

# Ways of being, lines of becoming: a study of post-revolutionary diasporic Iranian literature in English

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# **Ways of Being, Lines of Becoming: A Study of Post-Revolutionary Diasporic Iranian Literature in English**

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A thesis submitted in fulfillment of the degree Doctor of Philosophy.

Supervised by: Professor Bill Ashcroft & Dr. Michelle Langford

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The 1978/9 revolution was a turning point in Iranian history. It led not only to drastic regime changes in Iran, but it was also the cause for the migration of millions of Iranians. Ever since then, Iranians have continually migrated and have created their own pockets of communities globally. But like any migratory group, they too have experienced difficulties of migration. Ever since the early days of Iranian migration, many began to write about their experiences. While among them, many wrote in Persian, some began to write in English. Gradually, over the last several decades Iranians have authored nearly two hundred books of fiction and memoir in English. Formed at the junctions of Iranian culture and experience and the English language and Western cultures, this body of work has formed a unique literary space. Not only is it a reflection of diasporic Iranian experiences, but it is also a body of work which draws on and adds to elements of English literature and as such deserves special attention in the so-called category of World Literatures in English.

This thesis, *Ways of Being, Lines of Becoming*, is a study of this body of work. Its aim is two fold. On the one hand it introduces existing and emerging Iranian writing in English into the arena of World Literatures in English. While it situates them alongside other diasporic writing in English and examines them through existing diasporic literary frameworks and theories, such as postcolonialism, it also argues for their distinctiveness. On the other hand, it identifies this body of work as a unique creative discursive space that is reflective of the diasporic Iranian experience. In short, drawing on various psychological theories of the importance of narration and identity, it argues that this literature can be a site through which the Iranian diaspora can reconstruct, maintain and negotiate their individual and communal identities.

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# Acknowledgement

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This thesis has been in the making for six year. It has traveled with me from Sydney, through to the streets of Kabul, where I witnessed young women's deaths, destruction and poverty. It traveled with me to Europe, and to Tehran, and Hong Kong, where it almost dropped out of my life. That this study has come to a completion alongside so much in my life is a miracle that would not have happened without generosity of the universe that conspired in my favor time and again. In this process, more than anything else, it has been the kindness of the people who have helped me, and to all them I owe a huge thank you.

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Although submitting a thesis might appear to be the end of a journey for the scholar, it is only the beginning of the life of this work. I hope that in the next stages of its life, this thesis would be beneficial for all those who refer to it.

# Table of Contents

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<b>Declaration .....</b>	<b>i</b>
<b>Acknowledgement .....</b>	<b>ii</b>
<b>Introduction—"the essence of desire for a better world" .....</b>	<b>1</b>
Scope of this study .....	3
Methodology and theoretical framework.....	9
Historical background and direction.....	17
 <b>Chapter One</b>	
<b>History—"holding onto, remembering and narrating the past" .....</b>	<b>30</b>
Historicization and maintenance of identity.....	34
Transformation and interpolation of History.....	42
Conclusion.....	60
 <b>Chapter Two</b>	
<b>Sufi Poetry—"the supreme expression of what is most universal and profound in the Persian soul" .....</b>	<b>62</b>
Situating poetry in Iranian society .....	64
Diasporic poetry of nostalgia.....	72
Reflecting diaspora.....	83
Conclusion.....	96
 <b>Chapter Three</b>	
<b>The Memoir—"double-edged" narratives by Iranian women.....</b>	<b>98</b>
'Why so many memoirs? .....	102
<i>Memoir as Scriptotherapy</i> .....	105
'Is there a market for all those books?' .....	119
<i>Captivity Narratives and American Orientalism</i> .....	122
<i>Paratexts</i> .....	128
Conclusion.....	146
 <b>Chapter Four</b>	
<b>Mothers and Daughters—writing "beyond" the homeland.....</b>	<b>148</b>
Mothers and daughters in Iranian literary history .....	150
Polyphonic narration .....	155
The journey.....	164
Magic and dreams.....	176
Conclusion.....	181

## **Chapter Five**

### **Iranian Masculinities—reconsidering “hypervisibility/invisibility” ..... 182**

Iranian men’s hypervisibility/invisibility	
and Iranian women’s self-Orientalization .....	187
Iranian men writing Iranian men .....	197
<i>Terrorism and hostage crisis</i> .....	201
<i>Sexuality and romance</i> .....	210
<i>Homosexuality</i> .....	216
Conclusion .....	221

### **Conclusion—Looking forward to the “Not-Yet” future of Iranian writing ..... 222**

### **Appendix—Books published by Iranian writers in English as of August 2012 ... 229**

### **Works cited ..... 238**



# Introduction—"the essence of desire for a better world"

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I don't feel *turmoil* anymore. [...] And I don't mind being a chameleon; my father used to call me that as a compliment. [...] My childhood was like *ahsh*, like soup with beans and noodles and spices and yogurt and lemon juice—contrasting tastes and smells and hopes and ideas. It may be true what you say about peacefulness of belonging to one culture completely, but you forget that I've never *completely* been one thing or another. I was brought up in this country; I am a lot of things. (Pari 1997, p. 421)

These words, uttered by Layla, the culturally confused Iranian-American character in Susanne Pari's novel *The Fortune Catcher*, ignited in me the need for a thesis such as this. I discovered Pari's novel by accident in a dingy basement bookstore in Hong Kong, where I was studying at the time. It was the cover, with the half-veiled face of a woman—still a surprisingly fresh image in late 1990s—that attracted me to the book. Growing up outside Iran, as the child of an Iranian banker who travelled across the globe, like Layla, I never really felt as though I belonged to any one culture. I desperately longed for home, the never-changing paradisiacal images of which had formed a great part of my sense of identity and belonging; but I also wanted to belong and feel at peace in the country in which I lived. This is why Pari's book really spoke to me. As one of the first novels in English by an Iranian woman living outside Iran, it brought back nostalgic sights and sounds of home. But it offered me more than that. Here was a book that not only reflected my own condition, but also pointed hopefully towards the possibility of a future without turmoil despite non-belonging. Reading it, I felt that, through Layla, I had an opportunity to negotiate my own sense of identity.

Although I had always been attracted to and sought solace in diasporic literatures, it was refreshing to see an Iranian expression of this experience that resonated so acutely with my own. I no longer felt that I was the only one with those feelings. But it was not just personal sentimentality that attracted me to Pari's novel. Rather, the book spoke to me on another level. In *The Fortune Catcher* I recognized a similarity of subject, themes and issues with other diasporic writings that I had studied during my years as a Literature student. The sense of nostalgia,

placelessness, identity crisis, and hope for a better future in the host country that the novel deals with could have been conjured up by almost any diasporic writer from anywhere in the world. But I noticed that it also foregrounded the voices and experiences of marginal characters and people through strategies similar to those I had often encountered in postcolonial Indian, Caribbean, African and Asian writing in English. It was this thematic and subjective resemblance of Iranian writing to other diasporic and postcolonial writing that planted the seed for this present study. After reading *The Fortune Catcher*, I became intrigued to know if there were other Iranians, like Pari, writing in English. This curiosity led to the eventual discovery of an emerging world of Iranian writers in English. As I read other fiction and memoirs by diasporic Iranian writers, the similarity between their work and that of other diasporic and postcolonial writings became even more apparent. But as the number of Iranian writers grew, particularly after 9/11—by the time I decided to undertake a dissertation on the topic there were more than fifty publications to study—I realized that what differentiated these books from other diasporic and postcolonial writing in English was that they were collectively dealing with issues that were specifically Iranian. It was this specificity in similarity that eventually led to this research.

Given the increasing number of novels and memoirs published in English within the diasporic Iranian community—which by the time of the completion of this thesis stands at nearly 200—and considering their inherently Iranian perspective, the purpose of this study is primarily twofold. On the one hand it introduces existing and emerging Iranian writing in English onto the arena of World Literatures in English. While it situates them alongside other diasporic writing in English and examines them through existing diasporic literary frameworks and theories, it also argues for their distinctiveness. On the other hand, emphasizing its distinctiveness, this study identifies this body of work as a unique creative discursive space that is reflective of the diasporic Iranian experience. In short, it argues that this literature can be seen as a site through which writers can reconstruct, maintain and negotiate their individual and communal identities.

## Scope of this study

This thesis is concerned with a body of work that originated in the wake of the mass migration of Iranians from Iran after the 1978/79 Islamic Revolution. Its emergence and gradual popularity came in three waves. The origins of the first wave can be traced back to the revolution and ensuing hostage crisis. A second wave followed the events of 9/11, and more recently we are seeing the beginnings of a third wave after the controversial 2009 Iranian presidential elections. This is not to say that before this Iranians were not migrating or writing abroad. From the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Iranians of a certain educated and aristocratic class, though in small numbers, had begun to travel and migrate, marking Iran's increasing contact with foreign countries. Indeed, the origins of diasporic Iranian writing in foreign languages could be traced back to the scattered writings of this group of early migrants and travellers. For instance, the first French novel by an Iranian woman should be credited to Amineh Pakravan (1890-1958) for her *Le Prince sans histoires* (1921) which was awarded the Prix Rivaro in 1951 and praised by French literary critics. This was followed by her posthumously published *Destinées Persanes* (1960).<sup>1</sup> Similarly, Freydoun Hoveida (1925-2003) should be mentioned for his significant contribution to this field for his French novels *Le Quranraines* (1961) followed by a string of other successful novels *L'aerogare* (1965), *Dans une terre étrange* (1968) and *Le Losange* (1969). In English the pioneers of this field could be traced back to the late 1950s to Najme Najafi for her books *Persia is My Heart* (1953) and *Reveille for a Persian Village* (1958), followed by Freyduun Esfandiari (aka FM-2030) (1930-2000) for his novels *The Day of Sacrifice* (1959), *Beggar* (1965) and *Identity Card* (1966). They were followed by a group of writers who emerged at the brink of the revolution including Donne Raffat who published *Caspian Circle* (1978) and Nahid Rachlin who wrote her first novel *Foreigner* in 1979.

Despite this relatively long history of scattered diasporic Iranian writing in other languages, however, it was not until after the revolution, which led to the mass migration of a significant number of people from a cross-section of Iranian society,

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<sup>1</sup> Pakravan's granddaughter, Saeideh Pakravan is also a writer who has published a semi-autobiography *Hoveyda's Arrest: Stories of the Iranian Revolution* (1988), and more recently a novel about the protests in Iran entitled *Azadi: A Novel of Protest in the Streets of Tehran* (2011).

that a distinct and more sustained body of work began to emerge from Iranian diaspora. According to Nasrin Rahimieh (1992, p. 40) this body of work could be divided into three groups. There are those who write only in Persian, aimed exclusively at Persian-speaking audiences. These include well-known and already established authors such as Ali Jamalzadeh, Bozorg Alavi, Esmail Fassih, Goli Taraghi and Shahrnush Parsipour, who have also had their works translated. Then, there are those who write in English (or languages other than Persian)<sup>2</sup> and have launched their careers in a foreign language, such as Nahid Rachlin, Gina Nahai and all those dealt with in the course of this thesis. Finally, there are those who launched their writing career in Persian after migration and have established themselves abroad as Persian writers, such as Shahla Shafigh. However, while the first and last categories are usually older, first-generation migrant writers, the second group are often second-generation or those who migrated in their youth and spent the majority of their lives outside Iran.

Although Persian writers in both groups have produced far more work over the last several decades, a number of factors justify the focus of this study on those who have launched their writing careers in English. First, the majority of established writers who continue to write in Persian after migration already have an avid readership, network of critics, reviewers, and studies that analyse various aspects of their work both in Iran and abroad. These writers are often successful even after migration, continuing to win prizes in absentia in Iran and various Iranian studies societies globally. Often, their works in translation have gained them considerable attention from readers, reviewers, and academics in other countries. Among them, for instance, Goli Taraghi, one of Iran's first female novelists who migrated to Paris

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<sup>2</sup> Although my research focuses on diasporic Iranian writers in English, there is a body of work in other languages too. For instance, in French there are numerous writers such as Sorous Kasmaii, and Chahdorett Djavanne who are considered popular writers in France. There is also a body of scholarly work about French-Iranian literature. Laetitia Nanquette, for instance, has pioneered the field with her recent PhD thesis submitted at SOAS in 2010 entitled 'The Eye Sees Not Itself? Mutual Images of Iran and France Through Their Literature (1979-2009)' and her forthcoming book *Orientalism versus Occidentalism: Literary Cultural Imaging Between France and Iran since the Islamic Revolution*. In Dutch, for instance, Kader Abdolah is a well-known Iranian-Dutch author who has single-handedly transformed the relationship between Dutch and Persian literature through his numerous popular novels. There is also an emerging interest in Iranian writing and literature in German, with several recent publications in process that aim to bring together papers about German-Iranian literature and film.

after the war broke out in 1980, has continued publication and was awarded the Bitá Prize for Iranian literature through the Iranian Studies Centre at Stanford University in 2009. Similarly, Sharhnoush Parsipour, best known internationally for her translated works and the recent film adaptation of her novella *Women Without Men* (2004), was awarded an honorary Doctorate of Letters in 2010 by Brown University alongside seven other delegates including Nelson Mandela and Morgan Freeman. Shahriar Mandanipour, an acclaimed Iranian writer whose books were banned in Iran between 1992 and 1997 settled in the United States when he went there for a festival in 2006 and did not return, obtaining instead a fellowship at Brown University. His success was soon reflected in the translation of his book *Censoring an Iranian Love Story* (2009), which gained him a review by James Wood in *The New Yorker* (2009), revealing the book as a reflection of harsh censorship laws in the Iranian publishing industry that affect researchers, writers and academics. Mandanipour went on to be nominated for the prestigious Neustadt Prize in 2010 along with writers like Margaret Atwood and Haruki Murakami.

While the above writers have had great success within and beyond a Persian readership, those who have established themselves as diasporic Persian writers have also gained considerable attention from readers, critics and scholars and have been the subject of many studies both in Iran and abroad.<sup>3</sup> Over the last several decades numerous centres and associations, like the Iranian Writers Association (in Exile) and Iranian Pen Centre in Exile, have created support networks for these budding writers. Similarly, websites such as the BBC Persian have dedicated sections to Persian writers in exile, debating, featuring and introducing their works for a Persian readership.

On the other hand, despite the relatively large and increasing number of novels and memoirs published by Iranians in English since 1979, only recently has this group of writers come to the attention of general readers and academics. When I had the idea for this study in the early 2000s, there were virtually no formal studies of this group of writers in an academic setting. The pioneering scholarship in the field emerged gradually only after 9/11, with the influx of the second wave of books by

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<sup>3</sup> For discussion of diasporic Iranian literature and its classification see Mehrdad Darvishpour's blog entry 'The New Nest and Horizons of Exile' (2009). Maliheh Tiregol has also dedicated her entire site <http://www.mtiregol.com>, in Farsi, to an analyses and discussion of what she calls 'thirty years of literature in exile.'

Iranian writers. While before then there had been few mentions of first-wave post-revolutionary Iranian writing in English, except for some small reviews, after 9/11 there was a sudden increase in publications and subsequently, of interest in their writing. But this interest was particularly focused on Iranian women's memoirs, framed in relation to the Arab/Muslim woman's position after America's declaration of "War on Terror." In fact, it has only been since then that these writers have become serious subjects of interest for both Iranian and non-Iranian scholars. While numerous essays were published about Iranian writing in diaspora, particularly between 2001 and 2007,<sup>4</sup> it has only been since Gillian Whitlock dedicated an entire chapter of her book *Soft Weapons: Autobiography in Transit* (2007) to Iranian women's memoirs that diasporic Iranian writing in English was discussed as a serious and emerging discourse. Since then, a series of other scholarly endeavours have expanded the field. In 2007, for instance, Jasmine Darznik submitted the first full-length PhD thesis on the topic, entitled 'Writing outside the Veil: Literature by Women of Iranian Diaspora'. Similarly, in the same year, as a first, the *Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States* (MELUS) published a special issue on Iranian-American Literature. It was also in 2007 that Persis Karim, one of the pioneers of this field, along with a group of diasporic Iranian writers, established the Association of Iranian American Writers (AIAW), building a 'network of writers who have roots in Iran and America and who seek to build a literary community'. (AIAW website) AIAW gave many emerging and established Iranian writers the chance to showcase their work, organize conferences, communicate and exchange ideas through forums and blogs. Since 2007, partially due to AIAW's success, there has been increased interest in various aspects of diasporic Iranian writing. It is only since then that one can see different aspects of this body of work regularly addressed in papers, conference panels, reviews, special journal issues and articles. For instance, in 2009 AIAW organized an event to celebrate '30 Years of Iranian-American Literature' at which distinguished Iranian writers in English debated their situation as writers in America. Similarly, the

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<sup>4</sup> See for instance Mahmood Karimi-Hakkak's 'Exiled Freedom' in *TDR* (2003). Negar Mottahedeh's 'Off the Grid: Reading Iranian Memoirs in Out Time of Total War' in *Middle East Report* 2006. Also see Farideh Goldin's 'Iranian Women and Contemporary Memoirs,' on Iranian Chamber, 13 June 2006, Azita Osanloo's "Imperative: The Pressure to be Exotic" in *Poets and Writers*, and Babak Elahi's "Translating the Self: Language and Identity in Iranian-American Women's Memoirs." *Iranian Studies* 39 (2006): 461-80.

International Society for Iranian Studies (ISIS), which had previously addressed and included panels about Iranian diasporic writing in Persian, included panels about diasporic Iranian writing in English both in their 2008, 2010, and 2012 conferences. Forthcoming, Persis Karim is due to guest edit an issue of *Iranian Studies Journal* dedicated to diasporic Iranian literature in other languages. Karim, along with Babak Elahi (2011), has also edited a special section in *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* with focus on Iranian diasporic literature.

The reason for pointing out the above facts is to indicate that it is only recently that a serious discursive and scholarly space has emerged for the discussion of diasporic Iranian writing in English. It is the novelty of the field that has also limited the scope of this study to English memoirs and fictions. In dialogue with increasing scholarship in the field and engaging with ongoing and current debates, this study addresses some of the fundamental issues about this body of work. One of its major contributions, however, is to fill some gaps in the existing scholarship. There are two significant issues to which adequate attention has not been paid to date. The first is the failure to acknowledge the contribution of diasporic Iranian writers in English to the broad field of Anglophone diasporic writing. Diasporic Iranian writers, who have produced large numbers of works over the last several decades, are drawing upon and contributing to the discourse and rhetoric of English literature. Yet much of the scholarship dealing with these works is often framed in relation to their historical and socio-political contexts, often ignoring or disregarding their literary merit within the discourse of English literature.

The second is the underrepresentation of a cross-section of texts by diasporic Iranian writers in English in literary scholarship. Until recently much of the study done on diasporic Iranian writing in English has focused on a number of significant and well-known titles. This means that works by less-known or more obscure writers, who are nonetheless making a significant contribution to the field, have been largely ignored.

