

**Literary and Cultural Disability Studies: An Exploration**  
**Prof. Hemachandran Karah**  
**Department of Humanities and Social Sciences**  
**Indian Institute of Technology - Madras**

**Lecture – 8**  
**Conversation with Dr. Sona Hill Kazemi**  
**Burning Wounds, Disfigurements and Disabilities in the Making:**  
**An Ethnographic Witnessing**

Prof. Hemachandran Karah: Hello, welcome all of you. Today our discussion is going to be about acid attacks. Well, acid attack survival is now treated as a disability according to Indian law, but acid attack survival is much more than that. It is the most painful burning experience from inside and out. Today, I have with me Dr. Sona Kazemi, postdoctoral fellow at Ohio State University and she is associated with Mills College too.

She has done extensive ethnographic work on acid attacks and other forms of debilities in developing societies such as Iran and she is positioned in America. So, she negotiates between first world academic expectations and the developing society. She uses her rich experience to bear upon her work. I call today's discussion title as 'Burning wounds, Disfigurements and Disabilities in the making: an Ethnographic Witnessing'.

So, in preparing for a conversation with her I just extracted a small note from her book chapter which I had the privilege to read. But before reading that for you let me ask Sona to say hello to all of you. Hi Sona.

Prof. Sona Kazemi: Hi Dr. Karah. Thank you for inviting me, I am very honored and privileged to be in this conversation with you and I am so looking forward to the talk.

HK: So, well let me read that out for you as I promised from the chapter on acid attack survival. This is the case of Masumi about whom we will hear more from Sona. Let me read that out. "She did not think for a second that this was a corrosive substance. The liquid as she remembers it

now was a dark sticky substance like a condensed syrup or sap. She smelled rancidity which puzzled her even more about what was happening to her, by what and why? She noticed that her Monto (Islamic covering that women are supposed to wear under the Iranian regime) was fragmentizing and crumbling off her shawl (hijab, the head scarf women are forced to wear at all times in public) started shrinking quickly like a burning scrunching piece of plastic. The old man throwing the acid targeted Masumi's face, but since she was standing inside the door, some of the acid splashed on the door. Thus, the acid had even penetrated the door and the asphalt even the tiles on the front pavement had holes in them. Still standing in the semi-opened door Masumi tried to open her eyes after she felt the liquid. The sticky liquid was still pouring down her face. The acid was penetrating her skin slowly and yet quickly. Masumi started screaming. "I am burned".

Well, I do not think I read it so well, but I know I am moved by it.

So now where do we start? What is acid attack? Can I begin that way?

SK: Yeah absolutely, as a matter of fact I think you read it so beautifully. When you live with these things for so long over years as a witness like you mentioned and as a researcher or what I call witness researcher, it is very interesting when you hear it from someone else reading it out loud to you. Because it is a very isolating and lonely experience to be in touch with this level of pain and torture because most people do not want to be very upset with these things. So I really appreciate that you have decided to get close to this topic, and for people who will be listening to this conversation, I appreciate that.

Second, I would like to say that it is interesting how these things never get repetitive for me. Even now as you were reading it, I kept imagining Masumi as this was happening to her and as she was telling me about all these things as it was happening and I was transcribing and translating at the same time. I would like to say that acid attack is not just an act of violence that happens in an incident. Acid attack is a form of torture that almost never ends because it is aimed at controlling the victim or I should say the survivor rather forever and that is the most interesting - well, not in a positive way - thing about acid is that it is not something that ends. Usually when we think about incidents, we think about something that happens to you and then

ends at some point and then you move on. But with this type of violence, the whole philosophy of it is based on controlling the person forever.

HK: Yes, so well I always thought until this date that acid attack is an Indian evil, but it looks like it is universal, that is what I understand with case even in United Kingdom.

