. The loneliness I felt there, being with people who I don’t know and the injustice I experienced. All of these reasons gave me the courage to say who I

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<sup>15</sup> Author’s interview with Widad.Jaber, pseudonym, a woman detainee, Hannover, Germany on 01 May 2018

<sup>16</sup> Author’s interview with Amal Amin, pseudonym, a woman detainee, Mülheim, Germany, on 29 April 2018

<sup>17</sup> I will refer to him as he, because he went through a transgender operation and became a man after leaving Syria after his release. But when he was arrested he was a woman.

am, this courage that I never had when living amongst my family. O<sup>18</sup> the Girl, Died here and wouldn't be getting out. Now, I have nothing to lose<sup>19</sup>.'

My puzzle specifies that the time frame of the victimhood paradigm shift is after the release of female detainees, and this period of time has been chosen for two reasons. First, it is impossible to meet political Syrian prisoners and interview them during their imprisonment even if I am still in Syria because that will put their lives and mine in danger. Second, I am interested in the process they went through after their release to reintegrate and gain their agency back. However, I cannot ignore the reasons that led to their imprisonment which can be summarised by one word 'agency', as well as the period they spent in incarceration and finally their life after prison. Therefore, exploring the phenomena will be done through three chronological stages; before detention, during detention, and after detention.

### **5.1. Before Detention:**

This part of my analysis will focus on the symbolic inversions of women before detention. As symbolic inversions are expressive behaviours that come in the forms of non-normative or contrary behaviours which *challenge* and *contradict* the normative cognitive or social structure of society. Thus, I will look at women's behaviour that led to their detention. These actions focus on individuals agency, which is considered by this thesis burdened in all stages especially in the first and second. The sub-questions of this part are: *what were the expressive behaviours that led to women's imprisonment by the Syrian regime?* This is to understand the agency behind their actions and how it was restricted. The other sub-question is: *how these expressive behaviours contradict or abrogate the social norms?* This is important to further understand the victimhood and agency of the women.

#### **5.1.1. Expressive behaviour: Revolution as a liberating action:**

The Syrian Revolution in 2011 which was explained in the context chapter, was the core of my conversations with my informants and the center of their attention. At the beginning they considered it a way of their own salvation as women. During the interviews, the historical event of participating in the demonstrations was always referred back to by the women. Despite their involvement and in many cases leading to their arrest and subsequent detention, none of the participants showed any regret or remorse from their involvement in the peaceful protests. On the contrary, during the interviews all the women were able to recall the same enthusiasm and power that they felt during that time. Despite all they have been through since, I observed a sense of pride and passion when they were talking about the revolution. They could also remember a high level of detail when talking about the revolution itself; they knew exact dates and times of when they were active on the streets. One of the informants said that the 'participation of women in the protests in the streets is a

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<sup>18</sup> Referring to his name when he was a woman.

<sup>19</sup> Her monologue in the prison.



revolution by itself, they are saying NO and are not doing what their husbands asked them to do'<sup>20</sup>.

### **5.1.2 Breaking the rules:**

Their revolution was not only against dictatorship but also against the authorities that suppressed them their whole lives. They went to the streets to defy the patriarchal system and injustice, and to break the rules they had to follow because they are women. One informant said that 'you feel that you are literally breaking the rules, our revolution -especially as women- is not only against the regime but against everything that oppressed us, including ourselves '. She continued saying "even God! Heey yalla we will not kneel even for Alla"<sup>21</sup> meaning that they do not want to be subjected even to god.

### **5.1.3 First Protest: (collective action).**

Azar states that "collective recognition of individual grievances...naturally leads to collective protest" (1990: 12). When people collectively have the same view about what currently is, and what ought to be, then they share the collective resentment. Azar critiques traditional conflict analysts as being too narrow-minded when it comes to explaining the causes of violence. He also critiques the emphasis placed on direct violent conflict, and highlights the need to also analyse more latent forms of non-violent conflict. He takes a multi-causal approach and recognises the need to analyse conflict from multiple dimensions. He states that "social conflicts occur when communities are deprived of satisfaction of their basic needs on the basis of their communal identity". These collective grievances can be seen in Syria, as the people who initially attended the peaceful demonstrations felt that their basic needs and human rights were denied by the powers governing them. People felt that some ethnic groups in Syria, such as the Alawites, were heavily privileged over the majority of the population.

During my interviews, I asked Lana Mustafa about her motivation to join the revolution and she said "before we were not asking ourselves questions related to change, but I felt deep resentment and unease. I didn't agree with the system that we are living in. For instance, even the transportation in Syria was a catastrophe, let alone the education system. There was corruption prevalent everywhere"<sup>22</sup>. Lana was a journalist and was writing reports about these issues. This shows that people were not satisfied with the very basic infrastructure of the country, and though things like transportation alone are not reasons to start a revolution, collectively the corruption and injustice were.

Azar also talks about the great importance of the formation of collective identity in contemporary conflicts. He goes as far as to say that communal identity is a basic need

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<sup>20</sup>Author's interview with Nada.Sharif, pseudonym, a woman detainee, Paris, France 19 April 2018

<sup>21</sup> Author's interview with Manal.Hamdi, pseudonym, a woman detainee, Paris, France 18 April 2018

<sup>22</sup>Author's interview with Lana Mustafa, pseudonym, a woman detainee, Paris, France 21 April 2018

(cited in Demmers 2017: 103). This idea was echoed in my interviews, as some of my participants expressed the importance of the collective feeling during the protests. Nada described her first time by saying: “It is an amazing feeling, so much adrenalin and energy, you want to express your anger. The collective behaviour and being with a group calling for your rights, demanding the same thing, and sharing the same goals is an amazing feeling”<sup>23</sup>.