This study, therefore, aims to address these issues. On the one hand, by focusing on individual works from various authors, it will contextualize diasporic Iranian writing through known discourses of English literature and alongside other diasporic writing in English. On the other hand, it will draw on a large and varied range of English memoirs and fictions by diasporic Iranian writers to address



specific topics, thereby providing a more complex landscape of recurring issues. In addition, this study will include an appendix listing as many memoirs and works of fiction by diasporic Iranian writers in English as are currently published or available in bookshops or on the Internet, by the time of the completion of this thesis. As a first of its kind to introduce and address a large cross section of fiction and memoirs, this study will serve as a reference for those interested in locating these texts, and aims to pave the way for future studies.

Despite introducing a large number of publications, this study, however, does not claim to be an all-inclusive study of every memoir and fiction published by Iranians in English to date—for the sheer number of books would be too massive for the scope of a thesis. Rather, this approach is intended to be as inclusive as limitations of a thesis permit. This is why this study is organized so that instead of focusing on one or two texts, it is a composite study in which issues and subjects are approached through a variety of perspectives offered by multiple texts. As a result, some sections include detailed content analysis of one or several books, while other parts may only refer to titles that deal with specific issues. This method enables for the study of the diversity, complexity and multiplicity of Iranian diasporic writing in English.

Additionally, in narrowing the scope of this study, language has played an important role. On a practical level the scope of this research was determined by my own linguistic ability and interest. I left Iran at the age of eleven in grade four. My knowledge and understanding of Persian, though good enough for daily conversation, and lay reading and writing, is not adequate for engaging with literary texts in Persian at a professional or academic level. Added to this is a personal and professional interest in and identification with the subject matter of many of the books written in English. My attraction to these narratives is best reflected in Houra Yavari's observation of the two categories of diasporic Iranian writing. She writes,

The almost [three] decades of post-revolutionary fiction abroad, diversified in theme, language, and aesthetic structure, can be divided in two phases, initial shock followed by reconciliation. [...] The first group of Persian writers in exile, most of them former political activists, robbed of their identity and habitual environment, and ill-prepared for what was to come, exclude the host country from their writings. Instead, their narratives are haunted by the revolution and transpire in the homeland. These early exilic works of fiction were often edited and published by their



authors in small printings. They are usually either direct autobiographical accounts or draw on the writer's personal experiences, including more often than not, prison, torture, and war. With the slow process of adaptation, the haunting image of revolution, although never absent, is gradually relegated to the background. Memoir-like narratives of a troubled past are replaced by narratives directed to the less visible aspects of life in exile, and set against the backdrop of the host country rather than the homeland. The polar opposites of home and exile give way to the polarity of reception and rejection by the host country, and the sense of exile is internalized. (1995, p. 600)

Considering Yavari's division, my age and the nature of my diasporic life, I find myself drawn to and identifying more with the second category of writing which, as much as dealing with the pangs of exile, is also engaged in a dialogue between one's home and host cultures. What I want to add to Yavari's statement, however, is that the majority of accounts which are concerned with establishing this dialogue have emerged in English—or the language of the host country—simply because this new language can offer writers exciting new opportunities to communicate with people in their host countries. What this means is that in addition to expressing heartfelt and shared experiences of migration with their fellow Iranians, they are equally concerned with reflecting the turbulent recent Iranian past and difficulties faced by diasporic Iranian communities for their non-Iranian readership. This new language, aside from being a means of communication with members of the host country, also provides many who previously did not have the ability to express themselves in their home or host cultures, with new linguistic possibilities of expression. This has played an important part in the decision to limit the present study to this particular group of writers because the intersection of Iranian writers and the English language has led to the construction of an interesting dynamic and relatively unexplored new discursive spaces of literary expression. This study, therefore, focuses on an analysis of this intersecting space. It argues that the intersection of Iranian writers and their culture with the English language and its various discourses has opened up new and transformative spaces of expression through which diasporic Iranians maintain, reconstruct and negotiate their subjectivities.

### **Methodology and Theoretical Framework**

Diasporic Iranian literature in English occupies an ambivalent discursive space. It is

constructed at the junctions of Iranian and Western literatures and philosophies and reflects the complexities and multiplicities of Iranian migratory experience as the Other. Often written against the grain of history, like the many characters that occupy it, it is a hybrid form that defies precise classification. Reflecting this complexity, my approach, conceived at the intersection of my Iranian background and knowledge of English literature, analyses this body of work at the juncture of the multiple overlapping discursive and theoretical spaces that it occupies.

This thesis approaches diasporic Iranian literature in English by classifying it as ‘diasporic utopian,’ a term that best describes the overall position of diasporic Iranian writing in English. The word ‘diasporic’ best demonstrates the condition of millions of Iranians abroad because as exiles, asylum seekers, refugees, or expatriates, they are, as Nilou Mostofi argues, ‘a group of people [...] who have been forced into mass migration’ (2003, p. 685). Like other migrants, they too have left ‘their homeland for any number of years, maybe even for the rest of their lives,’ and often ‘construct a new identity abroad through the use of imagination, nostalgia, and memories’ (p. 685). In their literature, too, as we will see throughout this thesis, Iranian migrants often share similar sentiments of expression with migrants from other countries. The employment of the term ‘diasporic’ to describe the large number of Iranian migrants and their writing, then, greatly benefits this study. Since diasporic Iranian writing shares common themes and ideas with diasporic literature of other countries, the use of ‘diasporic’ to describe the Iranian migratory experience enables this study to categorize Iranian writing in English as ‘diasporic literature’. Consequently, this allows for the application of the already-established hybrid theories of diasporic literature to this body of work.

The juxtaposition of the term ‘utopian’ alongside diasporic allows us to add another layer to the complexity of this body of work, as it reflects the disposition of many migratory, including Iranian, writing in English. The word ‘utopian’ here is not used in reference to something being of, or referring to, Utopia, an idealized paradisiacal island, state or place. Rather, it draws on contemporary definitions of utopian theory in which utopia is ‘no longer a place but a hope itself, the essence of desire for a better world’ (Ashcroft 2007, p. 411). Ernst Bloch, one of the contemporary utopian theorists who redefined traditional understanding of the term in his seminal multi-volume *Principles of Hope* reframes utopia by distinguishing the *word* utopia, as an

ideal state coined by Thomas More, from the *concept* of utopia. According to Bloch, while utopias as social landscapes and as ideal states are ‘abstract playful forms’ (1986, p. 14) that are often unachievable, utopia as a concept is fundamental in individual human life because every person desires and works towards a better future. As he puts it, ‘everybody lives in the future’ (p. 4). Everyone, he argues, has ‘dreamed of the better life that might be possible. Everybody’s life is pervaded by daydreams: one part of this is just stale, even enervating escapism, even booty for swindlers, but another part is proactive, is not content to just accept the bad which exists, does not accept renunciation. This other part has hope at its core’ (p. 3). Thus, ‘urging, longing, craving, wishing, imagining, dreaming – The Not-Yet [that] lies deep in human consciousness’ (Ashcroft 2009a, p. 5) are all human ways of dreaming and day-dreaming, nothing less than hope for a better future. But it is not only dreams and daydreams that constitute this utopianism. For Bloch, even ‘thinking means venturing beyond’ (1986, p. 5) what already exists into the future and is, in effect, utopian.

It is on this understanding and definition of utopia, as a reflection of a desired state in the future, that at times throughout this thesis, I view migratory Iranian literature in English as utopian. As we will see, some diasporic Iranian literature, in one way or another, is a reflection of the writers’ desired state of being for their own individual or communal diasporic futures. This space allows them to project a reconstructed and negotiated sense of identity into the future through writing.

But imagining a Not-Yet, better, hopeful future, however, is not simply a look forward to the future in ‘mere vacuum of an In-Front-of-Us’ (Bloch 1986, p. 4). It is not merely an abstract vision of the future. Rather, Bloch believes, although this process is looking towards something new in the future, it is very much rooted in the past. As he argues, ‘Real venturing beyond knows and activates the tendency which is inherent in history and which proceeds dialectically’ (p. 4). Thus, this utopianism, as much as looking beyond into the future, is also based and rooted in the past because the past always has a powerful influence in how we view our future. As he puts it, ‘Beingness simply coincides with Been-ness,’ and ‘what Has Been overwhelms what is approaching’ (p. 8). Here, the ‘rigid divisions between future and past thus themselves collapse, unbecome future becomes visible in the past, avenged and inherited, mediated and fulfilled past in the future’ (p. 9).

It is also this added layer of utopianism, that compels this thesis to identify most diasporic, including Iranian, literature as having a utopian potential. As Ian Richard Netton and Zahia Ismail Salhi argue,

regardless of the reasons that make exiles live far from their homelands and regardless of whether they escaped persecution or chose to live far from home, they all keep an idealized image of home as a paradise they were forced to flee, and never manage to entirely adopt their new dwellings. (2006, p. 3)

They go on to argue that consequently many share feelings of solitude, estrangement, loss, and longing. To overcome these feelings they seek to maintain their connection to that past and to construct a new world that somewhat resembles the old one. While Netton and Salhi's argument is related to Arab diasporic writing, this is also true of most diasporic Iranian literature in English. Many Iranian writers, as this thesis will contend, draw on an idealized image of their Iranian past to maintain a sense of continued identity with their homeland and often draw on their connection to their Iranian heritage and history to reflect and negotiate their desired diasporic identities in the future.

Yet, this utopian projection is not simply about the outcome or what is produced. In fact some texts that may be considered as displaying utopian elements might not necessarily point to a different or hopeful future. Contrarily, they may even involve representations of a rather dystopian past. This is why the focus of this study is not solely on the outcome or on what the texts imply. Rather, as much as the outcome, this study takes into account the process of creation, because, for many, the very possibility of writing, regardless of the outcome, is a utopian manifestation of something that they had envisioned, rooted in a past that had silenced their ability for expression. Often, the utopian element in this process is the transformation of absence into presence, of silence into voice, or of objectivity into subjectivity. As Sarah Webster Goodwin and Libby Falk Jones put it 'utopia is traditionally a genre associated with gaps: between what we have and what we'd like to have; between that we would like to have and what someone else would prefer; between our apprehension of possibilities and the words we find to construct them' (1990, p. ix).

This study therefore, at times, follows the trajectory of the process of creation in diasporic Iranian writing in English from absence to presence, and argues that the very process of writing has been transformative for diasporic Iranian individuals

and communities at large by filling in certain gaps. Diasporic Iranian literature often serves as a response to a lack of representation or misrepresentations both in the writers' host and home countries. Arising out of their Western diasporic setting, in which many Iranians are either historically misrepresented or not represented at all, this literature tries to imagine a hopeful future in their new environment. In response to their Iranian past, it often draws on the historical and socio-political restrictions of their homeland that had silenced the voices of social, religious and political minorities, as well as the voices of women. Consequently, the most painful dystopian narrative can be seen as utopian as it paves the way for the future by coming to terms with the pains and trauma of the past. The argument in this thesis is that this literary space sometimes enables the construction of new imaginative forums in which diasporic Iranians can come to terms with their pasts and their futures. What it will also cast light on, intermittently, is the way in which this literature opens up new spaces of expression for the reconstruction, maintenance and negotiation of a desired state of being and identity for diasporic Iranian communities rooted in their diasporic present and the homeland of the past.

However, utopian literature operates beyond a mere desire for a better future. Because its *raison d'être* is imagining of a different world, this literature can be seen as a reflection of a desire to transform something in the real world. As Bill Ashcroft argues, '[I]t is by narrative, by the stories we tell, that we have a world and it is by utopian thinking, utopian forms, utopian narrative, that we have a conception of a radically changeable world' (2007, p. 418). This transformative aspect of utopian literature has informed much of the work of those, like postcolonial writers and critics, who desire to change the politics of the world through narrative. Ashcroft, who explores various aspects of postcolonial utopianism in a series of engaging essays, explains this best when he writes,

It is the function of imagining that forms the basis of the utopian in literature and it is the process of imagining—the process of utopian thought—that forms the basis of the utopian in post-colonial resistance. Utopia is a vision of possibility that effects the transformation of social life. It is desire in the act of imagining, and imagination that can be at once oppositional and visionary, a state of affairs that explains the importance of the literary in post-colonial representation. (2007, p. 418)

A key feature of this postcolonial literature is its inherent desire to transform the social future grounded in the memory of the past. Here, the transformative

conceptions of utopian hope that locates the way the new comes into being, is embedded in a historical past. But, drawing on history is not solely about recovering the past, but also about the production of possibility for the future based on that past by coming to terms with its trauma and pain. In short, in this kind of utopianism the 'new is always embedded in and transformed by the past,' through the 'Myth of Return,' where 'the past is allegorically deployed in literature to re-conceive a utopian present' (Ashcroft 2007, p. 423). This operates not only through nostalgic memory, but also by 'recovering a forgotten history and interpolating the master discourse of colonial history [...] or by reimagining of the past in the present through an exuberant language of historical discourse that disregards the boundaries between 'myth' and memory' (p. 423). As Ralph Pordzik also points out in *The Quest for Postcolonial Utopia*, postcolonial utopian writing tends to dispute or subvert known 'doctrinaire identification in favor of a more complex and open-ended utopian locus encompassing all those possibilities of change that have not yet been fully realized' (2001, p. 16). As such, he believes, it enables 'a fragmentation, discontinuity, and ambiguity that offers new perspectives that cannot be integrated into a historically continued meaningful whole' (p. 3). This quest is reflected in the semantic multiplicity and diversity of perspectives employed by postcolonial writers to project the complexities of their respective societies and to confirm their function as basic constituents in the act of projecting a utopia of their own. Utopianism, in this way, which can take shape through many different forms of narrative and techniques, relies on tapping into and utilizing rich cultural resources that had been 'depleted and destabilized by colonial history' to transform the future (Ashcroft 2007, p. 423). One of the constituents of postcolonial writing is the employment and transformation of the continuities of past and existing dominant literary traditions, such as language, unified historical narratives, and literary techniques and cultural references, in order to reflect new multiplicities of voices and experiences.

As such, postcolonialism, however, is not limited to the literature of those from former colonies, and indeed, it informs the literature of many diasporic, including Iranian writers, who are not necessarily responding to a national colonization. Often diasporic writers, especially refugees and those who migrated to escape prosecution in their homelands, are writing back to the history and dominating forces of a homeland that had discriminated against and silenced them. Though not necessarily

responding to a national colonization, many of these writers, like postcolonial writers, are tapping into and transforming dominant discourses to project a new utopian vision that is reflective of the multiplicities and complexities of their own experiences. Although this similarity is not necessarily obvious across the diasporic writings of those who have not been colonized, we can see that in diasporic Iranian writing there are direct recurring thematic and technical similarities between Iranian and some postcolonial techniques. For instance, many Iranian writers appear fixated on challenging grand narratives of History both in Iran and abroad as a way for reflecting the multiplicities of Iranian experiences. Similarly, the use of the English language, the very language that had often been used to form certain negative opinions about them in the West, is sometimes strategically employed to challenge the tenets of traditions that discriminated against them. These similarities, of which there are many and with which this thesis engages, provides a significantly original perspective and necessitates an engagement with theories of postcoloniality in approaching and reading this body of work.

In choosing to read these works through the conceptual framework of postcolonialism, however, this thesis is not claiming that Iranian writers share the same historical and political motivations for writing as writers from former colonies. This would be historically inaccurate, of course, since Iran, as a nation, has never been physically colonized by any outside forces. The postcolonial theory with which this thesis engages has its bases in Elleke Boehmer's explanation in her *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature* that 'colonialism was not different from other kinds of authority, religious or political, in claiming a monopoly on definitions in order to control a [...] reality' (1995, p. 159). This is best complemented by Homi Bhabha's definition of postcolonialism in *The Location of Culture* in which the term 'post' does not indicate 'sequentiality [...] or polarity' (1994, p. 1). Rather, it correlates with Bloch's concept of utopian hope, and indicates 'moving beyond' to resist the attempt at holistic forms of social expression. As Bhabha puts it,

The 'beyond' is neither a new horizon, nor a leaving behind of the past. [...] [T]here is a sense of disorientation, a disturbance of direction, in the 'beyond': an exploratory, restless movement caught so well in the French rendition of the words *au-dela* –here and there, on all sides, *fort/da*, hither and thither, back and forth. [...] What is theoretically innovative, and politically crucial, is the need to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments and process that are



produced in the articulation of cultural differences. These ‘in-between’ spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood –singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself. (1994, p. 1-2)

In approaching diasporic Iranian literature in English through a postcolonial lens, this thesis draws partially on Bhabha’s above definition where postcolonialism indicates any opening up of new spaces of expression beyond already existing domineering discourses that dismantles extensive power relations and encourages agency of the silent and voiceless. It is at the junctions of Boehmer’s definition of colonialism, and Bhabha’s interpretation of ‘post’ in postcolonialism, that this thesis views the unifying and totalitarian pre- and post-revolutionary regimes of Iran, and the Western descriptions of Iran and Iranians, as quasi-colonial and oppressive forces that have rendered many Iranians marginal both in their homeland and abroad. In the same light, this study views diasporic Iranian writing in English as mounting responses to and constructing sites of resistance that ‘initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself’ (Bhabha 1994, p. 1-2) against those forces.

In approaching diasporic Iranian writing in English from a postcolonial angle, there are two elements of specific interest. First, since the construction of new discursive spaces often forms a central tenet of postcolonial literature and criticism, the resemblance of which can also be seen in diasporic Iranian literature in English, this will also form a major part of this study. Specifically, the thesis examines the in-between discursive spaces that are created at the borderlines and intersections of an Iranian past and current diasporic realities, and constructed through specific adaptation and transformation of dominant discourses. Here, it asks the same question as Bhabha does: ‘How are subjects formed “in-between”, or in excess of, the sum of the “parts” of difference (usually intoned as race/class/gender, etc.)?’ (1994, p. 2) Specifically, how are Iranian subjectivities being formed and reframed, in and through this discursive space? Then, by viewing this space as one that does allow for the expression of hybrid Iranian experiences, it examines the way the ‘in-between space’ has become a reconstructive site of resistance and transformation. The resistance and transformation of interest here is not only that on the individual and social levels, but also in the transformation of the very discourses of



representation with which diasporic Iranian writers are engaging. What happens, for instance, to traditional Iranian and English literatures when they are exposed to each other and what does the transformation of these traditions imply?

To achieve this analysis and demonstrate key points, this thesis will examine recurring themes and strategies that diasporic Iranian writers employ to construct transformative new spaces of expression to account for their experiences. Specifically, this will include an analysis of the process that creates that space, as well as its transformative impact on the historical, socio-political and discursive elements with which the writers engage. However, before embarking on the details of these strategies and their scope of operation, it is imperative to have an understanding of the socio-political and historical setting, both in Iran and abroad, to which these writers are responding.