SK: Yeah, thank you for saying that. Unfortunately, yes that is the presumption and that is very wrong. As soon as you say acid, people immediately think of just South Asia like Bangladesh, Pakistan, India. That is not true. Acid attack happens in many parts of the world including Cambodia and Iran and Afghanistan and the UK and some other parts that I cannot remember exactly but I know that happens in many different parts of the world. But the problem is the ones in the UK are mostly gang related, that is the difference.

HK: Can you explain that more about that Sona? What is this gang and what is gang violence and why are men the victims of it mostly, can you explain more?

SK: Yeah of course. So the acid attacks in the UK that happen mostly in the context of gang violence, are usually based on a quick revenge. For instance, in the United States there is widespread access to weapons. So, people wanting a quick revenge use a gun. However, in the UK though there is no easy access to guns, there is however easy access to corrosive substances. I do not want to preach this but people even use the car battery because there is sulfuric acid in it. I do not want to teach people that but these are things that people use, bleach or all sorts of even household cleaning materials that can burn the skin.

HK: Yes the problem is not in the substance but the intention right, the instinct. Once you have that in mind then you know ways and means to get substance that will do your...

SK: Exactly. Even here in the US, people are so worried about their rights to have weapons. I mean the argument is "people kill people, guns do not kill people".

HK: Well, that looks devious to me.

SK: Yeah, that is the argument. Well, I live in a Red state after all. But the intention behind an acid attack according to one interview that was done that I talked about in my chapter of the book (that hopefully come out in the next couple of years) is based on humiliation leaving a mark on the face of your target. So it is a type of humiliation for men because of these supposed notions and cultural construction of masculinity.

HK: So man is supposed to soldier on and you dent his soldiering by imprinting something on his face on body saying that you are not a soldier anymore, that kind of thing, right?

SK: Exactly. It is humiliation. You know how for example some gang members have different traditions of tattoos; for every person they kill they tattoo a tear on their face or some other thing. So, these are just an aesthetics of violence. I mean it is showing off the violence right? But when it is used even in gang-related violence, if they want to get back at a gang member, they might go for his girlfriends. That is the most interesting part. One gang member who had used corrosive substance on another person's girlfriend was asked why he did it. And I watched the interview myself, he said he did it because women love their beauty.

So, this is another part of this problem which comes to bite women because of again the cultural notions of femininity and beauty and how women must perform this beautification of their gender and their bodies, which again I mean.. these are all notions behind these types of violence. That is what I am trying to say, not that it is justified but these are the thoughts behind it.

But when the acid attacks are done on women outside the gang violence, it is usually on the side of a rejected lover or an angry husband who you know for a variety of reason, for dowry or for example in Masumi's case she got divorced and the father-in-law decided to throw acid on her. So, it happens for a variety of reasons, but controlling the body forever seems to me as the common trope in all of these stories.

HK: Coming to that in a minute, when it happens to women it is more about making them unavailable.

SK: Exactly, ineligible or making them destroyed from inside so that they do not have a second chance whatsoever about a fuller life. So, in that way you control them, the perpetrator of violence controls them in their absence.

HK: Well, it is very diabolic but where does this all come from? I am sure patriarchy is the name of that mindset or misogyny but can we understand it a bit more deeply Sona? Where does it all begin?

SK: Yeah sure, well yeah you named it. I mean for those of us who might not be familiar with the notion of ableism - because I really want to inject the word ableism here as we are talking about patriarchy and misogyny because they cannot alone do this. There is an element of ableism here and I will explain why. For those of us who might not know as for example discrimination against a certain race is called racism or discrimination against women is called sexism, discrimination against disabled folks or mad folks or disfigured folks is called ableism.

So, when someone throws acid on another person, the intention is to disfigure them. However, there is another thought in that person's mind. That person is already relying on the society's ableism to finish the job for him and what I mean by that is that he already counts on these already existing notions of performance of beauty on behalf of women. For example, Masumi in this case has become blind in both eyes and has become disfigured. So, the notion in the father-in-law's head was to make her like you said, 'unavailable' for other men.