## **Activism**

### **5.1.4 Agency and heroic victims:**

Demmers defines agency as “the individual's capacity to initiate change” (Demmers 2017:16), and Jasper argues that agency “involve choices” (Jasper 2004). Meyers describes heroic victims as agentic figures whose agency may not be morally compromised and this definition could be applied to my informants. Widad: “My motivation to join the revolution was purely moral”<sup>24</sup>. Even though Waad lived in a relatively conservative place which was also dominated by Daesh between 2014 and 2017, she took the moral choice regardless of her being a woman.

Meyer talks about how different notions of victimhood are associated with masculinity and femininity. She says that the idea of a pathetic victim correlates with stereotypical characteristics of femininity, namely purity and passivity. In this sense, women are assumed to be victims, and are not expected to be treated as equals but rather inferior (Meyers 2011: 257). Using the same idea, she says that heroic victims are associated with masculinity and chivalrousness. I disagree with Meyer when she associates this paradigm “heroic victim” with masculinity because my informants were women who actively chose and decided to join the revolution regardless of their gender. Waad continues: “I did not think as a woman, any human being should stand against injustice”. During my interviews, and also in the literature about the situation of female detainees in Syria, it was reported that despite the gender inequality prevalent in Syrian society, in prison men and women are treated equally as bad. So, if anything, women should be seen as the more ‘heroic’ victim as they not only have to deal with the suffering within the prison but also in society when (and if) they are released. When men are released from detention, they do not face further discrimination or penalties within society because of their arrest but, as previously mentioned in the context, women may spend the rest of their lives behind metaphorical bars due to spending time in prison.

### **5.1.5 Guilty victims:**

According to Meyer, to be considered as a victim, whether pathetic or heroic, requires being innocent, which means that you have done nothing wrong to justify this ruthless treatment. However, with pathetic victim innocence stems from their “passivity and de-agentification”, while the nonviolent action for a just cause makes heroic victims innocents (Meyer 2011: 260). Here, I would like to use the adjective ‘guilty’ but with a different connotation. Responding to my question about their definition of victim and whether

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<sup>23</sup> Author's interview with Nada.Sharif, pseudonym, a woman detainee, Paris, France 19 April 2018

<sup>24</sup> Author's interview with Widad.Jaber, pseudonym, a woman detainee, Hannover, Germany on 01 May 2018

they consider themselves victims or not, all my respondents did not consider themselves victims of detention because it was their choice to join the protests and have a role in the demonstrations, so in this sense they did an action and were punished. On the other hand, they identified themselves as victims of dictatorship as Syrian citizens; ‘To be fair, I do not consider myself a victim of detention because I am a criminal on the eyes of this brutal regime, I was fully aware of the consequences of my participation’<sup>25</sup>.

Nada was arrested by the security forces two times: the first time was during a demonstration she joined, and the second one was at the Syrian Lebanon borders when she was coming from Lebanon to attend her sister’s wedding. She said that she was very brave dealing with the interrogator the first time and was able to express her thoughts; when he asked her what she wants, and told her that the government is trying its best to do reforms, she replied: ‘What reforms are you talking about? We started a revolution against this regime’<sup>26</sup>. However, she expressed how much she was terrified the second time because, according to her, this was “surprising and unexpected”. This demonstrates the idea of innocent and guilty victims.

## 5.2 During Detention

In this section I will focus on the burdened agency that my informants had which was manifested in their resistance. Moreover, I will also explore the restrictions that were posed on them. The sub-questions of this section are: *how did the powers in charge of the prison constrain their agency? How did the women inside the prisons practice their agency and resist the persecutors? How did they escape the restrictions that they were posed on them?* First I will start by examining the restrictions that the women suffered from during their detention, which I found to be summarized by lack of knowledge and torture.

### 5.2.1 Lack of Knowledge:

As mentioned in my context, women were arrested anywhere and anytime without an arrest warrant, most of the time by unknown security forces to unknown destinations without providing them with any legal justifications. They could be held in security branches for unlimited time without informing them or their families about the charges against them or the place of detention. Knowing that and experiencing the same procedures, my informants’ biggest fear and restriction was their lack of knowledge about their own destiny. El Saadawi is an Egyptian feminist writer, activist, physician, and psychiatrist and author of several books about women, society and religion. She was described as the Simone de Beauvoir of the Arab World. She was arrested by the Egyptian authorities and then wrote a book about her memories in prison. She states that “knowledge whatever is, is less harm than ignorance, vagueness is like death, it is death indeed, because if we knew death, there would be no death and fear of death”(2000: 32). The women I interviewed did not have the right to call their families and tell them that they were arrested. When asking about the reasons of their imprisonment, the only

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<sup>25</sup> Author’s interview with Amal Amin, pseudonym, a woman detainee, Mülheim, Germany, on 29 April 2018