### **Historical Background and Direction**

Although the body of work examined in this study has emerged outside Iran, its contextual origins should be traced back and analysed in relation to the last century of Iranian history and the recent history of Iranian diaspora. In the last century Iran has been subject to two revolutions: the constitutional revolution of 1906 and the more recent Islamic Revolution of 1978/79. Between these two revolutions, Iran was also heavily influenced by British, American and Russian forces to the degree that many, like Richard Cottam in *Nationalism In Iran*, believe there was ‘a bizarre situation in which a form of indirect colonial control existed in the hands of two imperial powers whose relative positions were in constant flux’ (1979, p. 9). It was, historians believe, the constant presence of Western forces in Iran that influenced Reza Shah’s drive for modernization in the 1930s. Through an ambitious modernization scheme, inspired by Turkey’s Mustafa Kamal Ataturk, Reza Shah vastly and rapidly pushed Iran forward into the modern age. However, part of this modernization scheme introduced a certain degree of secularism and a move away from traditional religiously driven schools of thought that operated throughout every aspect of society. Reza Shah consequently attempted to replace traditional religious systems with modern and secular ones. However, the most memorable and controversial consequence of modernization came in 1936, when Reza Shah decided to modernize even the face of the country. In a controversial decision Reza

Shah ordered men to wear suits and Western-style hats, and women to put the veil aside. Launching an anti-veil offensive, he sent soldiers to roam the streets of cities and villages on horseback, pulling the veil from women's heads. This affected the development of Iranian women and inhibited their ability to achieve equal rights. Many women who had lived their entire lives under the veil were shocked by the idea of unveiling and refused to leave their homes, let alone work or go to school alongside men. Ironically, while the modernization scheme was designed to allow women to enter into the workforce, the forced unveiling kept many conservative women indoors, preventing them even from opportunities that they would have had prior to the program in a traditionally accepted gender-segregated manner.

Caught between tradition and modernity, many Iranian women never had or gained the opportunity or ability to express their concerns. Although modernization affected the façade of the country, it did not change core family values. While some families levied more freedom to women, the majority still operated according to strict gender and public/private dichotomies that had ruled Iranian society for centuries. Within this dichotomy women's voices were silenced and the stories of their lives kept within the domestic realm.

Without a doubt, one of the responses of diasporic Iranian writers arises from silences that had dominated Iranian women's lives. Indeed, a glimpse at the array of books published by Iranian diaspora over the last several decades reveals numerous accounts both in the form of memoirs and fiction that address intimate details of women's lives, details that would have seen them ostracized by their families and even persecuted in public. This is why women's narratives, and the various strategies that they have employed to reconstruct their sense of subjectivity and identity forms one of the running themes of this study. Chapter Three, for example, will examine the popularity of the memoir form as a means by which many diasporic Iranian writers are reconstructing the image and subjectivities of Iranian women. Similarly, Chapter Four will analyse the importance of the relationship between mothers, daughters, and the conceptions of homeland as a recurring theme in both memoir and fiction. It will consider the way/s in which this theme is strategically employed for rewriting and reconstructing the static and often symbolic image of the Iranian mother, and her relation to the homeland.

But women's oppression is not the only issue against which diasporic Iranian

writers have felt the need to react. In the early years of the twentieth century, after its encounter with modernization, Iran was on its way to becoming one of Middle East's most economically developed countries. But it had climbed the economic ladder at the price of the majority of its population's discontent. While changes introduced within this plan affected all aspects of Iranian life, including as Ali Mirsepassi points out, 'economic relations, social institutions and cultural patterns of the country' (2000, p. 73), what was neglected was the complex process needed for accommodating social change, particularly for the transformation of a predominantly religious society into a secular one. For many people, things like unveiling were an unfathomable sacrilege against the very sanctity of Islamic beliefs that had formed the basis of much of Iranian identity for centuries. Any attempt to discredit traditional ways was not only frowned upon by popular clerics and the majority of people, but also a threat to the core values underpinning Iranian identity and society. Consequently, Reza Shah's secularization affected everyone. While it favoured only a small number, who became the ruling class, it alienated the government from the people. In this system, however, there was very little room for the expression of discontent, especially after Mohammad Reza Shah, Reza Shah's son replaced him in 1941. During his reign those who opposed the government were dealt with harshly by the feared secret police, SAVAK.

During this time, the written word in all its forms—local and imported books, newspapers, pamphlets—was subject to heavy censorship. The government was especially sensitive to subjects and words that hinted at discontent or revolt. Azar Mahloujian, for instance, tells us on her blog that 'before the Revolution, the authorities were sensitive to such words as 'red' and 'red rose,' which symbolized the blood shed during revolution, or 'black night' and 'high walls,' which symbolized prison and repression' (2003). Thus, the possession of books such as Maxim Gorki's *Mother*, for instance, which tells the story of a mother's unconditional support of her socialist son in Russia, meant paying a hefty price. As Mahloujian goes on to argue 'the publication or possession of forbidden books [was] dangerous for all concerned -- writers, readers, booksellers and publishers -- so those who [were] not political activists [would] seldom risk reading them,' because dealing with these books could 'lead to [at least] a three-year jail sentence' (2003). Everyone was aware of the lethal consequences of possession of and

engagement with forbidden material. The government made this message clear by occasionally cracking down on and prosecuting high-profile revolutionary writers.

One of the recurring themes of diasporic Iranian writing in English, therefore, has been a response to this lack of freedom of expression throughout Iranian history. As analysed in Chapter One, there has been much effort by diasporic Iranian writers to foreground the stories of men and women who struggled against the Pahlavi regime. Particularly for older first-generation writers who remember growing up during that era and its tensions, foregrounding the nearly erased histories of those who struggled against the regime forms a significant part of their discourse. Throughout this study, particularly in Chapter One, we will discover the various strategies by which some writers have recollected forgotten histories of the Iranian past to provide alternative perspectives on totalizing narratives of history.

But in recent Iranian history, one of the most oppressive periods, to which many writers have been responding, has been, without a doubt, the Islamic revolution and its aftermath. It had been the great social gap, discontent, and lack of freedom of expression under the Shah that eventually led to the revolution. Realizing that the only remaining binding force within the country had been the Shi'i religion, the clerics, led by Ayatollah Khomeini gained power 'by offering a religious populist ideology as a safe haven to the masses' (Mirsepassi 2000, p. 94). This promise 'offered a sense of social solidarity and individual identity to a population who felt alienated from the existing social processes' (Mirsepassi 2000, p. 94). The clerics, who had by then lost almost all their power, opted for an Islamic state by romanticizing an Islamic state for a population who had been denied their right, even under the secular democratic politics. Supported by the intellectuals, they promised a state in which modernization could occur but with contextual and cultural understanding of the Iranian social situation and identity. It was this populist appeal of a modernized Islamic government that consequently led to Khomeini and his followers' overthrow of the Shah.

Yet, the identity crisis for the Iranian population did not end with the revival of an Islamic state, for this turned into a theocracy. Soon after gaining power, the Islamic regime moved to abolish all Western influences, as its main 'concern was the reestablishment of traditional institutions and the removal of all modernist reforms' (Hoveyda 2003, p. 91). This included reforming the education and legal systems

and restoring them to traditional religious systems, since the traditionalists ‘felt confident that by Islamising education they [could sow] the seeds of a process which would mature into conflict between children and their unIslamic parents’ (Hiro 1985, p. 262). In July 1980, however, there was a reversal of what had happened decades earlier as the government passed a law for women in public offices to cover their hair. A year later the law of veiling extended to all women, Muslim and non-Muslim, in all public places. The violation of this law was punishable by a maximum jail sentence of one year (Hiro 1985, p. 258).

As the result of this sudden change, Iranians, faced with ‘secularist modernization on the one hand and religious orthodoxy and traditionalism on the other’ (Hoveyda 2003, p. 1), became even more bewildered and confused. While the implementation of secular laws and reforms had affected the lives of traditional Muslims within Iran, the re-implementation of strict Islamic laws and reforms affected ‘the lives of all Iranians’ (Hiro 1985, p. 61). Yet, the tables had turned, and now the upper and upper-middle classes, those who had been the supporters of the Shah, especially, ‘found themselves alienated from the regime’ (Hiro 1985, p. 262), as restrictions were imposed on almost all aspects of their everyday lives. There were restrictions ‘on women’s dress in the street; a continued ban on music and dancing in public; there was propagandistic output of radio, television and the press,’ and there was ‘a constant fear of reprisals if they expressed their disenchantment too loudly’ (Hiro 1985, p. 262). Also affected were minorities such as Jews, Zoroastrians, Armenians and Baha’is, who lost almost all their rights. While they were discriminated against in and by the government, they also faced open discrimination from many people who boycotted their businesses and insulted their beliefs.

Soon after the revolution, writers and publishers too were faced with stricter censorship laws. Now, once again, there was intensified censorship of anything that hinted at political and social discontent. But this time, added to politically censored subjects were those who were deemed to be against the Islamic values of the state. As Mahloujian observes, ‘the new government banned books written by or about the Shah, as well as books dedicated to him or the royal family. Eventually, this censorship extended to books on Marxism, Darwinian evolution, and anything else seen as contradictory to religious doctrine’ (2003). Similarly, anything that dealt with dancing, drinking, and sexual relationships, or women’s bodies were strictly

censored. Many books by Western writers that advocated a Western lifestyle were also pulled off bookshelves and university reading lists. Lecturers, like the now-prolific Azar Nafisi, the author of *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2004), who taught foreign literatures and languages, were pressured to change their curricula or leave their posts. Even Iranian classical poetry that dealt with love, eroticism and wine, despite its symbolism, was heavily censored, making uncensored classic and loved books of poetry by Hafez and Rumi rare to find commodities, even on the black market. When these rules began to impact every aspect of people's lives, many who were in a position to leave, did so, escaping to Europe and America, some enduring harsh conditions in order to effect their escape. Most who left at this time, including aristocrats, landowners, and Western-educated intellectuals, were blacklisted and faced a life of exile. Those who remained faced an eight-year bloody war with Iraq.

A glimpse at the body of diasporic Iranian writing in English reveals that this oppressive period of Iranian history has been one to which the majority of writers have been responding. As this study will make clear, writing has been one means by which political and religious minorities, for instance, have revealed their perspective on life in Iran during that time. Political prisoners who would have been sent back to jail for narrating their stories, have similarly recounted the oppression and torture they faced in Iranian jails. Children of aristocrats and those forced to leave Iran have written about the hardship of their family's prosecution as the result of the revolution. These recurring themes, emerging from the various political and social silences of Iran, represent alternative voices of many in Iranian history and society, and form the various chapters of this study.

Given that diasporic Iranian literature is in heavy dialogue with the past, one of the significant components of this thesis is an analysis of that engagement with history. This study argues that this body of work, through the process which has led up to its construction and through various techniques, reconstructs a discursive space in which diasporic Iranians, as individuals and groups, can come to terms with the traumas of the past. The analysis of this process and space as reconstructive, draws on Kelly Oliver's argument in her book *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition* (2001) where she indicates, 'individuals who have experienced discrimination and subordination, have been "othered."' This undermines subjectivity, for she believes that 'being othered, oppressed, subordinated, or tortured affects the person at the

level of her subjectivity, her sense of herself as a subject and agent. Oppression and subordination render individuals or groups of people as other by objectifying them' (p. 9). This oppression takes away all hope for the future. Hopelessness, as Bloch maintains, 'is itself, in a temporal and factual sense, the most insupportable thing, downright intolerable to human needs' (p. 5). But Oliver argues it is by becoming a speaking subject and 'through the process of bearing witness to oppression and subordination, [that] those othered can begin to repair their damaged subjectivity' (p. 7). By drawing heavily on Oliver's theory, this thesis examines the way in which this space allows the oppressed to become speaking subjects and reconstruct their sense of subjectivity in the face of discrimination and trauma they had faced in Iran.

However, diasporic Iranians deal with additional elements of discrimination in their writing. While leaving Iran might have offered escape from persecution, many who left, especially those who migrated to the United States, faced a double exile. Leaving their home behind, they were faced, like any other migrant group, with social isolation and homesickness that affected and disrupted their sense of continued identity and subjectivity. This is a natural experience for any migratory group, as Stuart Hall explains in his essay 'Who Needs Identity?' Although 'constantly in the process of change and transformation,' he says, identities are also 'subject to a radical historicization' (1996, p. 4). Historicization being a sense of identification is 'constructed on the back of a recognition of some common origin or shared characteristics with another person or group, or with an ideal, and with the natural closure of solidarity and allegiance established on this foundation' (p. 2). Migration disrupts this sense of historical belonging, because, to put it in Bhabha's words, it leaves the immigrant in a state of 'unhomeliness.' Unhomeliness, far from being a state of physical homelessness, is a feeling that 'creeps up on you stealthily as your own shadow and suddenly you find yourself [...] taking the measure of your dwelling in a state of "incredulous terror"' (1994, p. 13). Unhomeliness leaves the subject in displacement with 'borders between home and world [...] confused' (p. 13). To overcome this sense of incredulous terror, the displaced often try to retain their sense of identity and belonging, by 'maintain[ing] a longing for their homeland and [a] desire to either return or preserve their nostalgia as a form of identification' (Mostofi 2003, p. 682). Thus, for many of these people, 'the crux of [diasporic] identity lies in the "collective memory, vision, or myth"' (p. 682) of a past whereby



by holding onto, remembering and narrating it, the immigrant can maintain his or her sense of continued and collective identity.

A quick survey of diasporic Iranian communities across the world reveals that they, too, exhibit a deep desire to maintain a sense of collective continued Iranian identity by holding onto and remembering certain nostalgic images of the past. One of the ways in which these communities have retained their sense of continued identity has been through construction of media channels or what Mostofi calls 'exile media' (p. 687). These outlets, which include radio, television, newspapers, are created and catered for Iranian audiences and have been crucial in maintaining 'Iranianness' 'rooted in Iran of old, living in memories' (p. 687). In this process books, both in Persian and other languages, have also played a crucial part.

Considering the significance of this literature, this thesis in part, aims to analyse its contribution to the maintenance of a continued sense of Iranian identity. Drawing on Stuart Hall's argument about historicization of identity, it analyses how various recurring themes and subjects in this body of work contribute to the maintenance of a collective and at times nostalgic, paradisiacal utopian, image of Iran's past by recalling 'shared, lived, remembered experiences' (Mostofi 2003, p. 684). Additionally, it takes into account the sense of unhomeliness often felt by diasporic communities. It argues that certain recurring elements of this literature, such as traditional tropes and symbols of Iran's past, home and the Persian garden, as well as the engagement with Persian poetry and literature, are allowing Iranian diasporic communities to overcome their sense of unhomeliness.

However, not all Iranian writers see a connection between dwelling on the past and maintaining a sense of continued identity. Indeed, many are aware that as much as maintaining a connection with a utopian past can alleviate pains of exile, it can also hamper a community's ability to look into the future, move forward and integrate into their host community. This realization that 'such return is always in danger of becoming a disabling nostalgia,' according to Ashcroft (2009c, p. 704), forms a central feature of postcolonial utopianism. As such, postcolonial utopianism draws on and critiques the past to project a desired future where 'a vision of the future is grounded in a resurgent memory of the past' (Ashcroft 2009c, p. 704). Like many postcolonial writers, many diasporic Iranian writers draw on traditional notions of belonging and elements of a historical past, to dismantle their edifice, and construct



new sites of belonging that accommodates their diasporic experiences. Such projections not only open up new spaces of belonging, but also critique traditionally and historically accepted notions of belonging. Iranian writers regularly engage with traditional elements of the past to critique them and offer alternative modalities of belonging and identity. Thus, while Chapter One of this study, for instance, focuses on the way diasporic Iranian writers use history to maintain a sense of continued Iranian identity, it also focuses on how history serves as a critique of those traditional historical concepts that had formed Iranian identity. Similarly, Chapter Two analyses how engagement with traditional elements of Persian classical literature that has formed the cornerstone of Iranian identity is also being challenged and transformed to reflect new realities. Chapter Four also revolves around the traditional depictions of the home and the mother-daughter relationships, and considers how writers are challenging traditional nationalistic and inherently patriarchal notions of belonging and identity through engagement with this theme.

But, there is an added complication for diasporic Iranian communities. Aside from having to cope with the difficulties of exile, they are also faced with the burden of contradictory images of Iran and Iranians pre and post-revolution that have informed popular Western understandings of Iran and its people. These representations, which often construct stereotypical images, have hampered the Iranian diaspora's integration into new communities. As Lila Azam Zanganeh, editor of *My Sister, Guard Your Veil; My Brother Guard Your Eyes*, puts it, Iran has been present in Western literature since antiquity: '[W]hether as a haven of exotic sensuality or a stronghold of fanatic religiosity, Iran has, since ancient times, inflamed the popular imagination' (2006, p. xi). The image of pre-revolutionary Iran that had flourished in the Western mind was one that frequently had its origin in dated explorer travelogues and tourist accounts, as well as exotic fictional narratives. Put another way, the representation of Iran throughout Western history, fits Edward Said's definition of the Orient in *Orientalism*, as a land that 'had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscape, [and] remarkable experiences' (1978, p. 1). Indeed, descriptions of Iran or Persia, as it was known up to 1935, were often characterised by effusive elaborations of it as 'a pleasant dream,' with 'intriguing alleys and secretive walls, open spaces and courtyards, and avenues that slit down the middle with

watercourses and lines of trees' (Amory 1958, p. 15). It was the land described in which 'within the same space contains a greater variety of contrasts of scenery' (Benjamin 1887, p. 49) with its people described as 'the most cheerful people in the world [...] [who] delight in familiar conversation; [...] [and] contrive every means to add to the pleasure of their social hours' (Malcolm 1861, p. 66).

However, despite lengthy and often florid descriptions of Persia and the Persians in many of these books, they still reflect a sense of Western superiority. This is particularly evident in descriptions of the condition of Iranian women. In most of these accounts, women, who occupied a separate territory out of the Western male narrator's reach, remained an enigma. Western writers, who were both 'fascinated and repelled by the veil' and by the situation of women, created the assumption and convention that 'veiled women were necessarily more oppressed, more passive, more ignorant than unveiled women', which led to 'exaggerated statements about the imprisoned existence of women in "the Orient"' (Mabro 1991, p. 3).

But while this discourse about the oppression of Iranian women has continued to affect the way Iranian women see themselves and are seen in the West even to this day, the image of Persia as an exotic and wonderful land of adventure, and its gracious people, began to dissipate in the wake of the 1979 revolution. While the onset of forced re-veiling reinforced some of the already-existing negative images of Iran, it was the ensuing American hostage crisis that led to the emergence of a heavy anti-Iran attitude in the West. The hostage crisis, which began on 4 November 1979 when 63 Americans were taken hostage at the American embassy in Tehran and held for 444 days, unfolded as nightly television and radio drama for the American public. This incited many of the negative perceptions of Iran and Iranians, portraying an image of them as 'non-rational,' 'hungry for martyrdom,' and 'unwilling to compromise' (Mobasher 2006, p. 110). Long-forgotten were exotic utopian adventures into Persia and its harems. Instead, Iran became the demonic anti-American dystopia with escalating numbers of human rights violations. While the non-stop coverage of the hostage crisis played an especially important role in the construction of this anti-Iranian attitude, this representation resonated far into the future, continuing to affect the way in which Iran and Iranians are seen and represented in the West even today.