And what he is already doing in his mind is that he is relying on the society's ableism that will have to perceive a disabled woman as undesirable. They will have no choice but to perceive her as undesirable and well of course I mean it is sarcastically, not that they cannot, but I mean this is the notion behind it. And so if we do not have a cultural establishment that believes that disabled

people are undesirable why would he do such a thing? He is definitely counting on the society to perform their ableism, so this woman can be isolated and alone and undesirable.

HK: From near and far. Family circle and distant societies - I mean distant not in the physical sense, not non-intimate societies around. But you also add an angle to ableism here Sona, cathartic ableism. This framework is very powerful to understand acid attack across societies, so maybe you can unpack it for us.

SK: Yeah of course and I can tell you where it all started. I attended a talk many years ago which was done by a very amazing Persian-Iranian author and what she was talking about in that talk really struck me. Farnoosh Moshiri her name is, and her uncle Fereydoon Moshiri is a very well-known Iranian poet. Farnoosh Moshiri, she is a wonderful author and she was talking about this book that she has written which is a fiction work based on her memories of the Iranian Revolution in 1979 and it is interesting where she was defining the word catharsis. In Greek tragedy, as our listeners might know, catharsis is this moment of witnessing something extremely tragic. And then as you are watching it, getting purified inside - that is what catharsis means in arts and in tragedy in literature. But the way she defined it she gave us a different definition and that really struck me. She was talking about how tragic the treatment of political prisoners had ended up in the aftermath of Iranian Revolution, but the way she defined it really struck me. She said, "well when I look at this tragic moment the catharsis does not happen because I see that this person is in so much pain; the catharsis happens because I look at this person and I am so happy that I am not that person and it is in fact the happiness that is the catharsis, not the tragedy of watching another person's pain". Of course, she meant it in a sarcastic way and she knew..

HK: Maybe the sense of relief that one is not that person, one is not...

SK: Exactly which is just dirty right? It is very dirty and I am just going to say that it is very dirty. And as soon as I came across this, this was in my head and then when I started talking to my acid attack survivors that I do ethnographic field work with and a lot of these people mentioned to me

that as they walk down the street and when people go by many of those people say “thank god, thank god, thank god”.

HK: How do they say that? What is the word they use locally?

SK: Yeah, the word is ‘*alhamdulillah*’. You know, in Farsi that means ‘thanks to god’, and they say it in a way that that person hears it. This audibility of it is also what is very interesting. So that reminded me of that moment of catharsis that I had seen.

And I had witnessed in Farnoosh Moshiri’s talk and then I came to call this that anti-catharsis movement of ableism. So, basically you come across this person who is disabled and you say out loud thanks to god, but clearly you are not at a church, you are not talking to god, you are using that person as a rosary or as we call a Caspi in Persian. You reduce that person in order for yourself to feel superior, to feel better and to feel good about your own lack of disability.

So, this is basically the essence of what I call this anti-catharsis moment of ableism, which is a social encounter, it is not spiritual at all.

HK: Great, well now see we are at a point to say that this attack, survival and witnessing all involve socially sanctioned aesthetic values in the western classical sense and also well catharsis as a framework is not yet dead because it so fundamentally talked about. You know one’s predispositions when watching a work of art or experiencing a work of art or something as moving as or something visceral as acid attack, basically it says that one goes through emotions such as pity and fear and then somewhere after that experience some of you come to terms with it so that is catharsis. And all societies like where I come from - Indian - we have ancient rasa system which is talking about different forms of emotions driven by aesthetic evaluations such as anger, fear, admiration, love, fear, disgust and so on. The problem is unless we talk about ableism we cannot fully understand or fully comprehend the central core of any sentiment including anger and fear because that is driven by one’s capacity or some other person’s incapacity or some

other person's weakness or perceived weakness. So only then these sentiments get driven into our heads and hearts. So, you are so right in bringing together ableism and something as fundamental an experience as catharsis. So that is the way I am trying to look at it. Well, in bringing this framework you also get into 'bodymind' without hyphen, because at the end of the day acid attack is about the conquest of the bodymind. Can you say more about bodymind Sona?