<sup>26</sup> Author’s interview with Nada.Sharif, pseudonym, a woman detainee, Paris, France 19 April 2018

answer they got was because they are terrorists and traitors. The first thing they took from them is their watches; 'whenever I asked about the time there answer was always five o'clock'<sup>27</sup>. They found ways to estimate what time of day it was, for example the 'sounds of the birds means morning, noise of the keys when locking the cells means midnight. Then I used my menstruation to know the date'<sup>28</sup>. They also did not know what was going on outside the prison with their families and with the country, "I was missing the protests which were giving me energy and satisfaction, I missed my mother"<sup>29</sup>. Milan Kundera describes in his novel 'The Ignorance' the missing which stems from the lack of knowledge:

'The Greek word for "return" is nostos. Algos means "suffering." So nostalgia is the suffering caused by an unappeased yearning to return.....In Spanish añoranza comes from the verb añorar (to feel nostalgia), which comes from the Catalan enyorar, itself derived from the Latin word ignorare (to be unaware of, not know, not experience; to lack or miss), In that etymological light nostalgia seems something like the pain of ignorance, of not knowing. You are far away, and I don't know what has become of you. My country is far away, and I don't know what is happening there.'

(Kundera 2003)

The quotation above summarizes the pain they felt because of not knowing about the revolution, their cause, their families, and their destiny. This is also related to the endless waiting, waiting for the known was also killing the prisoners. One informant said to me that 'time seemed to be frozen, one day equals a year in solitary confinement'<sup>30</sup>. El Saadawi also mentions this when she writes "In the prison, the human being does not die out of hunger, heat or cold, beating, illness or insects, however he dies out of waiting" (2000:158).

This tool of restriction may seem painless and easy in comparison to torture, but it had a great psychological effect on my informants, especially those who stayed in solitary confinement. One of them spent three months in solitary confinement. At one point she even began trying to annoy the guards so they take her to the interrogation room and punish her because "it was the only window to the outside world".<sup>31</sup> I indicated in this section the psychological or indirect restrictions the women faced during detention, in the following part I will mention the physical, direct ones.

### **5.2.2 Torture**

In my context I noted that Amnesty international documented 35 torture techniques in Al Assad prisons. The situation for women in detention is no better, because the authorities use the same torturing methods. They were hung by their feet, given electric shocks, their faces were beaten into walls and their skin set on fire, breaking bones or teeth. They also suffered from the Shabh method which is when the prisoner is tied to the roof by his hands

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<sup>27</sup> Author's interview with Lana Mustafa, pseudonym, a woman detainee, Paris, France 21 April 2018

<sup>28</sup> Author's interview with Amal Amin, pseudonym, a woman detainee, Mülheim, Germany, on 29 April 2018

<sup>29</sup> Author's interview with Rania.Kamel, pseudonym, a woman detainee, Paris, France 24 April 2018

<sup>30</sup> Author's interview with Alaa.Hamwi, pseudonym, a woman detainee, Berlin, Germany 07 May 2018.

<sup>31</sup> Author's interview with Alaa.Hamwi, pseudonym, a woman detainee, Berlin, Germany 07 May 2018.

without letting his feet touch the ground (SNHR 2014), and the German Chair which is when the detainee's arms and legs are strapped to a metal chair and their bodies stretched and distorted as they were repeatedly tipped backwards toward the ground. (Mckay 2017). They were also not given enough food and were only allowed to use the toilet a limited amount of times per day. Moreover, the women experienced sexual harassment including verbal or physical harassment and rape. Human Rights Watch documented some cases where women were raped. However there is no evidence whether rape is systematic or has been committed under commands from high rank- officers. There is also no information about whether any action was taken to investigate sexual violence and punish the perpetrators ( Human Rights Watch 2013).

Lack of information about sexual violence towards Syrian women is logical, because most of the women keep silent fearing the stigma attached to this issue. The lawyers who I interviewed asserted that sexual violence is prevalent and that all prisoners, whether men or women, have experienced such violence in different forms and degrees. The lawyer reported that 'there are many rape cases but very few were revealed, but almost all women who were arrested were deeply sexually harassed'<sup>32</sup>. Also the authorities were humiliating women in several ways. The lawyer said:

'In 2012 in the interior branch, there was an open room where ten or twelve women were exposed naked, some of them were in their menstruation, it was so cold and the male detainees and the guards were able to see them, the women were so ashamed and tried to cover themselves in order to cover their bodies and avoid cold. 'a male detainee reported in a testimony'<sup>33</sup>

All these actions show the performance of humiliation by the regime. One of the women I interviewed was raped and was a witness of her cellmate being raped as well. This woman said that she was affected by being a witness more than being a victim. She felt that she was passive and helpless during that moment as she watched the Kurdish woman (who was a combatant) losing her virginity and being broken. She said to the guards: 'Do not kill her, her family will slaughter her when the figured out'. Through testimonies and the interviews I conducted with women, it was revealed that rape was used against women who belong to a very conservative environment, or as a pressure on male activists, or if she is unfortunately beautiful. One destroying method was used by the regime with one of my informants in which she was forced her to appear on National T.V and confess that she is a terrorist and was getting money to be seditious. During the interview, she said 'after all this suffering, torture and waiting, they wanted me to do that! There is nothing more painful than this and no sorrow was as deep as this performance'<sup>34</sup>. Visiting prisoners was and still is only possible when they are transferred into a normal prison, which for this case, is Adra prison. However, five of my informants were prevented from being visited by their families and friends. Two of them were imprisoned with criminal female detainees where they were

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<sup>32</sup> Author's interview with Anwar Al Boni, real name, a Syrian lawyer, Berlin, Germany 03 May 2018.

<sup>33</sup> Author's interview with Anwar Al Boni, real name, a Syrian lawyer, Berlin, Germany 03 May 2018.