Consequently, many Iranians who migrated to the West, particularly to the United States, were faced with a new sense of identity crisis, one that stemmed from open discrimination. This put additional pressure on the perils of migration, and the persecution that they had faced in their homeland. The negative imagery that surrounded them rendered them invisible and silent. Although both Iranian men and women suffered greatly as the result of this discrimination, however, I believe Iranian men and masculinities were far greatly affected. While images of the hostage crisis represented Iranian men as angry, bearded hostage-taking fanatics, these were accentuated by the more recent post-9/11 debates and by Arab and Iranian women's narratives that were used to point to the seemingly patriarchal and oppressive nature of Muslim/Middle Eastern men.

This is why much diasporic Iranian writing in English, while being a response to the oppression of the writers' homeland, and difficulties of exile, has also emerged as a response to the silences and discriminations they had faced in their diasporic setting. Just as writing has become a way to come to terms with and reconstruct their oppressive Iranian pasts, it has also been used as an outlet through which they could speak out against discrimination in their host countries. Thus, this literature has been an outlet through which many have become speaking subjects, projecting and negotiating a desired image within their host countries.

However, considering the fact that Iranians have often been rendered as the 'Other' in their host countries, this is a difficult task that necessarily requires the construction of a space diminishing the differences between self and Other. As Oliver argues, oppressed individuals can reconstruct their subjectivities by becoming speaking subjects. But for her, individual subjectivity is constituted intersubjectively, so 'that we come to recognize ourselves as subjects or active agents through recognition from others' (2001, p. 4). But recognition, she maintains, occurs only when a 'subject recognizes [...] something familiar in that other, for example, when he can see that the other is a person too' (p. 9) through the process of address-ability and response-ability, and the concept of visibility. Disagreeing with 'Sartre's accusing *look*,' and 'Lacan's insistence that the *gaze* necessarily alienates through misrecognition' (p. 9), Oliver argues that apart from speech, 'vision connects us to the world and other people' (p. 9) and allows people to recognize the similarities in the Other. What this means, for a group of people

like the Iranian immigrants, is that in order for them to regain their subjectivities in the face of discrimination, they must negotiate pockets of recognition between themselves and their host communities. Part of this process of gaining recognition, as we shall see, involves communication with those in the host country. This is why as a body of work, produced and received in the West, diasporic Iranian literature in English is as much in dialogue with its Iranian readers as it is with its non-Iranian audiences. This dialogue plays an important part in opening up spaces of recognition between Iranians and their host communities. This thesis, therefore, views this body of work as providing a space for negotiation and recognition of their identities. At times drawing on Oliver's theories it examines the various methods by which writers gain recognition within their host societies.

In this process of regaining subjectivity and negotiation, for both male and female writers, however, language and its employment plays a crucial role. Language here, is not only a means of communication by which these people can express themselves, but it is a tool that has been adapted and used by many who try to resist, challenge and negotiate the way in which they want to be represented. As Ashcroft puts it in *Caliban's Voice*,

language is not simply a repository of cultural contents, but a tool, and often a weapon, which can be employed for various purposes, a tool which is itself part of the cultural experience in which it is used. The meaning achieved through language is a social event negotiated by real people, not a simple function of its structure or grammar or lexicon. Language therefore, can be made to change, to be used in different ways of talking about the world and in a metaphorical sense, to lead to changing the world itself. (2009b, p. 4)

In postcolonial criticism, the use of and challenge to the dominant language of the colonizer often forms one of the greatest strategies for transformation, critique and negotiation of recognition. Language, as we know, is more than a tool for communication. In some cases, it can also be seen as an imposition by domineering forces, 'a conscious strategy of cultural hegemony' (Ashcroft 2009b, p. 3). This hegemony is often exclusive and 'impose[s] a way of talking about the world that privilege[s] certain kinds of distinction and representations and debase[s] others' (p. 3). This exclusive use of language, however, does not promote recognition between self and Other, and instead advocates hierarchy and misrecognition. This is why the employment of the dominant language is such an important strategy for postcolonial

writers. For them, according to Ashcroft, ‘colonial languages have been not only instruments of oppression but also instruments of radical resistance and transformation’ (p. 3). In postcolonial literature, the choice to write in English is part of the conscious decision to employ the colonizer’s language and appropriate it and ‘make it do a different cultural work from that of the colonizers’ (p. 4), in order to advocate recognition and similarities between self and Other.

For diasporic Iranian writers, too, the choice to use the English language plays a significant part in their process of reconstruction, maintenance and negotiation of their subjectivities through literature. English has often been the language used to discriminate against them in the West, and it has been English that has given them voice and allowed them to recreate their sense of subjectivity. Therefore, as much as this thesis is concerned with the contents of diasporic Iranian writing and how it is leading to transformation, it also interested in an analysis of the formal changes and challenges that are taking place in this process. For instance, how is diasporic Iranian writers’ engagement with the English language changing, transforming and appropriating some aspects of English language and literature to make it more reflective of their own experience? Chapter Two specifically takes into consideration the ways in which these narratives insert and draw on elements of Persian literature in their expressions in English, which as much as changing and adding new dimensions to English literature are also transforming certain aspects and elements of Persian literature.

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While each chapter of this thesis will address a different aspect of diasporic Iranian writing in English, each will begin with a personal anecdote relevant to the issue addressed in that chapter. While this approach fulfills my creative desires and injects a personal perspective into this study, it is also a way to showcase the fact that the issues I deal with are those with which many Iranians living abroad have had to deal at some point during their migratory lives. But above all, for me, as an Iranian woman writing in a traditional English Literature thesis, this approach is a way of personalizing a tradition that normally has very little room for personal input.

# Chapter One

## History—“holding onto, remembering and narrating the past”

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Many times during reflection on diasporic Iranian literature in English, I have been reminded of my very first encounter with a diasporic Iranian community. At that time, I had just left Hong Kong, where an Iranian community was non-existent, and moved to Canberra, which then had a small Iranian group of about forty families. As a new addition to my husband's well-known family in the Iranian community, I was welcomed by a gathering. Although I had lived the majority of my life abroad, somehow I had managed to avoid large diasporic Iranian groups, and never encountered so many of my fellow countrymen under one roof, outside Iran, until that night. As I overcame the initial shock of having to keep speaking Persian and playing the part of the well presented newly arrived bride, I had the sudden realization that many who surrounded me had a consistency, almost uniformity, about them. They were mostly aging men and women who had made the quiet suburbs of Canberra home some thirty years ago. Many of them had not returned to Iran since then, and carried themselves as if they were still middle class Iranian citizens of Tehran in the 1970s. Everyone was dressed up, almost in excess. Most women wore colourful dress suits, some of which resembled what might have been fashionable when they left Iran. Their blond hair was perfectly blow-dried; their jewellery self-consciously displayed, a distant remainder of their once rich lives in Iran. The men wore suits with ties and spoke of the Shah's regime as if it was still an existing government, occasionally sighing and cursing its Islamic replacement. Later that night, as I listened to nostalgic poetry accompanied by the soothing sound of traditional Iranian instruments, it dawned on me that these men and women were very much living in a distant past, a past that they carried with them in how they dressed, the songs they listened to, and the way they carried themselves.

As I settled into Canberra, however, I realized that this connection to a historical past played a far more important role in the lives of the men and women of the community than I had assumed at my first encounter. Many of these people

attended regular gatherings at each other's houses. Being invited to these houses was like being invited back to Iran. One could smell the rich aroma of cardamom tea, and saffron rice even before ringing the doorbell to enter into houses decorated with Iranian handicraft, and displaying pictures of ancient Iran. The bookshelves of these far away houses in the suburbs of Canberra were often lined with classical Persian poetry, and philosophy books. Their television, if ever turned on, would be of various Iranian channels beamed by satellite from Iran and America. Gatherings at these houses consisted of poetry and book readings. Sometimes, people reminisced about their grandparents, their homes in Iran, and the rich culture that they had left behind. Sipping tea out of slim-waisted Persian glasses, one could easily forget that one was not in Iran, if not for the sudden entrance of one of their Australian-born adult children. These young adults, who often came at their parents' insistence, spoke Persian with an accent, but listened intently as they tried to make sense of a poem, or learn something about the history of their cultural past. Sometimes, they would leave to attend other parties with their Australian friends. These gatherings, which in my mind almost always had a direct or indirect historical theme, brought to my attention the importance of and connection with history in the way diasporic Iranians maintain and negotiate their sense of identity. While for the older generations these events were the epitome of their identity, for their children it was merely a way to understand their past so that they could negotiate their identities in Australian society at large.

Although I had experienced the Australian version of these gatherings, I soon realized that this was not exclusive to Australia. Having read about and seen pictures and clips of similar Iranian gatherings from around the world, I noticed that this connection to history was a common denominator in all diasporic Iranian communities across the globe. For me this was an important discovery which, years later, manifested itself in a different form. When I became seriously interested in the literature of diasporic Iranian writers in English, I recognized a similarity between the gatherings and the books. Most of the nearly two hundred books, as memoir, fiction, or even poetry, that I studied could be classified as somehow having a historical theme. Reading these books was like entering into those Iranian houses and gatherings in Canberra. It was easy to lose oneself in the sights and sounds of an Iranian past that they so graciously depicted; sights and sounds that confirmed

and maintained a connection to an Iranian history. Yet, like those gatherings, these books were also a projection of the confusion and accented histories of desperate young adults who wanted to belong to the past but who also had to negotiate a sense of belonging in the new countries they called home.

In reflecting on the way diasporic Iranian writers engage with history, however, I realized that history is not just a theme that is picked up by some and ignored by others. Rather in this body of work history is a central and pervasive theme that, like the gatherings at people's houses, is always present in various forms. While in some, it emerges in and through a memoir, a personal recollection of a specific event, time period or locale, in others it comes as reference, or sometimes challenge, to historically cherished elements of Iranian culture, like its literature. In some cases engagement with elements of the past is a deliberate strategic response to the grand narratives of history as a way to highlight and foreground marginalized voices of the past. In other cases, history is simply drawn upon to negotiate current diasporic presents and futures.

It is because history, both directly and indirectly, is such an important element in the literature of diasporic Iranian writers in English, that a chapter on history also seems an essential opening for this thesis. This chapter plays a crucial role in this thesis. On the one hand, it sets up and creates understanding of the historical setting and background to which diasporic Iranian writers are responding. It argues that this literature arises out of a response to socio-historical contexts of both their Iranian and diasporic histories. In this way, this chapter forms a base upon which other issues and themes that are addressed in later chapters, most of which stem out of a response to elements of that past, can be understood. On the other hand, this chapter considers the importance of this historical engagement for Iranian writers and argues that the various ways that diasporic Iranian writers are engaging with, adapting, and responding to the discourse of history, is a means for them to maintain, reconstruct, and negotiate their own current diasporic identities.

Before embarking on further analysis, however, there is one essential question that one is often faced with in approaching the centrality of history in diasporic Iranian communities and their writing in English. Why would a relatively young diasporic community that should still be concerned about settling into their new environments be constantly looking back at history rather than looking forward to the future? The



answer to this question is far from simple and relates to the complex relationship between identity and history. Understanding this relationship, however, is essential to understanding the way arguments unfold throughout this chapter and the rest of this thesis.

As Stuart Hall argues, ‘because identities are constructed within, not outside, of discourse, we need to understand them as produced in specific historical and institutional sites within specific discursive formations and practices, by specific enunciative strategies’ (1996, p. 4). This means that the discourse of history is an important element in the way identities are maintained and constructed. This, as will be examined in detail in the first part of this chapter, is why we need to look back to history to maintain a continued sense of identity defined by specific and shared discourses and practices. But such relationship is far more complicated since sometimes what is historically specific is not representative or inclusive of the identities of those who it claims to represent. Thus, in the works of those who want to resist the hegemony of official history, particularly the colonized and marginalized, engagement with history is not necessarily about maintaining a continued sense of identity. Rather, as we will see later in this chapter, it is a way of tapping into the very discursive formations and practices of history to challenge them in order to reconstruct and negotiate new histories that are representative of multiple experiences and futures.

Taking the complex relationship between history, and maintenance, reconstruction and negotiation of identity into account, this chapter analyses two prominent ways through which diasporic Iranian writers are engaging with history. First, by drawing on Stuart Hall’s concept of historicization, which emphasizes historical connection in maintaining a sense of identity, it argues that diasporic Iranian writers are using elements of the past to maintain a diasporic collective historicized sense of identity and belonging. Then, it analyses how through engagement with elements of the past, like many postcolonial writers, diasporic Iranian writers are tapping into history to challenge and transform its elements, in order to reconstruct and negotiate history that is reflective of their identities, experiences, and futures.

## **Historicization and Maintenance of Identity**

In “Who Needs Identity?” (1996) Stuart Hall argues that among many factors, history, particularly in the form of collective and shared experiences, is a central tenet of how we form our identities. Identities, he proposes, are formed through what he calls ‘historicization,’ which is identification ‘constructed on the back of a recognition of some common origin or shared characteristics with another person or group, or with an ideal, and with the natural closure of solidarity and allegiance established on this foundation’ (p. 2). Considering this, identities, particularly those of the ‘forced’ or ‘free’ migrants, need to be situated and understood within ‘those historically specific developments and practices which have disturbed the relatively “settled” character of many populations and cultures’ (p. 4). Although historicization is important in how everyone defines their own sense of identity, it plays a particularly important role for diasporic people who have been cut off from points of identification that had previously defined their continued sense of identity.

This is why for many diasporic people maintaining a connection to elements of their past is such an essential part of the way they define themselves. Indeed, as Nilou Mostofi observes, so important is this kind of remembrance that, ‘the crux of [diasporic] identity lies in the “collective memory, vision, or myth”’ of a historicized past whereby by ‘holding onto, remembering and narrating the past, the immigrant can reassure himself or herself of his or her sense of identity’ (2003, p. 682). This kind of remembrance is often nostalgic and visualizes the past as an unchanging paradisiacal space to which the narrator or characters feels a strong bond and belonging. Sometimes, however, this historicization does not rest on positive memories and can indeed be of a shared dystopian experience, like a historical event that led to migration or to the disruption of that paradisiacal past.

This is the case for diasporic Iranian communities for whom the Islamic revolution is one of the most pivotal points of collective identification. Since it was the revolution that led to the migration of millions from Iran, some in fact argue that ‘the history of Iranian diaspora starts with the Islamic revolution of 1978-1979’ (Mostofi 2003, p. 685). This means that for diasporic Iranian communities, the revolution and its interruption of the normal flow of life is the single most important collective point of identification. This is in no way suggesting that this is the only point of historicization for diasporic Iranian communities. As we will see

throughout this chapter and the rest of this thesis there are many cultural and social elements that diasporic Iranians draw on as shared points of identification. However, this does suggest that the revolution, as a historical event, is one of the only shared elements that transcends the socio-political, religious, linguistic, and class differences across various diasporic Iranian communities. Most Iranians who live outside Iran as the consequence of the revolution, regardless of their religious, ethnic and social background, identify with the fact that the revolution disrupted their lives. It is no wonder then that, in the majority of work by diasporic Iranian writers in English, the revolution serves as a key point of arrival and departure, the single most important event around which historicization or maintaining a sense of historical connection to their fellow Iranians revolves. Although the revolution is a shared experience, its reflection varies according to the experiences of individual writers. As we will see in this chapter, while some focus on the nostalgia of pre-revolutionary era, others deal with the interruption of the revolution and post-revolutionary periods. Still others take the revolution as the point of departure and address its exilic consequences. Some even take readers across Iranian history from pre-revolutionary Iran, through to the revolution and eventual exile.

Since the revolution interrupted and changed the socio-cultural landscape of Iran so permanently and profoundly, the pre-revolutionary era often holds nostalgic value for many Iranians. As Mostofi argues, ‘The trauma of the Islamic revolution and subsequent immigration has left Iranian immigrants nostalgic for a homeland that no longer exists, for a constant regeneration of “the way things were,” and for a construction of an identity that [...] incorporates their past lives and histories’ (p. 688). For those who remember it, this time is often reflected as carefree, but with the air filled with political build up, peppered with a hint of danger with the mysterious presence of the Shah’s notorious secret police, SAVAK, and the pressures leading to the revolution. This era is memorable and cherished by many first generation migrants who will forever remember the landscape of Iran as such, and it also forms the backdrop of many novels and memoirs. For instance, this is the setting for bildungsroman novels like Mahbod Seraji’s *Rooftops of Tehran* (2009), a touching novel that follows seventeen year-old Pasha, as he falls in love with his neighbour Zari, but whose romance is cut short when they become involved with the SAVAK. Similarly, Zohreh Ghahramani’s *Sky of Red Poppies* (2010) follows

teenager Roya as her friendship develops with politically involved Shirin leading to near-fatal consequences with the SAVAK. Anahita Firouz's *In The Walled Garden* (1995), follows Mahastee a young wealthy woman married to one of Iran's elite real estate owners, as a forbidden love is rekindled with her childhood crush, Reza who is now a Marxist, the enemy of the very class that she represents.

This era is also the backdrop of many memoirs. In *The Blindfold Horse* (1988) for instance, Susha Guppy takes the reader back into the streets of Tehran in the 1940s until her departure for Europe. Similarly Sattareh Farman-Farmaian's *Daughter of Persia* (1996) recalls life as a princess in the quarters of her father's palace until she, too, left Iran permanently after the revolution. And Roya Hakkakian's *Journey From the Land of No* (2004) takes us on a more modern journey through Iran just before the revolution from the perspective of a young Jewish teenage girl dwelling at a time of social upheaval that became the revolution.

Although these books present diverse experiences from a cross-section of Iranian society, each in their own way contribute to the maintenance of a historicized sense of identity as they preserve and collectively remember shared sights and sounds of pre-revolutionary Iran. Zohreh Ghahremani, the author of *Sky of Red Poppies*, explains this best on her blog. Before embarking on a ten paragraph reverie of how the simple phrase 'jingling of gold rimmed tea glasses' that she read in a book filled her 'mind with a hundred visions of her past in Iran,' she writes, 'oceans away from the land that I love, my Americanized lifestyle helps me to bury the past so deep inside that I don't even think about it. That is, until someone, or something triggers my memory and then it all comes back vividly, as if it were only yesterday.' She concludes,

Yes, that simple sound of thin, gold-rimmed glasses shaking in a tray and jingling as they hit one another has stayed within me for decades, only now it's no longer buried for it has emerged to remind me of all the [...] lazy summer days, the late afternoon tea in the garden, or the sad tea passed around at funerals. Decades later, my estekan [glass] has changed to a larger, thicker one, and my lonely glass no longer finds a companion to jingle against. Just when I thought the past was all behind me, those tiny gold-rimmed glasses have come back through the pages of a good book to remind me of who I am and how far I've come [...] It doesn't take much to bring back those wonderful memories. All I need is the familiar ring of a few words, the echo of a sound, or the dusty smell of a faraway place and there I am, flying back on the magic carpet of memories. I would give up all the privileges of my new life for just one moment of a life that is lost

forever. It's a sweet fantasy and I cherish it while it lasts: There I am, back where I belong, back to a time when all I needed to get over my troubles was a good glass of tea. (2010)

By the same token, many Iranians of a certain generation identify with shared elements from pre-revolutionary Iran. Many, for instance, remember sleeping on the rooftops of their homes before the revolution in the summers and falling in love with a neighbouring boy or girl as Pasha does in *Rooftops of Tehran*. Similarly, most of those schooled during the Shah's regime identify with the school system, the books that were taught, as well as the fears and values of being politically involved through Roya's schooling in *Sky of Red Poppies*. In reading the memoirs, many would identify with the detailed sights and sounds, flavours and aromas, of pre-revolution Iran described by Susha Guppy in *Blindfold Horse*; or, those of a wealthy class will also remember the grand gardens and the gender dichotomous homes as Sattareh Farman-Farmaian remembers in *Daughter of Persia*. These are utopian paradisiacal, unchanging memories of a shared idyllic past through which many can form and maintain a historicized sense of identity and belonging.