SK: Yeah, so I think from the Cartesian time and the enlightenment and the rise of modernity and the rise of subjects with rights we have been talking a lot about body and mind and the dualism of the two. So what I intend to do and of course before me professors like Margaret Price and Sami Choc have pioneered the use of the word 'bodymind' as one word in order to emphasize the inseparability of the two because you cannot dissect them. When we talk about body, inevitably we are talking about the mind and when we are talking about the mind inevitably we are talking about the body.

And for example, when we talk about a violence like an acid attack of course you can see the scars on someone's face or eyes or you might even measure them somehow, but how do you measure the scars on their psychology, on their psyche, on their under soul?

HK: ..or for that matter social psyche.

SK: Exactly. Or what it does to society because these types of violence, they have a ripple effect and they shake the society. They do not stay, they leak, they scare women, they discipline women to perform as patriarchy and misogyny and ableism want them to, otherwise this could be coming. This is the logic, this is the rationale to control women's bodies and their sexuality and their desires. So it is a leash, it is keeping women on a tight leash to say this is coming. I was listening to an interview by a perpetrator who had thrown acid on his wife, and as part of the interview, he was saying, " I was so upset with my wife, I took a cab, when I was on the cab I was so sad. The cab driver said what is going on with you and I told them that my wife did something that I did not like, I am so upset and then the cab driver said alright go do something to her then".



Yeah! it is shaking right, such a kind of advice and see here is exactly where my point lies. What I am trying to say, sorry I got a little bit diverted from the bodymind but really I need to say this. So, we think that when we live in a society and a crime is committed, like a crime as horrendous as this, we need to remember what Hannah Arendt taught us after the Holocaust. She reminded us that after the Holocaust after World War Two, that some crimes were not done against one person or two people or a group of people, some crimes are against humanity. And that is why we have the definition of 'crimes against humanity'. Some crimes are not against one person. I am not a legal scholar, but I totally categorize acid attack as a crime against humanity because it is not against one person, it is against everyone.

It is against humanity, human soul and everything we stand for, bodily integrity, embodiment, dignity of the body and everything we know and we have learnt since the enlightenment about the integrity of the body. But coming back to what I meant to say that we are all in this together, I meant to say the only perpetrator in these scenarios are not the people who throw the acid. In fact we are all implicated in these scenarios and I can tell you why.

A few months ago a man in a village north of Iran beheaded his daughter with a sickle and when they asked him why you did this. These are called "honour" crimes right.

HK: It is there so much in India too, Khap Panchayats and so on. Please go ahead.

SK: So this guy said that first of all he had called a lawyer before doing it. Some people think that these are acts of sudden anger and that is such a mistake, these are very well planned procedures. So, he called the lawyer first..

HK: Interestingly you called them 'procedures'. I mean the agent removes himself from that act calling it a duty. That is why you used the word procedure, or so I think. Okay, carry on Sona.

SK: So what happened is that this guy called the lawyer and asked, "so, if I kill my daughter what happens to me?" And the lawyer said, "well you do not go to prison because that is your daughter but you have to pay a blood money" (or what we call *Diya* under Shariah law) and the

guy says, “alright, no problem” and then goes and beheads the 15-year-old daughter with a sickle. And when they ask him why he did it, he said because the next day he wanted to raise his head in the community. So what I am trying to say here is that that community that expects that man to behead his wife or daughter in order to “preserve” his honor is as guilty as that man.

HK: So, it looks like whichever part of the world that this happens, social gathering or a community has its bodymind. And for it to be integral, for it to maintain for its own sanctity they need a sacrifice. They need to do a duty-bound procedure to eliminate somebody who is sort of tarnishing that body-mind's integrity. So killing becomes easy in a sense that you remove your agency as a father and then just perform your holy duty.