<sup>34</sup> Author's interview with Manal.Hamdi, pseudonym, a woman detainee, Paris, France 18 April 2018

not allowed to talk or interact with them, and that was also very difficult for them. All of them still have scars from torture, both psychological and physical. There is no doubt that torture has always been systematic and prevalent in Al Assad prisons, however, a significant difference can be drawn between torture after 2011 and before that date. This difference is that before 2011, torture was used as a means to get information and confessions from the prisoners about their activism or other activists. After the revolution, however, it has become a punishment and a strong direct message to spread fear in society. This was stated by two of my informants who were arrested both before and after the revolution.

After exploring the constraints that were posed on my participants during detention, I will now look into the methods the women used in order to keep their agency and continue surviving.

### **5.2.3 Forms of Agency in the prison: (Burdened agency)**

In this section, I will analyse the resistance of Syrian women in the prison, noting that resistance is one of the several manifestations of agency (Fili 2013:6), which is considered by this thesis as burdened. Before going deeper into my analysis, I will first mention some opinions about women's resistance in prison. One cannot deny that women prisoners are subjected to restrictions inside and outside prison. On the other hand, it is essential to consider prisoners as agentic figures who could have some kind of control on the power relations in incarceration (Shaw 1992, Bosworth 1990, Smith 2002 *in* Fili 2013:5). It might seem ironic to speak about agency and freedom of choice while people are imprisoned, but if we adopt the notion of Henry and Milovanovic which "views humans as active agents producing their social world" (1994:11 *in* Bosworth 1999: 125); then we can claim that even prisoners can act to produce their social world" which is in this case is their life in prison. Keeping in mind that it is contradictory to have agency without freedom, Bosworth states that women rarely passively adopted a feminine behavior in the prison, rather they tried to resist the constraints imposed on them (Bosworth 1999) (Bosworth 1990 *in* Fili 2013:5). In his study of women prisoners in Greece, Fili defines prisons as: "sites of human interaction where prisoners are in a constant dialogue with the institution, and during the dialogue all participants negotiate and constitute the definition of the situation in which they find themselves" (Fili 2013: 18). This definition does not deprive prisoners from their ability to interact and be present, and recognises the agentic skills of the prisoners. Bosworth considers resistance as discursive and material expressions (1999:125), and I will discover the expressions of my informants in their detention.

One of the means that the women used in order to handle the situation in the prison and the ambiguity surrounded it, was to stop waiting and thinking of the world outside. Sometimes the conditions helped some of the women to adapt, but for others it did not. In the collective cells in the security branches, there were no time to think of themselves. Often, many women were crammed into the same small cell. They were busy listening to each other's stories, calming women who became exhausted from interrogation, or caring for one another. Despite these conditions sounding suffocating for some, my informant said that 'You cannot take a moment for yourself even if you wanted, we were twenty eight women in a twelve meters square room. If you talked to everyone for half an hour then your day will be

over. It was a nice situation'. Some women were trying to rehearse and memorise their confessions and keep their memory sharp so they could use the same words and events they mentioned in the previous interrogation sessions. Creating home, singing in the solitary confinement, hiding the truth, and going on hunger strikes were some of the means that were used by the women. Some of them used this time to improve their skills such as reading and analysing others' behaviour. All of them consented that the period in the prison improved them so much; and this is also highlighted by Bosworth when she describes how women in prison regularly tried to resist the restrictions posed on them even with the limited choices they had. Moreover, they expressed how much they have been strengthened by the experience in prison (1999:135). Throughout my interviews I also discovered that resistance is relative. Since the aim of resistance is to help the prisoner herself to manage the horrible situation she lives in then it is up to her to choose what kind of expression she might use. Some of them chose *defying and challenging* the interrogations and guards.

'Writing on the walls, screaming, and banging on the door. In the first interrogation I was young and did not know what should I do. But when I saw the reaction of my boyfriend who was with me at the investigation room and how he was begging them and literally kissing their shoes to stop the torture, I decided that I would never beg them. So when they were beating me I was cursing them loudly and shouting at them. I realised that after the third or fourth swipe (slap) you lose sensation, so why then I should beg them. Actually that gave me a great feeling.'<sup>35</sup>

The same woman who was defying, chose another way of resistance in her second detention which is pretending innocence and stupidity: 'After the first detention, I decided to use another tool of resistance, I played the role of a poor, stupid woman, of course without confessing about others' activism or begging the interrogators.'<sup>36</sup> Another woman stated that resistance for her is to stay alive and leave the prison with the least damage possible: 'I decided to leave as soon as possible and keep strong, so I ate everything I got, I did not try to provoke the interrogator. I am smarter than resisting directly'<sup>37</sup>. This can also be seen as resistance though since she had control on her decisions and actions and she left the prison with the least damage possible as she wished. This connects resistance with Meyer's criteria of heroic victims as their agency has not been morally compromised. Moreover, it is persistent resistance despite the known risk of persecution. I will mention two interesting and heroic incidents about the resistance of my informants.

'They arrested seven more women with me, we were eight women in the interrogation room. Three of us, who were also participating in the sit in, were under eighteen, they were panicking and crying. The rest was calmer and stronger. When the interrogator entered the room and started lecturing us, I told him, you are right, I appreciated your efforts to keep this country safe, but today you made a mistake, you arrested people in

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<sup>35</sup> Author's interview with Amal Amin, pseudonym, a woman detainee, Mülheim, Germany, on 29 April 2018

<sup>36</sup> The same interview with Amal Amin, pseudonym, a woman detainee, Mülheim, Germany, on 29 April 2018.