However, for many Iranians maintaining a connection to pre-revolutionary Iran has other implications than simply a nostalgic reverie. As Mostofi argues, for many diasporic Iranians the Islamic revolution, and the image that the West has of the revolution, is a negative one. This is why many Iranians choose to associate themselves with the pre-revolutionary era, calling themselves 'Persian' to identify with a cultural heritage rather than 'Iranian' which has nationalistic connotations. This is why as Mostofi argues 'Iranian diasporic consciousness constitutes an identity based on a 'historical consciousness' where some valorise cultural traits and cultural cohesion' (2003, p. 688). By emphasizing a connection to the pre-revolutionary era, diasporic Iranians assert themselves positively, disassociating themselves from identification with the Islamic regime of Iran. This is clearly reflected in their literary expressions. When Sattareh Farman-Farmaian, for instance, entitles her book *Daughter of Persia* instead of *Daughter of Iran* and poses for the front cover proudly, she is announcing her connection to that historical and cultural background rather than with the more recent negative political implications that Iran may uphold in the West. Similarly, Susha Guppy's insistence on calling Iran 'Persia' throughout her memoir stems from the same desire.

But as much as Iranian migrants construct a historicized sense of belonging on the back of nostalgically shared memories of pre-revolutionary Iran, they also all share the disruptions caused by the revolution, as well as the difficulties of life in post-revolutionary Iran and eventual exile. A survey of books by diasporic Iranian writers, particularly the memoirs, reveals that the revolution and eventual exile by far outnumbers nostalgic reveries of pre-revolutionary Iran. For instance, it is the revolution that forever interrupts Afschineh Latifi's life, as she recalls in *Even After All This Time* (2005), her father's execution soon after the revolution, leading her mother and siblings into eventual exile. Similarly, it is the revolution that disrupts Marina Nemat's life as she tells us in *Prisoner of Tehran* (2005), leading to her imprisonment at the age of sixteen. By the same token, it is in response to post-revolutionary conditions that Cherry Mosteshar and Sousan Azadi wrote their memoirs *Unveiled: Love and Death Among the Ayatollahs* (1995) and *Out of Iran: One Woman's Escape from the Ayatollahs* (1987). And it is also the revolution that interrupted the lives of Tara Baharampour, and Banafsheh Serov, as they recall their experiences of having to migrate as teenagers to other countries in their memoirs *Under Starless Sky* (2008) and *To See and See Again* (1999). For second generation diasporic Iranians, too, like Azadeh Moaveni who has written *Lipstick Jihad* (2005), and Said Sayrafiezadeh who wrote *When Skateboards will be Free* (2009), it is the revolution that has disrupted their connection to their cultural background.

For most of these writers, the very process of writing about the dystopian experience of the revolution is a utopian process, allowing them to come to terms with its trauma. This not only forms a shared site of collective identification on the back of which they could maintain a sense of historicized identity, but it also allows narrators to come to terms with their own individual trauma. This in turn, as we will see, enables them to regain their subjectivity and project a new sense of identity in their current and future diasporic setting. Diasporic Iranian memoirs, particularly women's, however, occupy a far more complicated and politicised situation to which Chapter Three of this thesis is dedicated.

It is not, however, memoirs alone that highlight the revolution as a shared interruption. Fiction writers, too, emphasize the disruption caused by the revolution and its aftermath. In *Interruptions* (2008) Masud Alemi, for example, demonstrates how the events of the revolution can interrupt an innocent man's life, leading him to

unfair imprisonment. Similarly, Fanoosh Moshiri, in all three of her novels, *Against Gravity* (2005), *Bathhouse* (2001), and *At the Wall of the Almighty* (2000), deals with individuals who have been directly affected by the revolution.

These narratives, both as memoir and fiction, construct a site for the shared sense of historical identification for diasporic Iranian communities based on the interruption of the revolution and difficulties of the post-revolutionary era and eventual exile. The representation of a variety of experiences of the same event further contributes to expanding the realization of similarities between diasporic Iranians who come from different social, political and religious backgrounds. That the gay Iranian man captured innocently in *Interruptions* has similar experiences as the young Christian Marina Nemat of *Prisoner of Tehran*, for instance, minimizes the socio-political, religious and even gender differences and hostilities that those people might have felt against each other in Iran. It is the realization of similarity of experiences through these narratives that contributes to the construction of diasporic Iranian communities that maintain their connection to the past based on understanding rather than difference. In this way, diasporic Iranians can maintain their sense of Iranian identity, as Hall puts it 'constructed on the back of a recognition of some common origin or shared characteristic with another person or group' (1996, p. 2). The literature that reflects this could be read as 'a consolidated effort to preserve the [diasporic] community's sense of identity' (Netton & Salhi 2006, p. 3) allowing the diasporic Iranian community to 'connect to one another through this collective remembrance' (Mostofi 2003, p. 687).

However, aside from direct reference to historical periods, diasporic Iranian writers maintain a sense of connection to their historical past by drawing upon numerous historical and cultural tropes and elements. While this chapter has outlined how historical eras are utilized in maintaining a shared sense of Iranian identity, other chapters of this study analyse specific cultural and historical tropes and elements that are used in a similar manner. Chapter Two, for example, focuses on the use of Persian literature as a site for the maintenance of an Iranian identity. Similarly Chapter Four focuses on the trope of the home and homeland and examines how it is drawn upon to define and challenge certain aspects of Iranian national identity.

But, while for a diasporic community recollection of the past could be positive in reasserting and maintaining identity by constructing a sense of belonging to a



shared historicized past, it could also be potentially dangerous if it is the primary means of identification. As Ashcroft puts it, ‘acts of memory are always vulnerable to nostalgia, which, rather than stimulating change can paralyse transformative action. In its most extreme form, [they] could be described as a “fantasy of unhappening” the desire to reverse history, to retrieve some essential authentic cultural identity that existed before’ (2009a, p. 8). If texts that reminisce about an unattainable past, or dwell too much on the dystopian interruption of the revolution, become the only means through which Iranian individuals or communities can maintain a sense of historicized identity in diaspora, then they could be seen as contributing to deepening a sense of loss for migrants. Potentially, this could hamper them from living in the present and integrating into their new setting. As Mostofi points out, Iranian migrants ‘pine over a home they can never become a part of because the Iran of their memoirs no longer exists, [but] they reside within a state they must adapt to for survival’ (p. 689). Although in some cases recalling of traumatic events may assist with coming to terms with past trauma, at times the inability to acknowledge the past and move on, can place the Iranian diaspora in an ‘awkward position’ (p. 689).

But the greater danger of this historicized identification lies where historically specific texts become models for understanding Iran and Iranianness in the West. As Hamid Naficy points out, a typical response of diasporic people ‘to the rupture of displacement is to create a utopian prelapsarian [image] of the homeland that is uncontaminated by contemporary facts’ (2001, p. 152). Added to this for the diasporic Iranian community is a constant grieving over the dystopian events of the revolution that interrupted their lives. Reflections of this grief can become problematic especially when there is time delay between remembered events of the past and the time that narration becomes part of public discourse. In recent years, this has been particularly the case, when in light of current socio-political conditions and renewed interests in the US/Iran conflict, narratives from Iran attract American readers again now, as they ‘revisit and fold the events of the Islamic revolution and its aftermath into the present one more time’ (Whitlock 2007, p. 163). Although interest in such books has been triggered by current socio-political settings into which they are received, most of those that recall a specific time period in Iran—whether they focus on the nostalgia of pre-revolutionary Iran or the disruption of the



revolution and the chaos that followed—remain uncontaminated by contemporary events in Iran. For instance, as addressed in detail in Chapter Three, Iranian women's memoirs most of which are delayed accounts of the Islamic revolution have been most susceptible to this. In most cases, despite their normally self-acclaimed historically dated setting, they are taken to be representatives of current Iranian society and experience. As Whitlock observes, these books 'appear at the one and the same time as unfamiliar and belated to contemporary Iranians, [but] familiar and welcome to contemporary American readers' (2007, p. 165). For instance when Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* chronicling life in Iran's most turbulent era between 1979 and 1997, became an instant best-seller upon publication in 2004, it was immediately read as a reflection of women's oppression and complete lack of freedom and rights under the fundamental Islamic regime currently. Although in her epilogue Nafisi acknowledges that the situation, particularly that of women, has changed drastically since the time of her experiences and that women certainly had gained many more rights in the last twenty years, her self-professed time delay of events is often gone unnoticed, making 'her recollections of a repressed and alienated society [...] wholly convincing and realistic to a Western reader in these times' (Whitlock 2007, p.165).

The diasporic Iranian community seems aware of the dangers of such historical reminiscing that can freeze Iran and Iranianness within a historical period. They are aware of the irony of texts that maintain Iranian identity through historical recollection in the West but are also contributing to static representations of Iranians and reinforcing the historically constructed barriers against the smooth integration of Iranian diaspora. Heated debates erupt regularly about Iranian identity and historic representation on popular Internet sites, like Iranian.com, where diasporic Iranians express their opinions about issues of concern. One regular contributor to Iranian.com, Ben Madadi, writes,

I know that Iran has a glorious past. It should make all of us proud, but we cannot live in the past. [...] It is time to look at the world as it is today. It has really changed. It has changed a lot. [...] Iran will never be what it used to, not in our lifetime, not in our children's life time and not for any foreseeable future. [...] Iran and Iranians, can get their act together [but] first we need to come in peace with our past and move forward. [...] We must find a basis of union, not based on the past glories of Iranian empire but based on the new realities. [...] We cannot live always thinking about the past. The world has changed, even Iranians have changed. (2006)

Iranian writers and critics also seem aware of the weight of history and historical representation in the process of construction and assimilation and are resisting its weight. But because history, both in how it is representative and a point of identification, plays such an important part in how Iranian identity is viewed and constructed in diaspora, it cannot simply be discounted, nor can a diasporic Iranian identity be constructed in the vacuum of the present. This is why, as the rest of this chapter addresses, Iranian writers, like postcolonial writers, are using the resources of history, culture and language, in a self-reflective and creative manner. This, as we will see, not only offers alternative perspectives of historical accounts but also allows for writers to draw on history to project and construct desired reflections for the future.

### **Transformation and Interpolation of History**

Although Stuart Hall emphasizes the necessity of historicization and connection to the past in maintaining a sense of identity, for him the close relationship between history and identity does not necessarily equate a ‘so-called return to roots but [also] a coming-to-terms-with our “routes”’ (1996, p. 4). This engagement with the roots/routes dynamics, which invokes an origin in a historical past, is not about a mere obsession about our identities as ‘who we are’ or ‘where we came from’ as much as it is about ‘using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming or “what we might become” rather than “being”’ (1996, p. 4). In this way, the invocation of history becomes almost like a Nietzschean genealogy of descent which aims to ‘identify the accidents, the minute deviations [...] the errors, the false appraisals, and the faulty calculations that gave birth to those things that continue to exist and have value for us [...] to discover that truth or being does not lie at the root of what we know and what we are, but the exteriority of accidents’ (Nietzsche qtd. Rabinow 1984, p. 81). In this process, historical probing becomes a way for understanding ourselves: ‘how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves’ (Hall 1996, p. 4). Thus, engagement with history, as much as being a connection to the past, can also be a space for negotiation of the representation of a desired ‘transformed future’ (Ashcroft 2009c, p. 705). In postcolonial utopianism, for instance, there is close connection between the representation of history and future. In fact a key feature of

this literature is ‘the intersection of the anticipatory consciousness with cultural memory, transforming [...] through a vision of the future grounded in a memory of the past’ (p. 706). Ashcroft believes that literature is the best space where this type of transformation and negotiation can play out because literature, ‘at its very core [has] the capacity to imagine a different world. This vision of the future depends on a “vision” of history’ (p. 706). As such tapping into history and memory through literature is not about ‘recovering a past but about the production of possibility – [it is] a recreation, not a looking backwards, but a reaching out to a horizon, somewhere “out there”’ (p. 706). In this way engagement with history becomes a way to negotiate a desired state of being in the future.

For many diasporic Iranian writers, too, tapping into and drawing on elements of history is about projecting and negotiating a new vision of the future in response to historical representation both in their host and home countries. In the West, Iranian identity has been formed around two general pre and post-revolutionary historical periods. Pre-revolution, Iranians in the West were viewed as exotic Persians thanks to the legacy of the Persian Empire mostly portrayed through Western travelogues and Orientalist descriptions of Persia, images that were never reconstructed to portray the true and current condition of the country. After the revolution, particularly after the 444-day hostage crisis of the American embassy in Iran, Iranians, regardless of their background, beliefs, or involvement with the regime, were seen through the media’s lens as fanatic angry hostage-takers. While over the years these representations have heavily contributed to the way Iran and Iranianness is viewed in the West, they have also led to an apprehension of diasporic Iranian communities’ ability to transcend these descriptions and caused erroneous and conflicting perceptions about how Iranians, particularly second generation migrants, view themselves. This means that in any process of self-assertion in their diasporic setting, Iranians must first reframe their identities beyond those limiting projected historical perceptions.

However, there is a great challenge in this for both second and first generation migrants. For second generation migrants, most of whom have never been to Iran, or those who were very young when they left, the challenge lies in gaining a comprehensive and alternative view of Iranian history to counter those historical perceptions embedded in family memories and filtered through social and media

networks. For many, understanding starts with investigation into the culture and history of their Iranian heritage, and sometimes ends with a physical journey back to Iran to experience the culture. The accounts that emerge from these intellectual and physical journeys often become a means through which the narrators challenge and reconstruct how they had been represented historically and how they wish to represent themselves in the future.

Azadeh Moaveni, for instance, the daughter of an Iranian immigrant family, born in California, self-consciously demonstrates this need for historical understanding in her return memoir *Lipstick Jihad: A Memoir of Growing Up Iranian in America and American in Iran* (2005). In the first pages of her book, Moaveni recounts her struggle of self-assertion in her American setting against a set of historically imprinted images. She recalls how, as a second-generation migrant who had only been to Iran at a very young age, she had constructed her own self-identity against an internalization of historical projections. She writes,

As a girl, raised on the distorting myths of exile, I imagined myself a Persian Princess, estranged from my homeland—a place of light, poetry, and nightingales—by a dark, evil force called the Revolution [...]

Growing up I had no doubt I was Persian. Persian like a fluffy cat, a silky carpet—a vaguely Oriental notion belonging to history, untraceable on a map. It was the term we insisted on using at the time, embarrassed by any association with Iran, the modern country, the hostage-taking Death Star. Living a myth, a fantasy, made it easier to be Iranian in America. (p. vii)

The above paragraphs demonstrate how Moaveni had comfortably internalized a sense of identity based on a set of historical imagery. Her insistence in using the term ‘Persian’ to refer to herself disassociates her from the political and negative associations of Iran in the West. However, Moaveni is quick enough to point out that self-assertion based on vague notions of history had not been an effective way of maintaining a sense of identity. She goes on to demonstrate how the negativity and oppressiveness of the hostage crisis, and its inevitability in their lives, had indeed also informed much of how Iranians were viewed and viewed themselves, as well as how they tried to construct an identity devoid of that historical association. She writes,

The hostage crisis had forever stained our image in the American psyche, and slowly I saw how this shaped so much of what we did and strove for as immigrants [...]

Iranians coped with this oppressive legacy in various ways. Some, like parts of my family, willed it away by losing any trace of a Persian accent, and becoming so professionally successful that they entered a stratum of American society sophisticated enough to understand and appreciate their presence and contribution. Some [...] sought strength in numbers and found a colony in Los Angeles. They seemed unfazed by their growing reputation for vulgarity and obsession with image; better to be associated with a penchant for BMWs than revolutionary Islam, they figured.

[...] But the image of that Islam-intoxicated, wild-eyed hostage taker was still a shadow that dogged all of us. Whether we were monarchists or not, whether we took some responsibility for what happened in Iran or blamed others, the shame of the revolution placed enormous pressure to be successful, but discreet about being Iranian. As though to make up for this image's awfulness we had to be ever more exceptional, achieve more, acquire more degrees, more wealth, make more discoveries—to become indispensable. All this effort was needed to clear up our nationality's good name; being average, obviously, would not cut. Redemption became our burden. (p. 24-25)

This paragraph demonstrates how thousands of Iranians in diaspora have responded to the negative historically imposed images of the hostage crisis.<sup>1</sup> But here I find the word 'redemption' most interesting. Although Iranians have struggled to integrate into their adopted communities, for the majority, as Moaveni also observes, their integration has come at the price of the redemption of their historically tainted Iranian identity. However, Moaveni is quick to point out that integration does not necessarily need redemption of a past identity, but rather it needs transformation and an understanding that 'a vision of the future depends on a "vision" of history' (Ashcroft 2009c, p. 706). She describes her own realization of the necessity of historical understanding, rather than mere redemption, through her own experiences. When in college, she sees her situation and historical conflict reflected in Andy a Hispanic classmate's struggle of self-assertion. As she watches, Andy

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<sup>1</sup> For various analysis of how Iranian-Americans have been coping with the stigma of the hostage crisis, see Mobasher's (2006) 'Cultural Trauma and Ethnic Identity Formation Among Iranian Immigrants in the United States.' Based on social research in California Mobasher deals at length with some of the effects of the hostage crisis on the Iranian diaspora and the various measures that many Iranians have taken to overcome this association. Similarly see Mazyar Lotfalian's (1996) 'Working Through Psychological Understanding of the Diasporic Condition' and Nilou Mostofi's (2003) 'Who We Are: The Perplexity of Iran-American Identity?' For interesting data on how Iranian-Americans have worked in order to assimilate into their respective societies, see the fact sheet on the Iranian-American Community by Ali Motashari for the Iranian Studies Group Research Series of February 2004. According to it, the 2000 Census reports that Iranians have six times as many doctoral degrees as Americans on average. The 2000 Census also shows Iranian-Americans as having a 45 percent higher per capita income and a median family income 38 percent higher than the national average.

gradually transforms and empowers himself through developing an understanding and acceptance of his ancestral culture and history instead of its denial.