SK: Exactly. And what you're saying reminds me of ancient times when they would sacrifice a person in front of the gods or something. Yeah that body mind, preserving that ideological construct that becomes so important. Because these they do not exist in the outside world. When I touch my hair right now. This is my hair or this is my finger that I am touching right now, but honor is an ideology. It does not exist in the outside world. It is just a concept that we have to make.

HK: But it is very visceral at the same time, it is not just an abstract idea. It is a very visceral notion, so visceral that my blood can boil when somebody close to me is seen as tarnishing that bodymind.

SK: Exactly, and that is what I meant to say, I mean that ideology becomes so important because that ideology preserves the supremacy of men in the society. And if that ideology is destroyed by any means, then the men's supremacy in the society is questioned and that is what they are most afraid of losing. It is not the honor, it is their supremacy in fact.

HK: That is right. Well, we have been talking about Masumi from the beginning, maybe you could walk us through the case and also your anxieties and your journey. I think I will still call it

‘witnessing’. How do you walk us through? Or how ‘can’ you walk us through? I am asking how ‘can’ you walk us through?

SK: Yeah, thank you for asking that, not many people ask about what I feel or what I do in relation to my subjects. In my book I call it vulnerable-active witnessing. So, what happens is because I come from a community that has gone through two revolutions in less than a hundred years, the constitutional revolution and another conventional revolution. So that shows that we are a very politicized nation, very politicized. So in my own life as an activist, I have inherited so many political activisms and political movements as in the next generation to the revolution and to the war and everything that has happened in the post-revolutionary Iran. So that is my one of the many hats that I wear which is important and I will come back to why. That has taught me one thing that goes way against western notions of psychology and psychotherapy. I am a therapist myself and I say this. I say that we should not treat other people's pains as an archive, as a dead information that is sitting somewhere. We need to internalize them and I mean and I am using the word ‘internalizing’ on purpose. I know the western notions of psychology are totally against this word but I am using it on purpose. I believe in internalizing it and living it and making it and I believe that you cannot make a revolution, you can *be* the revolution. And I believe that in my activism as a witness.

When I am in touch with another people's pain and I do not run away and I stay present at this exchange and I do not take advantage of these marginalized very disenfranchised people I instead try to be an ally and echo whatever they say and be present in their lives in any way that I can. If it is fund raising, political awareness raising, just be there, do not rob them of their knowledge and leave and I say this for young researchers who might be listening to this -do not steal people's pain, you owe them. You need to sit down with a community when they open up to you. I do not know how much that answered your question.

HK: Well, ‘no cerebral instrumentality please’ is what you are saying to all of us. Yeah. So take us back to Masumi that way, Sona.

SK: Sure, so Masumi is a very strong woman. We are friends. This happened to Masumi ten years ago, and since then, Masumi has gone through something around four reconstructive surgeries. Masumi has a 10-year-old son. She lives with her son and hopefully after the pandemic is over she might be able to get a surgery done on her one eye that still has some sight, we are currently fundraising for that. But what Masumi was doing before the pandemic hit is really interesting and admirable. First of all, she found a job at the White Cane Center which is a non-profit organization in Tehran. She went there and she learned how to use accessible phones like the voice-over and she taught that to other people with visual impairments or other blind people and she became so good at it that she became a very good teacher for others who had just acquired disability or they were new to it. Besides that, she learned pottery and became a very good teacher in pottery. In fact, she became so good that she started teaching pottery and she was making a small income out of that because before this incident she had a little beauty salon, but after the incident she had to close it down, but then she did not stop. She did learn pottery and all this and now she is doing modeling for this woman who makes these really nice clothes and she is doing modeling for that. And yeah, she comes on Instagram. We have 'live's once in a while on Instagram, we talk about the problems she is facing, the lack of support from the state and she lives her life counting on feminist solidarity from across the world. And another notion that I thought I wanted to touch upon if we have time is transnational solidarity movements that happen.