<sup>37</sup> Author's interview with Widad.Jaber, pseudonym, a woman detainee, Hannover, Germany on 01 May 2018

random, these three girls were not with us, I was there and I have not seen them, they were walking in the street and passed by the sit in but they did not participate. Then the officer left for fifteen minutes and then came back and released the three girls, I am so proud of this action.<sup>38</sup>

Another woman also tried to save the people who were working with her at the same network because they vowed to protect each other and not to tell about others' places and activism.

'When they arrested me they asked me to tell them about the leader who was helping dissidents to escape. They asked me to call him and arrange an appointment, I called him and asked him to leave his place because they wanted to arrest him. I did that in two seconds so they did not have time to react. After that my journey of suffering had started, but I was satisfied and happy that I saved my network.<sup>39</sup>

The last thing I will mention about resistance is that it could be a very small action but the effect on oneself is big. Nawal el Saadawi writes in her memories in the prison about resistance and coping mechanisms in order to prisoners to continue. "I do not know the secret of this human ability to adapt and overcome the worst conditions, but everything was possible since my body was still moving" (2000:67). She described also her conversation with the officer when he was driving with her to the interrogation place and how she insisted on sitting next to window and after a long talk he accepted " I sat next to the window, one small simple achievement, but very important, because I practiced my volition" (ibid: 223).

### **5.3 After Detention**

Detention has destroyed the lives of many women even after they are released, this is especially the case for non activist women. Many of them became divorced and were sometimes deprived of even seeing their children. Even NGOs neglected them and only used them as victims. However, after my informants were released, they were determined to continue their activism despite the difficulties they had during this stage. This section will explore the agency of my informants and the expressive behaviour they used in order to enhance their agency, defy society and change the stereotypical images of female detainees. As my puzzle states, the setting of this research is within the diaspora. However, describing the situation they lived in in Syria after their release is also essential because it led to them leaving the country.

#### **5.3.1 Restrictions**

My informants suffered from a variety of difficulties after their release. Some of these difficulties are related to the regime and others are related to their families and society. The limitations connected to the regime were; expulsion from their jobs and universities, travel bans, and constant monitoring of their movements, actions, and activism. These constraints were heavy but they were easier than the ones that were posed on them by their families and social environment. The first restriction was the stigmatisation they experienced from all sides. On the one hand, they were stigmatised by the pro-regime supporters as they were

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<sup>38</sup> Author's interview with Lana Mustafa, pseudonym, a woman detainee, Paris, France 21 April 2018

<sup>39</sup> Author's interview with Alaa.Hamwi, pseudonym, a woman detainee, Berlin 07 May 2018.



labeled terrorists due to spending time in detention for their activism against the government. They were also socially stigmatised and ostracised because of the shame attached to rape and sexual assault since, as I mentioned before, there is a belief that all women who were arrested would have been raped. After discussing this notion with my informants, we tried to track the roots of this belief because I could not find a valid source to support this idea. One of the reasons of this certainty goes back to the eighties when the massacre of Hama took place<sup>40</sup>. During this time, the military forces committed rape as a collective punishment. Therefore, when people recall this historical event they always remember the raping of women most clearly. The second reason is the lack of trust in the security forces: 'Originally, a woman in our society imprisoned by a center of power, in a country without rules or law to protect her, without any rights, so definitely she will be raped. This stems from the look at the authorities not the look at the women'<sup>41</sup>. However, wherever this notion comes from, it paralyses the mobility of many female detainees. Luckily most of the women I interviewed did not confront difficulties with their whole families after their release. There was just one exception, and she suffered from her father, the pro-regime professor who beat her after her release and forced her to get married with one of her relatives. She said: 'My story is different, because I was destroyed by my father not the regime. Then by this arranged husband who continued raping and assaulting me because of my detention'.

#### **5.4 Symbolic Inversion:**

In this part of my analysis I will explore the symbolic inversions of my informants after their release. Babcock defines symbolic inversion as "any act of expressive behaviour which inverts, contradicts, abrogates, or in some fashion presents an alternative to commonly held cultural codes, values and norms, be they linguistic, literary or artistic, religious, or social and political". First I will start by looking at their actions within Syria and then outside Syria in the diaspora.

##### **5.4.1 In Syria**

'Men are in charge of women by [right of] what Allah has given one over the other and what they spend [for maintenance] from their wealth. So righteous women are devoutly obedient, guarding in [the husband's] absence what Allah would have them guard. But those [wives] from whom you fear arrogance - [first] advise them; [then if they persist], forsake them in bed; and [finally], strike them. But if they obey you [once more], seek no means against them. Indeed, Allah is ever Exalted and Grand'  
(A Nisa Verse /Quran)<sup>42</sup>

In Syrian society, that the majority of the population, including women themselves, adopt this Quranic verse as a principle for dealing with women. In many places in Syria

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<sup>40</sup> Hama massacre: It was committed on 2 February 1982 by Al Assad father and his brother, in the city of Hama where a lot of Muslim Brotherhood were based. A lot of people were killed and a lot of women were raped too.