As I watched Andy grow into himself [...] I also began to envy him. He was surrounded by brilliant Chicano professors who encouraged and understood him; who plied him with illuminating books that spoke directly to his experience. He saw his anger and confusion mirrored in poetry [...] In time, awareness and pride replaced ambivalence and shame; [...] he had unlocked his internalized resentment of his identity. I saw this evolution not only in Andy but in many other students of color who educated themselves about their communities and their past, and found strength and support in the process. The notion of finding power in your otherness [...] was incredibly compelling. So was the explosive possibility that I could be confident about who I was, the idea that being Iranian didn't have to be about silly emotional culture clashes with my mother, but a sense of self anchored in history [...]. (p. 26)

It is through this encounter with Andy and her realization of the need for historical engagement and understanding in the process of self-assertion that Moaveni decides to embark on her own journey into history. After her encounter with Andy, she decides that,

Maybe there was something to be gained by studying history dispassionately, without the flushed distortions of family memory and cultural tropes. Within two years I was totally immersed in the Middle East [...] In the process of all this academic probing, Iran was demystified—it became a subject I could learn about on my own, a civilization that I could approach from whatever direction I chose. It stopped being only the emotional place and set of rigid norms only Maman could use to pull at my heartstrings. [...] As I discovered contemporary Iranian poetry some of which I could read on my own, I began to feel, for the first time in my life, that Iranianness was not an obstacle to my independence. For the first time I stopped resisting it. [...] Once I discovered the joys of my own private Iranianness, I was reluctant to dilute it with anything reminiscent of the years of adolescent conflict. (p. 27-28)

By gaining an objective insight into how Iranians have been represented historically, Moaveni, as Hall suggests, uses the 'resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming' Iranian in America 'rather than being' Iranian-American. It is this transformation of the stereotypically historically imposed image of herself within the frameworks of exotic/terrorist, and historically frozen nostalgic and family inherited images of Iran, that leads to her eventual personal transformation about her Iranian identity. By the end of her journey, for instance, she knows that her claim to Persian culture is far richer than carpets and cats. At the same time she also gains an understanding of the history of the revolution as well as

the complexity of current Iranian society, and can no longer claim it to be a hostage-taking Death Star. This realization that by drawing on elements of the past one can transform one's future, offers her a utopian vision of the future with alternative possibilities of social change. After all, as Ashcroft tells us, 'it is by narrative, by stories we tell, that we have a world and it is by utopian thinking, utopian forms, utopian narrative, that we may have a conception of a radically changeable world' (2007, p. 418). It is this insight that allows Moaveni to open up to the possibility that Iran has changed drastically, contrary to what her family, the media and books had told her. But more importantly it is this realization that gives her courage and freedom to make the eventual decision to travel to Iran as a journalist and represent her country for the West afresh by breaking down historically imposed stereotypes.

But, while for Moaveni and second generation migrants like her, an engagement with history requires an initial cognitive process and academic research, for the majority of first generation migrants, particularly for women and those of minority background, who had experienced Iran first hand and had come into exile as the result of the revolution, the process of engaging with and reconstructing themselves through historical understanding is much more complicated. As historians have observed within the Islamic and patriarchal system of Iran 'the construction of Iranian national identity has insisted upon the erasure and elision of gender, language and ethnicity' (Rahimieh 2002, p. 238). Consequently histories of Iran are often gendered through the exclusion of women, and unified through the exclusion of minority accounts. As it will be examined later in this thesis, for instance, matriarchal histories and the influence of women in society remained in the private domain and, if ever, these accounts were passed down orally in the footnotes of Iranian history from mother to daughter. Similarly, the presence of minority groups, particularly Jews who were ghettoized for centuries in Iran, remained outside the discourse of mainstream Iranian history and varied as generations succeeded each other. By the same token, the influences of non-mainstream political activists have always been ignored in the official recordings of the unfolding of events. Similarly, ethnic minorities such as the Azaris and the Kurds have also generally not had a huge presence in Iranian history books.

Considering such exclusion from public discourse, and Hall's belief that identities are 'constituted within, not outside representation', and that 'we must understand



[identities] as produced in specific historical and institutional sites within specific discursive formations and practices, by specific enunciative strategies' (1996, p. 4), then Iranian women and minorities who have been systematically excluded from public discourse have not really been given the ability to fully realize their own sense of identity and historic sensibility within Iran. To put it in Ashcroft's words, through a lack of historical acknowledgement and representation, they have not been 'legitimized' for 'what it means to have a history is the same as what it means to have a legitimate existence: history and legitimation go hand in hand' (2001, p. 83). This experience of historical non-legitimation resonated even beyond borders of Iran for those who thought moving away would allow them to legitimize their existence elsewhere. Abroad, after the revolution being collectively viewed as refugees and stamped as exotic/terrorist, but not having the historic sensibility to reconstruct or deny these labels otherwise, the problem of self-assertion becomes a doubly difficult task. For them, the reflection of their identities beyond exotic and terrorist, anchored in something else, first requires a coming to terms with their neglected identities as Iranians in Iran by tapping into the derelict private and collective histories of their homeland and by 'rethink[ing] the very codes and norms that consign them, as woman and other, to the margins' (Rahimieh 2002, 241).

In this process, diasporic Iranian writers face a challenge similar to postcolonial writers. Even though never physically colonized, the unifying and exclusive historical narratives of Iran and the hegemonic representation of Iranians in the West both pre and post-revolution, like colonial forces, have either not factored the multiplicity of histories in the grand narrative of History or incorporated them only 'at its edges,' within a 'marginal reality' (Ashcroft 2001, p. 92). For them engagement with history, therefore, requires tapping into the very discourse of History both in Iran and abroad, in order to rewrite history that is reflective of the multiplicity of their experiences. Like postcolonial writers, they too must engage with history, to change and challenge, not only certain elements, but also the very discourse of 'history itself' (Ashcroft 2009c, p. 708). This, what Ashcroft calls 'utopia from the *past*,' is 'a critical strategy designed to resist the master discourse of History' (p. 709), and according to him can operate in two ways. One way is through 'positioning of a different *kind* of history, a history that might disregard the boundaries between "myth" and memory, a history that subverts the tyranny of



chronological narrative.’ The other way is to ‘*interpolate* the master discourse of [...] history, engaging it on its own terms’ (p. 709). The key function of interpolating history is ‘to subvert the unquestioned status of the ‘scientific record’ by re-inscribing the ‘rhetoric’ of events’ (Ashcroft 2001, p. 92), by injecting, inserting and interrupting History with marginal voices and narratives. In both strategies, engagement with history is not ‘simply to contest the message of history [...] but also to engage the medium of narrativity itself, to re-inscribe the ‘rhetoric’, the heterogeneity of historical representation’ (p. 92).

The remaining part of this chapter attempts to draw out some of the similarities of postcolonial rhetoric and diasporic Iranian writing in English, and considers how diasporic Iranian writers are re-inscribing the heterogeneity of historical representation both in their home and host countries in order to make history more reflective of their own respective experiences. Thus, it analyses how they are introducing different kinds of history into the grand narratives of History as well as the various strategies through which they are interpolating history to challenge and subvert the very discourses that had rendered them marginal.

Looking at the range of historically themed books by diasporic Iranian writers in English, what becomes almost immediately clear is that despite the shared similarity, the history that they represent is almost always inherently different from each other. This difference is often highlighted in their depiction of marginal and alternative perspectives of those ignored in the grand narratives of History both in Iran and the West. For example, recent grand narratives of both pre and post revolutionary Iranian History, written with great censorship and uniformity, have almost completely erased the accounts of political activists. Prior to the revolution, for instance, activists who expressed alternative political views or hinted at discontent faced harsh punishments, and were quickly erased so avoid great impact on society. In 1968, for instance, Samad Behrangi, the 29-year-old beloved children’s author who wrote the popular *Little Black Fish*, was found drowned in a river. *The Little Black Fish* which tells the story of a little fish who defies his community’s rules and ventures beyond to see what lies on the other side of the sea, though written entirely allegorically, was seen as an encouraging revolutionary ideas. When Behrangi died, everyone rightly assumed that he had been murdered by the SAVAK. The government never denied the accusations, but no one dared

mention Behrangi or his books in public. Similarly, in 1974, the well-known poet Khosrow Golsorkhi (Khosrow the Red Rose), an anti-government activist and leftist, was charged with trying to overthrow the government. The Shah, to teach activists a lesson of their eventual outcome, strategically allowed Golsorkhi's trial to be shown live nationally on television. However, when asked to defend himself, Golsorkhi broke out into lines of poetry that attacked 'the institution of the monarchy and the Peacock Throne's supplication at the alters of outside powers such as the United States and Britain.' (Sadegh 2008) The live feed was quickly cut off, and uncensored footage of the trial was not seen again until years later. Eventually Golsorkhi was executed, leaving a deep heroic impact on people across the country. However, the legacy of those like Behrangi and Golsorkhi was pushed into the margins of history, as people were not allowed to write about them, praise them, or possess their writing. Eventually their names were erased from the official pages of Iranian history, only passing down in hushed voices.

In diasporic Iranian literature, distanced from the political restrictions of Iran, one of the recurring elements has been the deliberate resurfacing of the struggles and voices of those political minorities, whose struggles, though officially unacknowledged, has been influential in the direction of historical events. Many narratives set in pre-revolutionary Iran, for instance, revolve around the political tension that existed between the government and the oppositional forces, recounting the lives of some of those who influenced and were affected by this tension.

In *Rooftops of Tehran*, for instance, Mahbod Seraji brings to life characters who followed in the footsteps of revolutionaries in their struggles against the regime, but whose stories would never have been told if not through the book. As the book begins in the early 1970s, Pasha has fallen in love with Zari, a neighbouring girl, who is about to get married to a respectable young man and a friend of Pasha's, nicknamed Doctor. Doctor, however who disappears for weeks on end without disclosing his location, is secretly a political activist against the Shah's regime and has SAVAK actively looking for him. SAVAK eventually catch up with him. He disappears and is executed in jail. His parents find out about his death only when SAVAK contact them asking for the price of the bullet used to execute their son if they want his body to be released. Following an emotional outcry, Pasha tells us how Doctor and the likes of him are altogether wiped out from the pages of history,

No one will ever know the price of the bullet that killed Doctor. His parents are forbidden to speak of it. The stone on his grave must be left blank except for his name. The family can visit the grave as often as they wish, but others should not be encouraged. Doctor will not be issued a death certificate, and all documents pertaining to his birth will also be destroyed. As far as the world is concerned, Doctor never existed. His books and the rest of his belongings were taken away during his incarceration, and they will not be returned. (p. 143)

Pasha's emotional outburst brings to the foreground the government's systematic erasure of the names and identities of political activists from its pages. But to rekindle his friend's memory, in a daring move, Pasha gathers all his savings and borrows money from his friend and buys a red rosebush. He plants this in the middle of night in the alley near Doctor's house. In the morning everyone is startled by the sudden appearance of the rose bush:

'Who planted this?'

'Why?'

'Yes, why a red rose?'

'Why here? It doesn't make any sense.'

'Oh, a red rose! Remember the posters?'

'The posters? Oh, yes, the posters, I remember the posters.'

'Red is the color of passion and the color of revolution.'

'Red is also the color of love.'

'And the color of blood.'

[...]

'We must take turns caring for this bush,' someone says in the crowd, as I water the plant.

'Yes, we must,' everyone agrees. 'For Doctor.' (p. 146)

That the neighbours, all of whom had been traumatized by the Doctor's death, do not immediately recognize the significance of the rose, points to the fallibility of such characters in Iranian history. But as they eventually remember, and feel a sense of obligation to take care of the bush, they are safeguarding the memory of all of those like Doctor who gave up their life for a cause, but who could easily have been forgotten. In fact, Seraji's book, with a cover of the landscape of Tehran juxtaposed with a deep red rose does what Pasha does by planting the red rose. It offers us a different kind of history from the perspective of the many in Iranian history who

struggled against the pre-revolutionary regime, but whose existence has been wiped out completely from the pages of History.

In her novel *In the Walled Garden* (1995), Anahita Firouz, too, offers us a different glimpse of untold histories of political struggles and class differences in pre-revolutionary Iran. Set on the brink of the revolution it tells the story of a near love affair between Mahastee, an independent and glamorous aristocratic woman, and her childhood sweetheart, Reza, the son of their gardener, now an ebullient political activist against the Shah's policies. As Mahastee and Reza reacquaint, through their narratives we enter into their separate and marginal social classes: the very rich who are the ruling elite, and the lower middle class political activists. But it appears that both of these groups, in their own very different and almost contrasting ways, are trying to come to terms with the political upheaval that surrounds them. Half way through the novel, however, frustrated after a friend has been jailed, Reza suddenly breaks into a powerful philosophical soliloquy. He says,

We have two countries; the one they've designed for us, and the one we've got. They have movers and shakers and social engineers with policies and blueprints and facades, but without that flash of revelation at what we are from the inside out. They don't see it, that great force of a man's private history. The springboard of ideology is the intimate clockwork of blood and upbringing and the personal rituals and daily existence ticking away. They leak out and subvert all the great forces of history. Nothing lasts from the outside, finally, unless it's willed from the inside out. (p. 288)

Reza's speech highlights the complexity of Iranian history at the time in which the book was set. The two countries that he is referring to is the one that the politicians have designed and the one in which people live their daily lives. Often these two realities are distanced and not reflective of each other, for what the people want is very different from what the government has designed. While political activists, like Reza and his comrades, fight for freedom of speech and policy changes, as we see throughout the book, the government jails them, suppressing them, to keep up to its own agenda and reform plans. Reza, however, believes that people's personal beliefs in a cause, and their upbringing, has the power to subvert and overcome the appearance of hegemony that the government has tried to create. Indeed, it was this subversion that eventually led to what later became the revolution. Reza's statement, in its depth and complexity, thus, is a reminder of the importance of the individuals and their struggles in shaping current Iranian history.

What is interesting about *In the Walled Garden*, however, is that it reveals the complexity of Iranian society and history, through the narratives of two socially marginal characters. By picking up and emphasizing the daily lives, struggles, and personal beliefs of these two almost opposing characters, and juxtaposing them against the backdrop of what eventually became the revolution, the novel offers a different kind of history of the revolution: a history told from the insider perspective of an aristocratic woman, and a Marxist revolutionary—both of whose perspectives and voices are usually left out in the History of the revolution both in Iran and abroad. As such the novel itself could be read as a subversion of the recent narratives of the Iranian revolution both in Iran and abroad.

But, the subversion of revolutionary voices is not limited only to pre-revolution Iranian history. Similarly, after the revolution, lost are the voices and histories of aristocrats and ruling elite of the pre-revolutionary period. Not only have they been almost completely ignored in the sequence of events, but they have also often been demonized precariously by the Islamic government. Narratives, such as Firouz's which bring back these marginal voices and experiences, give such characters a history. This, in turn, gives them, and those of a similar background, a sense of belonging and legitimizes their experiences throughout Iranian history. This sense of legitimization and identification with a historical background consequently provides the opportunity for many to assert themselves in their new diasporic setting against the historically stereotypical portrayals of Iranians in the West.

While such narratives give Iranians the historical legitimization that they need, for non-Iranian readers, they shatter stereotypes by offering different perspectives of the revolution. As Firouz herself tells us about the responses of her non-Iranian readers on her website, 'they didn't know that the Iran in this novel existed. Because of how Iran is shown in the media, they think it is all angry fists raised in the air. But I am getting direct feedback from the readers who say they like walking into this other world before the revolution' (2007). The direct and positive response of readers indicate that Firouz has shattered the stereotype of Iranian revolution and offered alternative perspectives of Iranian history that is full of individual human experiences. The realization of the humanity and multiplicity of experiences for those in the host country, in turn, makes for a more hospitable environment into which diasporic Iranians can integrate.

Although many narratives do focus on the minority accounts of those who took part in the revolution, one of those groups that has not really had a chance to be represented outside of a stereotypical box has been the Iranian cleric or Mullah. Collectively seen as angry fanatics, particularly after the hostage crisis, Iranian Mullahs and the concept of Shi'i Islam have been viewed negatively in recent Western history. Although not many have tried to revive this image of the Iranian Mullah, in an eye-opening account in his book *Mantle of the Prophet* (1987), Roy Mottahedeh offers readers a rare human glimpse into the life of a Mullah. Inspired by the true-life story of an ex-Mullah friend of Mottahedeh's who visited him in Princeton, *Mantle of the Prophet* intertwines a lengthy account of Shi'ism in Iran with the life story of a Mullah at the dawn of revolutionary Iran. What differentiates Mottahedeh's narrative from other textbook accounts of Shi'i history in Iran is that it tells the story through a likeable Mullah, Ali Hashemi. We learn about a Mullah's reality through his life from childhood, through the system of the religious school, facing self-doubt about the rigorous teachings, until he becomes a leading teacher himself. Through Ali's story, particularly juxtaposed alongside a history of Shi'i Islam in Iran, *Mantle of the Prophet* offers a different human history about Islam in Iran and its religious leaders: a history often unknown to readers in the West. As the author himself tells us in the "Notes to Reader," his focus on Ali, as an individual was a deliberate attempt to humanize history and to represent 'real Iranians, not archetypes' (p. 10).

Additionally, Mottahedeh's focus on rituals and teachings of the Shi'i seminaries attempts to change the historic image of the Mullah for Western audiences. In "Notes to Reader," Mottahedeh recounts how upon meeting his ex-Mullah friend at Princeton, he had asked about how one studies to become a Mullah. When receiving the response that in 'the Shiah [sic] seminaries such as those in Qom a student began by studying grammar, rhetoric, and logic,' Mottahedeh excitedly remarks 'from that moment I knew I wanted to write this book,' and embarks on drawing a parallel between teachings at the seminaries and ancient scholastic curriculum of medieval and Renaissance Europe. He concludes that,

I realized [...] that my friend and a handful of similarly educated people were the last true scholastics alive on earth, people who had experienced education to which Princeton's patrons and planners felt they should pay tribute through their strangely assorted but congenial architectural

reminiscences of the medieval and Tudor buildings of Oxford and Cambridge. Here was a living version of the kind of education [...] that had produced in the West men such as the saintly and brilliant theologian Thomas Aquinas. (p. 8)

By comparing Shi'i Mullahs to the greatest educated men of Western history, Mottahedeh reconstructs the image of Iranian Mullah and Shi'i Islam portrayed throughout popular Western history. Readers and reviewers have been quick to pick up this non-stereotypical representation. In an online review for the *Washington Review of Middle Eastern Affairs*, Catherine Willford concludes her remarks with 'no one who reads this book will ever again be able to accept the media stereotype of the Shi'i as kill-crazy fanatics. The joy of religious mystery and the search for knowledge, reason and justice are shown to be the inspiration of the Shi'i faith, which has suffered much for its survival' (1990).