HK: In fact, I was going to ask about TDM, your framework.

SK: Yeah, one component of that Transnational Disability Model, well basically what I mean by that first of all is a disability movement that is not stuck between nation states, that is my first argument. People usually think that when I say 'transnational' it means the Global South but that is not what I mean. What I mean mostly is a movement and a consciousness that is not stuck between borders or the states. I want a consciousness that is global but goes beyond those man-made lines or walls. So in this model in relation to this particular chapter, I developed a new angle and I called it 'transnational analytic of care' and one part of it of course I was inspired by

your incredible work came in infrastructures of care that really touched me. In fact, I called part of the chapter as 'transnational infrastructures of care' in relation to this particular population. Because for example I know a bakery in Toronto which is run by an immigrant woman who only hires mad refugee and immigrant women and by 'mad' I mean people who deal with psychological concerns like depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress. So, they send half of whatever they make to these women and these acid attack survivors so they could make a living with integrity and with dignity because the state does not support them at all. At the same time, they raise awareness, they talk to their customers, they have little boards they write things on, little quotes, little violence-against-women awareness quotes. They do whatever is in their power although they live thousands of miles apart, but they have raised this political consciousness in themselves to be in solidarity with those women and this is what I call transnational infrastructures of care.

HK: Just going back to Masumi again and TDM, sure, see she will need a clinical recognition that her body is in pain and is in crumbling. So, she will need rehabilitation, immediate clinical attention and also restoration of a second chance, possibilities for anything in life. So in that mode, in that way proper medical attention is so important. At the same time, a social recognition that acid attack is a social crime and it also needs tremendous social support around her. And the third idea that acid attack is a political, cultural and historical problem. So in other sense medical, social models, all are required but they also need to be transcended and looked wholesomely. In some sense TDM can be a rich framework to understand acid attack and acid attack survival. Is that a fair way of summarizing that Sona?

SK: Yes, that is totally what I mean and I think the social model and the existing models in disability studies are not political enough and they are not context-specific. They are too general, too western that does not grasp the reality of complex hierarchies and asymmetrical relations of power across boundaries of race, class, sexuality and gender. And one reason I developed this model was to grasp exactly this tension.

HK: I think we are fairly done, but is there anything else you want to add that would add to Disability Studies, understanding of acid attacks and acid attack survival before we conclude?

SK: I would say solidarity is really important. As a final note I just want to say that it is not all gloom and doom. I know the way we sounded. This is of course a very sad topic to talk about. But I want you to know that Masumi told me that besides all the unkind anti-catharsis ableist attitudes that she saw, she also saw kindness. She also saw solidarity, generosity and alliance. So, I just want to say that acid attack is a torture, is a crime against humanity, is definitely crime against women and we must stand still against this violence. We cannot remain silent because silence is a political response and we do not want to be judged in the future based on this. We need to stand up and say something in the face of violence.

HK: Certainly. You know thousands of Masumis are out there, when they are attacked, maybe shock, fear, trembling and then massive amount of time spent on bereavement of the lost self. And then maybe a transition into looking to repair themselves and then eventually seeing the beauty of their mission. The trajectory may not be the same for everyone, but the way they get themselves back is what your ethnographic work has recounted. So in that way, it is a rich framework and this is what we need to learn from such a witnessing.

So wonderful to talk to you Sona and I am sure my audience equally enjoyed. Thank you.

SK: Thank you so much, I really appreciate the opportunity and I thank you on behalf of all of us, all women who have been in this together. It is very important to pay attention to these issues and we can just start from ourselves. If you cannot donate money to their surgeries that is fine.

Just do not stare at people. Start from yourself, it is not rocket science, it is respect. It is bodily integrity, it is just loving each other, respecting each other, caring for each other. Thank you.

Thank you so much.