<sup>41</sup> Author's interview with Noura, Bader pseudonym, a woman detainee, Paris, France 19 April 2018

<sup>42</sup> An Nisa: means the women.

especially the conservative Sunni areas, any actions of women will be interpreted as rebellious. However, a lot of women decided to change their lives and destiny after the revolution. Five of my informants belong to a conservative environment, and four of them were wearing the hijab before their detention. Two of them were wearing it for religious reasons and the other two were only wearing it as a social norm. These four women decided to remove their hijab when they were arrested. When one of my informants arrives at the security branch, she said that 'one of the officers snatched my hijab as an insult, but I felt his action as a relief, because for me the hijab did not have a religious significance.'<sup>43</sup> One of them was religious and she kept it in detention, she was praying for god all the time but then she lost faith.

'I was praying all the time and asking Allah to help me, but he was deaf, then I was screaming and calling him, where are you? Do not you see me? Then I stopped believing and removed my hijab when I had the opportunity.'<sup>44</sup>

Another result of the detention was that one of my informants revealed that she is a lesbian; 'without prison I would have never told my family that I am a lesbian, I confronted death and lived in the solitary confinement so there is nothing more to worry about or be afraid of'<sup>45</sup>. Four of my informants left the country directly after their release because they lost everything or were given short notice to leave the country. The other four kept their activism; 'I participated in a protest on the same day I was released'<sup>46</sup>. Two of them lived in Gouta, the most dangerous and conservative place in the suburbs of Damascus. There, they helped to document violations and gave first aid. They tried their best to continue their activism but then the government was monitoring them excessively so they were forced to leave. It is worth mentioning that these women were talking very proudly about their activism and achievements and how they were able to defy the society and the regime, and how they refused to wear the hijab in Gouta where Islamist parties were in power. They mentioned every single detail with exact date and place with joy and enthusiasm. The last behaviour I will mention in this section is that of Amal Amin when she escaped her arranged marriage and chose to join the protests even as a young mother. These actions could cost women their lives with the pretext of crime of honor. However these women insisted to continue their liberating process which contradicts the norms despite the cost, thus these are examples of symbolic inversions.

The next section will explore my informants behaviours in their new asylum societies in diaspora.

#### **5.4.2 In the diaspora:**

In contradiction to my expectations, my informants felt a lack of agency in the diaspora. They were feeling more free and powerful when demonstrating in Syria yet,

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<sup>43</sup> Author's interview with Widad.Jaber, pseudonym, a woman detainee, Hannover, Germany on 01 May 2018

<sup>44</sup> Author's interview with Amal.Amin, pseudonym, a woman detainee, Mülheim, Germany, on 29 April 2018.

<sup>45</sup> Author's interview with Lana .Mustafa, pseudonym, a woman detainee, Paris, France 21 April 2018

<sup>46</sup> Author's interview with Nada.Sharif, pseudonym , a woman detainee, Paris, France 19 April 2018

despite more freedom and choices, they now they feel they have less agency in Europe. In Syria they felt they had more tools to create change and impact, but they now feel powerless. This proves that agency depends more on the individuals and their desire, not only ability, to act. They used to have an impact and take responsibilities but now they are part of the bureaucracy and have to follow up on their papers and asylum procedures. This feeling of loss and failure was right after they left, where their feelings that they had let the revolution down were most heightened. But then they they took other initiatives in order to integrate in the new societies as former detainees and as refugees, as well as to continue their activism in different ways; like participating in conferences about Syria and trying to raise awareness in the new societies. One particular event which will be analysed in the next section, considers real symbolic inversions which contradict the stereotypical images of the western view on Syrian women in general and detainees in particular. This event is X Adra play, which was mentioned in my methodology.

### 5.4.3 X Adra

Four of my informants participated in this play, and they did so for a number of reasons. Primarily as part of their activism and to bring the issue of detainees to light, but also as a reaction to the mainstream media that focuses only on ISIS and the humanitarian crisis. There were other motivations such as changing the stereotypical images of the women detainees, showing the host communities the real reasons that led Syrians to leave their country, and as an attempt to overcome the emotional and psychological effects of detention. Five former female detainees and one man (who was a woman when he was arrested) acted out their own stories in the play. The goal of the director was to show their real stories without presenting any pathetic victims or provoking any kind of sympathy among the audience.

‘At the beginning I was not excited because I did not want to present myself as a weak victim as what is being presented in other works, but when the director told me that I am free to choose any stories or memories to talk about in a neutral way I approved to participate.’<sup>47</sup>

Reflecting on the importance of performance as a genre, my informants like going into this experience because of the interaction with the audience and the credibility of this action.

‘It is a form of expression, someone chooses to write a book while the other chooses to perform in a play. However it is an opportunity to interact with people directly, flesh and blood give more significance in communication, this is a human being not just a paper.’<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Author’s interview with Amal.Amin, pseudonym, a woman detainee, Mülheim, Germany, on 29 April 2018.

<sup>48</sup> Author’s interview with Manal.Hamdi, pseudonym, a woman detainee and actress in the play, Paris, France 18 April 2018

They aimed with their performance to convey messages to the audience, whether directly by using verbal expressions or indirectly by using their body language and movement. One of the direct messages was to tell the audience that there was a revolution and they were arrested for their peaceful participation and activism. Each one of the women mentioned the reasons that led to her detention in a direct way.

'From the first minute the revolution started in Syria, I felt that I was part of it. So I started contacting my friends to discuss what we can do. We had to do something, but we were unable to know what and how. The regime was killing and imprisoning protesters everyday, so we had to do something very strong to stop the violence.<sup>49</sup>

Another direct message was to tell the audience about other detainees who are still behind the bars of the prison, and the ways of torture they are suffering from. One of the women chose to describe the difficult situation that the male detainees are living in.