Although Seraji, Firouz, Mottahedeh and other writers named above, challenge history by offering readers alternative perspectives, their historical narrative still operates within the framework of recognizable narrative of events of recent Iranian past. While in their writing, the very action of inserting alternative narratives disrupts the unity of the grand narratives of Iranian History and transforms the way Iranian identity is perceived, many of these narratives still operate and give prominence to the framework of dominant Historical narratives which had placed them as peripheral to begin with. What this means is that although the above narratives offer us different kinds of history, they are still bound by the teleology and chronology of recognizable and dominant accounts. To use Ashcroft's words, they still fall victim to the 'trap of the empirical narrative which privileges certain species of "facts"' (2001, p. 88).

One particular author, Gina Nahai, however, seems aware of this and has dedicated her germinating literary career to what Ashcroft calls 'transforming history' by offering an 'incompatible and contesting' narrative to the dominant narrative of historical events of Iran. Of the four successful novels that Nahai has published since 1991, three revolve around the lives of Jewish women and their histories in Iran. What distinguishes Nahai's works from Seraji and Firouz, however, is her approach to historical perspective. In *Cry of the Peacock* (2001), for instance, Nahai traces the matrilineal history of a group of Jewish women living in the ghettos of Iran through two hundred years of Iranian history leading up to the revolution. But,



instead of narrating their stories through known linear dominant discourses of Iranian history it rewrites history, as we know it.

*Cry of the Peacock* is an exemplary demonstration of the ways in which Iranian writers are transforming the grand narratives of Iranian History, offering alternative histories that reflect the complexity of the experiences of the marginal. For centuries, Iranian Jews, both in their actual and historical existence, have been marginalized. While confined to their own quarters until Reza Shah's modernization scheme, history books also mention their presence as marginal. Through years of research and interviews with Jewish-Iranian diasporic communities, Nahai draws on the collective memory and experiences of many to create a historical novel that reflects the Jewish experience in Iran. Based on an oral history, the narrative defies linearity and teleology of Iranian History, instead constructing a history based on myth and memories. In this way, the novel invents a mythical history of Jews in Iran, through the story of Esther the Soothsayer who could 'reach into your past, unveil the secrets of your sorrow' and her granddaughter Peacock, who lives well over a hundred years through numerous droughts and revolutions. Thus, Persian Kings come and go, the dynasty and the regime changes, but all of those events are peripheral and are highlighted only if they contribute to the flow of life and the history of the ghetto or if those from the ghetto contribute to what is happening outside. As such it is the novel's foregrounding of alternative histories that makes it a site for contesting Iranian history.

One such account, for instance, is how Reza Khan gained his personal strength to eventually overthrow the Qajar Dynasty, consequently giving more freedom to Iranian Jews. Loosely based on facts, according to the novel, Reza Khan was born in a village in northern Iran. Shortly after his birth, his father dies and his mother, unable to support him, moves to Tehran and gives him away to an uncle, who in turn gives him away to Kazim Khan, a general in the Persian Army. Although at Kazim Khan's house he has a chance for education, he is constantly aware of his humble status as 'an orphan boy, half-guest, half-servant' and does not have the self-confidence of his peers, until he meets Peacock. Peacock, who by then was dealing jewellery for a rich jeweller, and who had been serving Kazim Khan's household, becomes aware of Reza's status. In an awkward encounter, after witnessing Reza being teased by other children, Peacock calls him aside and predicts a glorious



future for him: ‘Doesn’t matter that you were a peasant. You’re going to be King someday.’ (182) With this sentence ringing in his mind, Reza changes the course of his life and works to fulfil the prophecy. But he remains friendless and without any power. Years later, with Peacock’s foresight still vivid in this mind, he searches for peacock again to confirm her vision,

[Reza Khan] had no friends. [...] But all his life he had cherished his acquaintance with Peacock. In the days of Persia’s greatest tumult, when he felt himself standing on the brink of disaster, Reza Khan the Maxim went back and found the Jew from Esfahan.

“You said once I could be King,” he told [Peacock] in her windowless room in the Pit. He had been struck by those words, had felt his insides boil with excitement every time he remember that encounter.[...]

“You must tell me what you know,” he insisted. “Tell me my future.

Peacock smiled. All through her childhood, in times of hardship and disappointment, her mother had whispered to her Esther the Soothsayer’s prophecy made on the day Peacock was born. Now Peacock repeated the words for Reza Khan:

“A man shall come, riding from the north, with blood on his hands, and the wrath of God in his eyes.

“He shall sit on the Throne of the Sun, and with a sweep of his hand he shall reach across the empire to free our people.”

Reza Khan the Maxim felt the veins in his temples about to burst.

“How do you know I am that man?” he asked.

Peacock put her fingertip to his forehead.

“It says so right here—where Cain bore his mark.” (p. 223)

Intrigued by these words, Reza Khan becomes more persistent in his cause, and ten years later overthrows the Qajar Dynasty, becoming the first king to give Jews some freedom in Iran.

Nahai’s representation of historical events as such constructs a narrative that contests the dominant discourse of Iranian History and ‘has the potential to become the way in which the past is understood’ (Ashcroft 2001, p. 89). In this way, the novel empowers the Jewish Iranian historical identity as it provides them with a site of ‘struggle for authority over the past’ (p. 89), by transforming the discourse of Iranian history as we have been made to believe, interpolating the narrativity of History. Such interpolation is an act that, according to Ashcroft, ‘stands as one of the most strategic and powerfully effective modes of cultural resistance’ (p.15). Narratives that interpolate and challenge dominant discourses of History, not only

provide a sense of historical legitimization for those who had been reduced to historical labels or altogether left out of the pages of history, but also provide them 'a vision of the future grounded in the past' (Ashcroft 2009c, p. 706). This is why books such as *Cry of the Peacock* have the ability to empower diasporic Jewish-Iranians communities, to assert themselves against historically imposed stereotypes, allowing them to project and construct a vision of themselves for the future.

To interpolate history, to engage with it in its own terms, to challenge, transform and intervene in it, however, requires different strategies. For diasporic Iranian writers, as for postcolonial writers, one of these strategies has been through an engagement with and appropriation of language. Language, as already established in the introduction to this thesis, is far more than a mere tool for communication. In some cases, language can be seen as an imposition by domineering forces, 'a conscious strategy of cultural hegemony' (Ashcroft 2009b, 3). This hegemony is often exclusive and 'impose[s] a way of talking about the world that privilege[s] certain kinds of distinction and representations and debase[s] others' (p. 3). This is why for postcolonial writers and those resisting dominant forms of expression, language can be a means of resistance and challenge. This is why in postcolonial resistance, 'colonial languages have been not only instruments of oppression but also instruments of radical resistance and transformation' (p. 3). In such literature, the choice to write in English is a conscious decision to employ the dominant language and appropriate it and 'make it do a different cultural work' (p. 4).

For diasporic Iranian writers, too, the choice to write in English is a conscious decision, a strategy that allows them to speak against the oppressive historical forces of both their home and host cultures. Looking back at Iranian history, it has almost always been written by male members of society and through a dominant language that in many cases had not allowed for expression of alternative views and voices. This dominance had silenced many, particularly women and minorities, leaving little room for their expression. In diaspora, however, distanced from domineering forces, many have become aware of the oppression that they had faced in Iran and found a new language to express themselves.

In her memoir *Journey from the Land of No* (2004), for instance, Roya Hakakian deals with the issue of language directly. In the opening pages of her book Hakakian, a Jewish Iranian woman who had left Iran with her family after the

revolution, tells us how she eventually began writing her memoir about the years of the revolution. As a journalist with CBS in 1999 Hakakian receives a call from another journalist, David, at the *New York Times*, asking her to write a piece about the student clashes in Iran. But Hakakian, ‘embittered by [her] history’ finds herself unable to write an objective piece. She writes an apologetic email to David confessing ‘the past and the events that followed the revolution had biased me forever’ (p. 13), and that she was, perhaps, not the best source for this article. But instead of accepting her apology David writes a quick note ‘tell me about them’ (p. 13). But recalling and sharing memories, initially, is a difficult task because she feels that she may not have the right language to express herself. But, through David’s encouragement, Hakakian gradually conjures up to the fact that English could be a new medium for expression. She tells us,

To write in Persian would be daunting. Instead of re-examining the memories, I feared that in Persian, I might begin to relive them. Persian could summon the teenager at sea. English sheltered the adult survivor, safely inside a lighthouse. I did not know how to use the language of the censors to speak against them; to use the very language by which I had been denied so much as a Jew, a woman, a secular citizen, and a young poet. The love of Iran was still in my heart, yet I could not return. The irrevocable journey I had made was not the physical one, out of Iran. It was the journey from “no,” from the perpetual denials. And what I had painstakingly arrived at, greater than even the new land, was a new language, the vessel of my flight to vast possibilities. (p. 15)

It is this realization that English is a new language that can allow her to express herself, free from the constraints that Persian would have had, that allows her to recount and reconstruct her own history in her own words. Recalling Hall’s argument that identities are formed through historicization and representation, then Hakakian’s narrative is her way of representing and anchoring her current self through history, a history which had denied her any space in the narrative of events as a Jewish teenage girl.

But while English gives Hakakian the ability to reconstruct her own history in relation to her past in Iran, it also allows her to negotiate her own sense of identity in her diasporic environment. Here, her narration is not only geared towards finding a voice with which to represent herself in relation to her homeland. Rather it is also a way of projecting herself against forces in her adopted country which had also denied her any sense of individuality as a Jewish Iranian woman living under the

historically constructed labels of exotic/terrorist. Indeed, as Hakakian tells us, one of the worries that had prevented her from recounting her past, previously, had been the biased vision of her potential audience, 'who came in two kinds: the misinformed, who think of Iran as a backward nation of Arabs, veiled and turbaned, living on the periphery of oases [...]; and the misguided, who believed the Shah's regime was a puppet government run by the CIA, and who think that Ayatollah Khomeini and his clerical cabal are an authentic, home-grown answer to an unwarranted U.S meddling' (p. 11) However, Hakakian quickly realizes that English could benefit her in asserting her identity against those historically imposed stereotypes. By writing in English, thus, she taps into the system and takes hold of the very language with which she had been denied her story and 'appropriates and transforms' it into an 'appropriate vehicle' (Ashcroft 2001, p. 4). It is through this act that she dismantles the historically imposed beliefs of her 'misguided' and 'misinformed' acquaintances about herself as an Iranian Jewish woman living in America. Consequently, the very language that had historically been used to label her, allows her to negotiate with, and inform her audience. In this task, Hakakian seems to have been successful. Hundreds of positive reviews and praises for the book on various website point to how the books has offered a different perspective of Iranian history and broken down stereotypes. As Irene Wanner writes in an online review of the book for *Seattle Times*, 'This book does us the service of removing some of the region's mythical stereotypes [...] and illuminating a real contemporary culture we would do well to know better' (2004).

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has highlighted the significance of historical engagement in diasporic Iranian literature in English. While for some, recalling the past is a means for maintaining a sense of historicized identity, for others, tapping into history is a way for reconstructing and negotiating a sense of identity against historically imposed stereotypical images that had shaped their sense of identity. Although some of the ways that diasporic Iranian writers are engaging with history have been examined here, we need to keep in mind that engagement with history is a running theme throughout diasporic Iranian literature, and what this chapter has established so far has only been a glimpse at how they engage with history. In the chapters that follow,

this study will examine other ways that diasporic Iranian writers are drawing on history and historical traditions to maintain, reconstruct and negotiate their own identities. For instance, the next chapter considers the way writers are reframing and reconstructing elements of traditional Persian poetry, an epitome of Iranian history, to make it more reflective of their current condition. Similarly, Chapter Three, looks at women's narrative, in the form of a memoir, to analyze how they have challenged women's historically imposed silences to narrate their own histories. Chapter Four considers the various reinterpretations of historically constructed symbolism of the homeland and mother-daughter relationships. And finally Chapter Five, examines how Iranian male writers have engaged with history to reframe their own sense of current identities.

## Chapter Two

# Sufi Poetry—“the supreme expression of what is most universal and profound in the Persian soul”

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Growing up as the daughter of a banker who was posted from country to country, we tried to minimize the number of things we owned. Although my family has always loved books and reads extensively, we tried to buy as few books as possible; when it came to moving, books were things that could weigh us down. Despite this attempt to minimize books, two heavy and ornate ones—each of which probably outweighed all the books that I wanted to own at that stage—travelled with us to over five countries and never left the side table of my parents’ bed over the ten years that we lived abroad as a family. Of the books, one was a copy of the Quran and the other a copy of the 13<sup>th</sup> century mystic Jalaluddin Rumi’s *Masnavi*. Understanding and abiding by the messages of these books promised a hopeful future: while the *Masnavi* enlightened readers about spiritual growth for worldly life through the beauty of poetry, the Quran promised an idyllic afterlife through religion. My father, an ex-clergy turned banker, read both books almost daily. Yet, despite my family’s beliefs in the teachings of Islam and the Quran as our book of faith, of the two books, my father would always read to my mother and I from the *Masnavi* and rarely from the Quran. The three of us would often cuddle in bed on Sunday mornings after brunch and listen to my dad read from the *Masnavi*. With little ties to an Iranian community, especially in Hong Kong where there were very few Iranians, these Sunday morning sessions were our only connection to the history and culture of Iran, and they left a lasting impression on me. They made me feel like I belonged to a rich historical tradition, a tradition that I wanted to maintain and promote, a tradition that outweighed all the negative associations that I heard about Iran everyday.

When I enrolled in a creative writing course in university, and began seriously expressing myself by writing in English, time and again I found myself drawn to Persian poetic traditions as a source of inspiration. Sometimes, if I wanted to

express a particular longing or nostalgia I would refer directly to lines that had inspired me. Other times I would draw from a concept or idea that I had come across in the body of poetry and reframe it to make it reflective of my own experiences. Trained in English literature and aware of its various trends, sometimes I would blend elements of Persian literature with those of English literature and create a fusion of words and ideas that expressed my hybridity.

When I began researching for this thesis, I realized many diasporic Iranian writers who wrote in English also engaged with elements of Persian poetry. For some, this engagement, just as it had been for me, was a simple inclusion of a line or a stanza from a poem that reflected their sentiments. For others, this engagement was more complicated as it was about drawing on elements of Persian poetry, changing and reframing them to make them more reflective of the authors' hybrid experiences. As I read book after book with a strong presence of Persian poetry, I realized that for this diasporic group of writers, as it had been for me, using elements of poetry was a way to historicize a sense of identity. Its use, then, was sometimes driven by a sense of anxiety of separation and disconnection from a historical past, an anxiety caused by the migratory experience. Sometimes manifested nostalgically, reference to Persian poetry was a way of keeping close and maintaining a connection with a cultural past. But at the same time, although looking back at a historical tradition, reference to Persian poetry was also about using that tradition to reflect into the future, to adapt, change and transform its elements, like postcolonial writers, to make it do a different cultural work. In this way, Persian poetry is a vehicle through which writers can reconstruct and negotiate their diasporic identities. Not surprisingly, reference to elements of Persian poetry in diasporic Iranian writing in various forms is not limited to a few books. In fact it forms a significant recurring element in the body of work by diasporic Iranian writers. It was this constant recurrence that necessitated a study of it as a chapter of this thesis.

This chapter, thus, as one of the first studies to highlight the interaction of Persian poetry with diasporic Iranian literature in English, investigates the various ways diasporic Iranian writers draw on Persian poetry to express themselves. In doing so, it argues that their reference to Persian poetry is one of the elements that historicizes Iranian identity. On the one hand, it draws on Stuart Hall's concept of cultural identity, and argues that Persian poetry is one of the most significant elements of

Iranian cultural identity. By paying particular attention to the way diasporic Iranian writers engage with Persian poetry as a significant symbol of their cultural identity, this chapter argues that through its elements writers are maintaining a connection to their historical past. In doing so, it highlights how writers are maintaining this connection by drawing on some of the recurring themes and tropes of Persian poetry. On the other hand, this chapter considers the importance of and engagement with elements of Persian poetry as a means for the reflection and expression of diasporic Iranian identities and experiences. It argues that this engagement enables for the construction of a hybrid third space of expression that is reflective of the unique diasporic Iranian experience. Here, it draws on elements of postcolonial theory and examine how these hybrid spaces reconstruct and negotiate certain elements about Iran and Iranianness. Taking this as a point of departure, parts of this chapter argue that the Iranian writers' use and adaptation of elements of Persian poetry critiques, challenges, and adds to both the Persian and English literary traditions that they engage with, which in turn allows for the construction of unique spaces of expression.

Before embarking on various aspects of this study, however, we must keep in mind that Persian poetry is an embedded element of Iranian culture which has historical roots, and as Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak tells us in *Recasting Persian Poetry*, 'the nature and significance of poetry in modern Iran cannot be understood without a close reading of the conditions that gave rise to it and the processes that determined its shape' (1995, p.1). Thus, any understanding of the way poetry operates in diasporic Iranian writing today requires an understanding of the history of Persian poetry and its historical pertinence in the way Iranian identity and society is formed.

### **Situating poetry in Iranian Society**

In Iranian culture, poetry is, and has always been, an inherent part of the Persian discourse of communication. In fact so significant has been the importance of poetry that one could easily identify it as a maker of Iranian 'cultural identity.' In his famous essay 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora,' (2003) Stuart Hall argues that there are at least two types of understanding of the concept of cultural identity. The first understanding defines 'cultural identity' in terms of 'one, shared culture, a sort



of collective “one true self”, hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed “selves”, which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common.’ Here, ‘cultural identities reflect the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us, as “one people”, with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and vicis-situdes of our actual history’ (p. 223). Given the popularity, historical significance, and the unchanging nature of Sufi Persian poetry in Iranian culture, many Iranians view it as an unchanging element that has continuously informed the way Iranians define their own sense of identity. If we look at Iranian history, for centuries, in spite of historical and socio-political changes and differences, Iranians of different social and religious background have engaged with the spiritual classical poetry of Rumi, Hafez, Sa’adi and Khayyam and drawn upon them in their everyday and literary expressions. As Fatemeh Keshavarz, recalls in her memoir *Jasmine and Stars* (2007), classical Persian poetry formed such a significant part of her childhood in Iran that her mother drew from Sa’di’s poetry to punish her. She writes,

When I was about seven or eight years old and had done something very displeasing to my mother, she would press her lips together and look very stern. Next she would search her mind for a really bad punishment. Then she would settle for something relatively light like not allowing me to go out to play with the neighbour’s kids for the next hour. The justification for her softness always came in Sa’di’s words: “Trying to discipline a rascal is balancing a walnut on top of a dome!” She would not paraphrase or explain, just say the words aloud to herself. I did not know every single word in the poem but understood what she meant. This was true of all the other lines I heard people say around me on a daily basis. I understood them a little better every day as I grew older. In the meantime, these short quotes worked like little bridges connecting us with one another. (p. 30)

This is not rare. In Iran one often has such poetic encounters. Traveling in taxis, the seemingly unrefined taxi driver might suddenly break into poetry to reflect on the situation of the country; the grocer might respond with a poem; even the doctor might try to ease pain with poetic words of wisdom. Iranians even rely on poetry in their fortune. It is common practice for one in doubt or in need of advice to open up a page of Hafez’s poetry and ask for guidance in the words of the poem.