'When they were taking to the interrogation room. I was forced to walk between bodies of many guys or corpses of people who died under torture. It was hard to recognize the faces of the prisoners from the blood and the torture signs.<sup>50</sup>

In addition to the direct messages they tried to portray, there were some indirect messages which were demonstrated by their physical actions such as repetition of movements as a sign of the routine they experienced in prison, praying or writing to show their coping mechanisms. They managed to portray their everyday life in the prison but more importantly, they managed to present heroic victims and strong women. At the end of the play each one of them had a monologue to tell about her present life and show the audience that she is going on with her life. They also highlighted actions of symbolic inversion.

'Sometimes I rush out of my home in Paris, I do my hair very quickly and without thinking I get out. When I do this , I remember how I used to be in Hijab for 15 years as how our culture and my family wanted me to do.<sup>51</sup>

I mentioned the play in this section, and now will move to other manifestations of symbolic inversion.

## **5.5 Politicization and publicization of private choices**

I mentioned in symbolic inversions in Syria the issue of the hijab and also that related to sexual identity. Removing the hijab, naturally, implies publicization and confrontation with people. However, revealing sexual identity could be kept private and secret, but Lana

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<sup>49</sup> Kinana Zaher, pseudonym, a women detainee and actress in the the play, Mülheim, Germany, on 28 April 2018.

<sup>50</sup> Rania.Kamel, pseudonym, a woman detainee and actress in the play, Mülheim, Germany, on 28 April 2018.

<sup>51</sup> Rania.Kamel, pseudonym, a woman detainee and actress in the play, Mülheim, Germany, on 28 April 2018.

Mustafa, one of my informants chose to speak about this right in public. It is critical to mention that homosexuality is prohibited in Islam, and in Syria it is considered a crime. LGBT people may face serious problems in the law<sup>52</sup>. Moreover, it is socially rejected and considered as shame to the family honour. The last private choice I will remark on is also related to sexual identity. One of my informants, Alaa, said that she never felt like she was a girl. When she was 18 years old she was forced to marry one of her relatives, and that was one of the most devastating events of her life. But then she managed to run away from her husband and get divorced. She joined the revolution when it started, and then worked as a taxi driver to drive the dissidents to the Jordanian borders to flee. This is, by itself, a symbolic inversion as it contradicts the social norm that women do not work as taxi drivers. But her outstanding inversion was when she decided to gain her real identity and become a man. In the diaspora she underwent a transition operation in order to become male. Alaa is now a man despite the fact that his family considers him as kafir<sup>53</sup>; someone who deserves going to hell. Alaa has become an inspiration for many people who are struggling with their identity. In the following section I will explore the audience reaction to these symbolic inversions.

### **5.5.1 Still have a voice**

One of the elements of Alexander's' theory on cultural performance, which is necessary for this thesis, is the audience. In order for performances to be significant, there should be an audience. As Alexander says that audiences are 'observers of cultural performance', they can then be in the real world with people physically watching a performance, but they can also be online. In the interviews I conducted, one Syrian man, who was also a detainee, was really impressed by the X Adra play. He said that he was in awe that the former female detainees had the courage to speak about their experiences and that he, as a man, would not have been able to do this. Considering the social stigma attached to women speaking out, this shows huge significance that he said he would be able to. Another Syrian woman also expressed for the first time, after seeing the transgender actor, that she too wanted to transition to a man but until she saw the play she didn't have the bravery to do so. This shows how the play also empowered the audience. For the German members of the audience, they expressed gratitude as they learned a lot about the situation in Syria and that of detainees which they didn't previously know. This was one of the goals of the detainees in the play.

I envision social media users as the audience of online performances, namely on Facebook. Goethals and Allison state that anecdotes of all times show that people, individually or as groups, are hungry for heroes in order to survive and thrive. This hunger motivates them to construct heroes so that they can identify with them as "role models or guides for actions" (2012). Heroes are believed to be inspiring and powerful, their behaviour is usually defined as moral. Their influence on people's thoughts normally stems from their visions and feats that challenge conventional thinking or traditional norms. Applying this to my case, many Syrians had that tendency to create heroes too, and that was obvious during the revolution. The most prominent way to do that was using Facebook. As a reaction to detention in general, Facebook pages were created after arresting someone due to their

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<sup>52</sup> Article 520 of the penal code of 1949, prohibits carnal relations against the order of nature, and provides up to three- years imprisonment.

<sup>53</sup> It means unbeliever in Islam and this accusation is usually accompanied with rejection from society.

activism. These Facebook pages were called 'Freedom pages', where the admins of these pages were posting about the detainees with photos of them. Big bright slogans were also used. The title of these pages were normally 'Freedom for the hero or the heroin [the name]' or 'Free the hero or heroin [the name] from Al Assad prisons'. Many people shared these pages or changed their profile photos into the photo of the detainee, as well as writing revolutionary posts about the detainee. Through my work in documenting detainees, I was an admin of several Freedom pages. The function of these pages, according to the activists or the detainees' families who created them, is to spread the news about the detention and reach as many people as possible, and also to be used as proof for humanitarian organisations. In addition, they thought that these pages can contribute to a certain pressure on the regime to release the detainees. Six of my informants had these freedom pages during their captivity.

'When I was released after my first detention which lasted for four days, I was surprised by the huge Facebook campaign that was launched for me, and I became the heroin Rania not the normal Rania. I said to myself: who are these people? Why I have not seen them in the protests? I liked that at the beginning, I became a celebrity, but I realised that this title also entailed being not just a protestor but also a political figure'<sup>54</sup>

Franco, Blau, and Zimbardo (2011) proposed a taxonomy of heroism. They based their study on the basis of the types of risks that the heroes perform. One of the twelve subtypes of heroes is the political figures (Goethals and Allison 2012: 221). Detainees in Syria were looked at with appreciation and pride, because they had a noble, courageous and risky attitude, which were manifested in them defying a tyrannical regime regardless of the consequences. In this section, by 'people' I mean the revolution's supporters not the proponents of the regime. One of the people I asked about their motivation to share and promote those pages said: 'Their actions were brave and courageous, I cannot myself do that in such a brutal government. They are defending me and other silent people too, I got hope and power from them'<sup>55</sup>. Motivated only by their dream of change, my informants went to the streets, they did not think of any personal gains or benefits. On the contrary, they were aware of the serious consequences that they might face during and after detention. This idea is echoed in this quotation "Heroes symbolize something greater than attaining wealth and fame, performing death defying acts, or acquiring media-promoted status, Their qualities endure as a guide and inspiration for all of us to be heroes. It's time for heroes again". (Sanchez 2000 *in* Shuart 2004:146).

On the other hand, people had other motivations to help publish those pages, such as a reaction to their own deficiency to act and have a role, so they feel that those heroes are also acting on their behalf and they did so as a payback. In addition, it is an easy and safe way to show their stance towards the regime and their support to the revolution. 'They were practicing a legitimate right, and yes they are heroes and heroines because they could make a deal with the regime and get released with less torture and suffering but they refused

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<sup>54</sup> Author's interview with Rania.Kamel, pseudo name, a woman detainee, Paris, France 24 April 2018

<sup>55</sup> Whatsapp interview with Dana Zaza, a Syrian woman

and continued their struggle, and many of them died because of torture.<sup>56</sup> Regardless of the motivation, most detainees liked that idea, two of my informants thought that the campaigns that were launched for them helped releasing them. 'A high ranking officer with a neat suit and bright shoes visited me in my solitary confinement and had a talk with me, without giving me any information or hint about my situation, I was so angry and shouted on him but he did not do anything, the next day I was released. A huge campaign was launched in Syria and Tunisia for me and there were many appeals.'<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Author's whatsapp interview with Mona Jundi

<sup>57</sup> Author's interview with Lana Mustafa, pseudonym, a woman detainee, Paris, France 21 April 2018

## Conclusion

What I found from my interviews and data is that the shift in the victimhood paradigm can not happen without other external factors beyond the individual. The most important factor is the family. The women I met have very supportive families, or had at least some family members that showed pride and respect for what they did during the revolution. Their efforts were praised by the families, which is not always the case in Syria. For example, in the documentaries I watched and the testimonies from my informants about other women in detention, showed that women who do not have supportive families felt very victimised, weak, and abandoned.

The aim of this thesis has been to understand how the cultural performances, namely symbolic inversions, have shifted the victimhood paradigm from pathetic to heroic among formerly Syrian female detainees who were arrested by the Syrian regime for their activism during the Syrian revolution and who are currently living in Europe. However, 'shift' is a fluid term which is not measurable or concrete. Thus, I explored their expressive behaviours through three phases: before detention, during detention and after detention. These stages encompassed their lives in Syria and then also in Europe and how these behaviours, regardless of all restrictions and suffering they had in the prison, contributed to this shift. I also used burdened agency to analyse how their agency was restricted during these three phases. All the actions I analysed I consider symbolic inversions because they are defying the stereotypical actions expected of women.

In the first section I looked at the the period before detention, the agency they had that led to their imprisonment and how they were influenced by the collective action. I also looked at how the revolution has had a deep impact on them and played a role as a liberating factor for these women and helped them to acknowledge their agency. In addition to this I examined the restrictions posed on them by the regime and society.

The second section covered the detention period, the resistance and the coping mechanisms they practiced as forms of agency as well as the constraints in the prison including torture and lack of knowledge.

In the third section of my analysis I analysed their life after being released inside Syria and in the diaspora and the expressive behaviour they performed in order to reintegrate and change the stereotypical images of the Syrian women detainees. As well as that, I examined the reaction or interaction between them as actors and society whether in Syria or in the host countries as an audience.

In this thesis, I tried to remove the negative connotations of the word victim and also to avoid using the word hero which is related to mythical contexts. This was also as a response to my informants desire, who unanimously refused to be labeled as only victims or



only heroes. And this thesis has adopted the notions that victimhood is relational and agency cannot be full under any circumstances but burdened or in a spectrum.

### **Further Research**

I am aware that my research is not representative of Syrian female detainees, and this is a shortcoming. As noted in my methodology, I faced many challenges during this research. These challenges narrowed down the representation of women to just activist women, whereas that was not my original intention. Moreover, I believe that studying this phenomena would be more significant if it was done in Syria where the challenges that face women detainees are stronger and more manifested. A comparison between activist and non activist female detainees using the victimhood paradigm could also be critical. Also, researching women detainees in other constraining environments, such as under the control of ISIS or other islamist parties. A comparative study about male detainees and female detainees and how the detention had affected their lives and decisions, is also important.

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