The significance of poetry in Iran as a marker of cultural identity, needless to say, has deep historical roots, which go hand in hand with the spiritual nature of classical

Persian poetry. In an informative essay about elements of Persian poetry, Seyyed Hussein Nasr, a leading scholar on Islamic literature and science, traces the shape of Persian language and poetry today back to the time of the Arab-Islamic invasion of Persia in the 7<sup>th</sup> century and argues that ‘the current Persian language and the literature written in it were born from the wedding between Islam and the soul of the Persian people’ (1991, p. 328). The invasion, according to Nasr, ‘affected deeply all facets of life of the Persians’ including their social, political, artistic, religious and even linguistic dynamics. But, despite this influence, in contrast to the lands West where Arab dominations brought ‘Arabization,’ so that many countries from Egypt to Morocco speak Arabic to this day, in Persia—or what is now Iran—Islam spread without its citizens becoming Arabized. Contrarily, after the invasion, the Persian language developed and became infused with the vocabulary of Quranic Arabic, becoming ‘a major Islamic language while also making major contributions to Arabic’ (p. 328). Out of this union Persia became a major centre of Islamic thought, ‘an intellectual and spiritual microcosm of the entire Islamic world’ (p. 329). This left a profound mark on Persian literature, as it ‘became the vehicle for most schools of Islamic thought and spirituality and exercised an influence in the rest of the Islamic world far beyond Persia’s geographical border’ (p. 329).

Scholars and historians also believe that it was the union of Islam with the Persian culture that gave birth to Sufism or Islamic mysticism. In ‘Persian Sufism in its Historical Perspective,’ Abdol-Hossein Zarrinkoub argues that it was traces of Persian Zoroastrianism coupled with Islamic thought that gave rise to Persian Sufism. He writes,

[I]f mysticism is taken to be — as it usually is — an expression of man’s belief in direct connection with the godhead, the well-known ethical concept of the Zoroastrian — for whom every particular deed of daily life, good or bad, is the joint product of man and either the principle of Good or of Evil — might also be considered an unconscious expression of pantheistic type of mysticism. Thus, while the late Sassanian period prepared Zoroastrian minds for a new faith introduced by the Muslim conquest of Persia, the converted Zoroastrians of the early Islamic period were able to retain some of their former ethical tenets in the Sufi philosophy. (1970, p. 139)

Sufism according to J. Spencer Trimingham are ‘those tendencies in Islam which aim at direct communion between God and man, [...] a sphere of spiritual experience which runs parallel to the main stream of Islamic consciousness deriving

from prophetic revelation and comprehended within the *shari'a* [Islamic law] and theology' (1971, p.1). Sufism is an esoteric dimension of Islam, and is to be distinguished from exoteric or external Islam. According to Titus Burckhardt,

[W]hereas the ordinary way of believers is directed towards obtaining a state of blessedness after death, a state which can be attained through indirect and, as it were, symbolic participation in Divine Truths by carrying out prescribed works, Sufism contains its end or aim within itself in the sense that it can give access to direct knowledge of the eternal. (2008, p. 3)

This means that while Sufis attempt to 'observe the "rule of the heart,"' the ulema, the arbiters of Shari'a law, 'concentrated on the external acts' (Lewisohn, 1992 p. 21).

Sufism is mentioned here because Sufi philosophy has heavily influenced Persian poetry traditions. As Zarrinkoub points out, 'Sufi philosophy found a most hospitable soil in the domain of Persian poetry' (1970, p. 139), and as such, has had great significance in the direction of Persian poetry and literature. In fact Nasr believes that it was the influence of Sufism that completely changed the shape of Persian literary tradition. As he writes, 'if Sufi poets had not appeared on the literary stage, Persian literature would have remained for long centuries no more than a court literature limited to a panegyric character' (1991, p. 140). Indeed so profound has been the union between Sufism and Persian poetry that Nasr calls it, 'a cultural miracle in the bosom of Islamic civilization, [...] a vast ocean which has succeeded in expressing the most inward and spiritual dimensions of Islam in a most universal language' (p. 331).

Persian Sufi poetry is thus a reflection of the esoteric and spiritual aspect of Islam. Often referred to as poetry of divine love, its origins can be traced back to the 11<sup>th</sup> century and has such a long list of poets that according to Zarrinkoub, 'every great poet of that period was a Sufi, as nearly every great Sufi of the time was a poet' (1970, p.140). Among them, some of the known poets include Baba Tahir (11<sup>th</sup> century), Abu Sa'id Abi l-Khayr (11<sup>th</sup> century), followed by poets such as Attar (12<sup>th</sup> century), Rumi (13<sup>th</sup> century), Hafez (14<sup>th</sup> century) and Sa'adi (14<sup>th</sup> century).

According to Nasr, there are several elements that distinguish Sufi poetry from other kinds of verse in Persian.<sup>1</sup> First is its association with ‘the Spiritual Path,’ which is ‘concerned with transformation of a man’s entire being – for without becoming a new being one cannot see things in a new way’ (1999, p. 3). This poetry enables us to ‘become what we should really be, what we are already *‘ind Allah*, that is “in God,” to become ourselves.’ This means that it directs us to change and transform by breaking boundaries that our ego and environment have placed upon us. Its aim is to bring us closer to our true selves so that we can ‘become ourselves [...] that archetype or essence which is our very “self” and inner reality’ (p. 3). Iranians, even to date, believe in the transformative nature of this poetry and often turn to the poetry of the masters if they feel lost and confused.

The second aspect of Sufi poetry, related to its transformative quality, is its highly symbolic nature. Because Sufism is concerned with the hidden aspects of one’s being, as well as metaphysical experiences for which there may be no physical equivalent, Sufi poetry, too, is often enveloped in metaphors and symbols that hide certain truths for readers to unravel. As such ‘one penetrates into the language to be carried by it to the inner meaning’ (Nasr 1999, p. 8). As Al-Ghazzali, one of the greatest Sufi poets writes: ‘We mean by metaphor or analogue (mathal) to render meaning (ma’na) into the external form (surah). So if one sees its inner meaning, he finds it true. But if he sees only its external form, he finds it deceiving’ (qtd. in McCarron n.d.)’

The significance of metaphorical description is connected to another distinguishing aspect of Sufi poetry, its ‘depiction of paradise.’ It is through symbolism and allusions that Sufi poetry ‘creates a kind of celestial atmosphere for the soul to breathe in’ (Nasr 1999, p. 5). The celestial quality of this poetry, if understood beyond its symbolism, attempts to connect the reader to a divine reality. Thus, in the body of Sufi poetry across the centuries, the garden, rose, wine, lovemaking and ecstasy, are symbols and allusions that create and point to this celestial atmosphere.<sup>2</sup> These symbols often create in readers a sense of nostalgia or longing for that paradisiacal space, the ecstasy of union and connection with the divine.

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<sup>1</sup> For a complete list of what Nasr argues are distinguishably different elements of Sufi poetry see his “Persian Sufi Literature” (1999).

<sup>2</sup> For an extended interpretation of the symbolism of Wine see Saeidi & Unwin (2004).

Another quality of this poetry, according to Nasr, is that it has a ‘therapeutic effect’ as it provides the soul with nourishment. He writes, ‘the mystical poetry has created a kind of world into which the human soul can withdraw for nourishment and protection, and a kind of complement to the external world’ (1999, p. 5). In fact in Iranian tradition, so accepted is this therapeutic effect of poetry, that if someone is feeling depressed, people do not refer them to the doctor, instead they tell them to go and read poetry in their room.

This literature, in its essence, is utopian, for as Jacqueline Dutton argues about the utopian aspects of Islamic poetry, it not only ‘present[s] a description of the physical incarnation of the ideal place, but it [also] explore[s] the relationship between the cultural aspects of social dreaming and nature, as well as the role of human agency or free will, in the conception of the utopian vision’ (2010, p. 237). This vision, although ‘depicting the desire for a better way of being, built on the Islamic foundation of the ideal of paradise attainable through the realization of God’s immanence in all creation’ (p. 236), is also very much rooted in the physical realm, and indeed draws on rich imagery, allusions and elements of the physical world in its description. It is the duality of this literature, which refers to both known physical and spiritual elements of human life and condition, that allows for the construction of an imaginative future or the remembrance of an idyllic past.

It is these qualities of Persian Sufi poetry, passed down generationally, that have made it such a significant element of the Iranian cultural identity and discourse of communication, an element, according to Nasr, ‘of utmost importance [...] for Persian culture and the nourishment of the Persian soul’ (1999, p. 5). However, more important than its unique elements, Persian Sufi poetry is considered a site of shared identification, an element of cultural identity, amongst Iranians of various ethnic and social backgrounds because it has become a symbol of cultural resistance and pride. As a cultural tradition, Persian Sufi poetry has surpassed, survived and retained its most distinguishing attributes despite the socio-political changes that have affected Iran over the centuries. The very fact that after the Arab invasion, Persia managed to retain its own language and developed a literature that is unique to its culture has always been a source of historical pride for Iranians. As such, according to Jahanshah Rashidian, this literature, ‘fosters Iranian identity by establishing Persian as a common language of all Iranians’ (2010).

This literature has also overcome the great rift that has always existed between Sufism and conservative Shi'i leaders of Iran. Looking back at Iranian history, there has always been tension between traditional Muslim leaders and Sufi traditions. According to Abdol Karim Lahiji, the source of tension between these two schools can be summed up in their difference of thinking. He writes, 'the Sufis were more tolerant of freedom of speech and freedom of religion. The [shari'a] people were more aggressive and less tolerant of the other interpretations of Islam' (qtd in Ron Synovitz 2007). As Vanessa Martin also observes Sufism has always been to some extent frowned upon by orthodox Islam, because 'with its supposition of individual union with God, and in its more extreme form of pantheism, the presence of God in all things, it undermined the orthodox concept of divine transcendence' (2007, p.33). Thus, the tendencies of Sufism, with their more open-ended approach, which have always challenged established authority, lay or religious, have made Sufism 'the object of suspicion of both orthodox Islam and the state' (p. 33). Although an in-depth understanding of the rift between Sufis and Shari'a laws in Iran needs another study of its own,<sup>3</sup> it is important for the purposes of this study to note that although tensions have always existed between Sufis and Islamic leaders in Iran, this hostility has grown more since the revolution. The current Islamic government, particularly, has been extremely intolerant of alternative schools of Islamic thought. After the revolution, leaders of various Sufi orders were forced to leave Iran and have established centers across the world for diasporic communities. Those who remained in Iran, to this day, face a constant struggle with the regime. Their centers are shut down and their gatherings are often invaded by the morals police.

Under this tension, Sufi poetry also suffered. As Abdul Kasem reminds us about the rules of Shari'a, 'the status of poetry depends upon the content of the poem a poet composes. If his composition is to praise Allah and His messenger then that is fine. Any other type of poetry (like philosophical, love, romance, patriotism, nationalism, free and secular thinking....etc.) are completely illegal or *haram*' (2002). This is why in the early days after the revolution, most poetry, particularly Sufi poetry, were pulled off the bookstore shelves. With constant symbolic allusion to ecstasy, love, lust, music, dance, wine, love making, male/female relations and with normally risqué miniature-style imagery in books depicting men and women

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<sup>3</sup> For a detailed analysis of this relationship refer to Matthijs Van Den Bos (2002).

together drinking wine, these books were declared *haram* or illegal by authorities and censors. While symbolic references to ecstasy in the poetry were deemed corrupting to the mind, even blasphemous, it was believed that this kind of poetry, which constantly turns the attention inwards, could be debilitating. This stemmed from the idea that 'poetry protects the soul artificially, makes it lazy and prevents it from going out and achieving practical ends in the world' (Nasr 1999, p. 6).

Yet, despite the fact that Sufi poetry was frowned upon by the Islamic government, it continued to form an indelible part of Iranian literary discourse. No one stopped reading or reciting Sufi poetry because the government told them to. In fact, after the revolution, Sufism and Sufi poetry, with its aspirations to mysticism and the spiritual aspects of Islam, became a more favourable point of identification for many Iranians who did not agree with the government's forced Islamicization of the country. Indeed, as Rashidian observes, 'a growing majority of Iranians, specifically among the youth, is motivated to demarcate their self identity from the one which is imposed by the regime' (2010). As such, many Iranians maintain a connection to shared elements of their culture that predate the revolution, and is devoid of particular nationalistic identities that the state wishes to impose on its people. Persian Sufi poetry, it seems, has been one of the most significant historical and cultural elements that has formed Iranian cultural identity beyond a strictly nationalistic or political identity. As Azar Nafisi explains in an interview with Big Think, her father always reminded her that throughout history Iran has been invaded numerous times, rulers have come and gone, houses and cities destroyed, but 'one thing we have kept that gives us our Iranian identity [...] is our poetry and literature' (2008). Similarly, as Zohreh Ghahramani tells us at the end of her novel *Sky of Red Poppies*, in a section entitled 'A Note About Poetry,' 'poetry is a common denominator for us, an integral part of our culture' (p. 304). But perhaps Nasr sums up the importance of poetry in the Iranian cultural identity best when he writes that Sufi Persian poetry has become 'the supreme expression of what is most universal and profound in the Persian soul' (1999, p.1).



## **Diasporic Poetry of Nostalgia**

It is in the above context that the importance of Persian Sufi Poetry in the works of diasporic Iranian writers in English can best be understood. While Sufi poetry is the epitome of cultural identity for many Iranians across the divide, it seems as though for those living beyond the borders of Iran it plays a much more important part in maintaining and forming their sense of identity. This, needless to say, has to do with the separation caused by migration. Recalling Hall's theory of identity and the concept of historicization, there is a necessary connection between the way we define ourselves and the connections that we maintain to a series of continued and shared elements of our cultural identity and history. However, for those who have migrated, there is often a disconnection, a fragmentation, to this continuation. Cut from other sites of cultural identity, in their new setting, they are left with only a few markers of cultural belonging. As Andrew Davidson and Kuah-Pearce Khun Eng describe it 'migrants experience a sense of deterritorialization and dislocation where the break with the country of origin with its familiar social practices and cultural icons means these are no longer available to these migrants in their adopted country' (2007, p. 3). As a result, many migrants 'consciously seek to retrieve and reproduce some of these social practices and cultural icons' (p. 3) that serve as reminders of their sense of belonging and cultural identity. This act of remembering and drawing upon certain elements of a cultural past, according to Hall, 'offer[s] a way of imposing an imaginary coherence on the experience of dispersal and fragmentation, which is the history of all enforced diasporas' (2003, p. 224).

For diasporic Iranian communities, poetry, it seems, is one of the elements upon which they draw to historicize and maintain their sense of identity. Although diasporic Iranian communities are made up of people of varying religious, political, and ethnic backgrounds and beliefs, many choose Persian poetry as a shared element through which to maintain and connect with their historical past and others of Iranian background. In fact so important is poetry for diasporic Iranians that when Zohreh Sullivan conducted a survey with a large number of Iranian diaspora about what it means to be Iranian and the elements that constitute their sense of identity, in every response except two, there were 'recurring references to the love of poetry "essential" to Iranian identity' (2001, p. 17).



For diasporic Iranian writers in English, there are several ways in which they draw upon this literature to maintain a connection to their historical past. One of the most manifest ways is the transference of verses or stanzas of Persian poetry into their work in English. In line with the Persian discourse of communication, in which poetry is infused, it is common practice in Iranian prose books that the author opens his or her book with a verse or poem that is reflective of the intention or content of the book. Looking at the body of work by diasporic Iranian writers in English, many seem to have maintained this tradition. For example, Afschineh Latifi, begins her memoir *Even After All This Time* (2005), with a poem by Hafiz:

Even after all this time  
The sun never says to the Earth  
“You owe me”  
Look at what happens with a love like that  
It lights the whole sky.

Her memoir draws from this poem to compare her mother’s unconditional love to that of the sun of which Hafiz speaks. The memoir, thus, is a tribute to her mother who had selflessly and without complaint raised her three children by herself in exile after her husband had been executed by the regime at the dawn of the revolution.

Similarly, Sattareh Farman-Farmanian, begins every chapter of her book *Daughter of Persia* (1996) with a borrowed reflective poem about the theme of each chapter from masters of Persian poetry. When describing the ‘Fall of the Reza Shah,’ for instance, she begins with a couplet by Sa’adi: ‘When a man prospers, people sing his praise / When he falls, they trample his neck.’ In a chapter about her ‘Setting Out’ from Iran as a young woman she borrows the words of Khayyam to explain her feelings: ‘Strange, is it not, that of the myriads who / Before us passed the door of darkness through / Not one returns to tell us of the Road / Which to discover we must travel too.’ And she also draws from the words of Sa’adi to console herself about her migration and her need to adapt to her new country in ‘The Land at the End of the Earth’ which she begins with, ‘Do not give your heart to one mistress / nor your loyalty to a single place / for countless are mistresses / and extensive are lands and seas.’

Gholam-Reza Sabri-Tabrizi, too, begins his book, *Iran: A Child's Story, A Man's Experience*, which according to him is 'a bridge between a child's memories and a man's experience and between Eastern and Western cultures' (1989, p. 7), with these famous lines by Sa'di that speaks of the universality of human experiences:

The sons of Adam are limbs of each other  
Having been created of one essence.  
When the calamity of time afflicts one limb [member]  
The other limbs [members] cannot remain at rest.  
If thou hast no sympathy for the troubles of others  
Thou art unworthy to be called by the name of man [human being].

Shirin Ebadi, the Iranian noble peace prize-winner, opens her memoir *Iran Awakening* (2006) with lines from Rumi that reflects the grandeur and universality of her work:

Sadness to me is the happiest time,  
When a shinning city rises from the ruins of my drunken mind.  
Those times when I'm silent and still as the earth,  
The thunder of my roars is heard across the universe.

Although there are numerous other examples of diasporic Iranian writers opening their prose with Persian poetry, the above examples demonstrate the variety of ways that they draw on elements of the poetry to express their sentiments. This kind of engagement allows the author to maintain a connection to their Iranian identity through reference to traditional Persian modes of expression, despite the distance and language difference.

What has made Sufi Persian poetry particularly appealing for diasporic Iranians, as an element through which to maintain a connection to their past, is the fact that this tradition does not shackle itself to any form of nationalistic sentimentality. This is particularly important for Iranians abroad, many of whom have been forced to leave the country due to disagreements with the current regime, and who, in their expression and maintenance of their Iranian identity want to disassociate themselves with the current nation state of Iran. This is why as Mostofi observes, 'the Iranian diasporic consciousness constitutes an identity based on a "historical consciousness" where some valorize cultural traits and cultural cohesion through poetry, history, and geography' (2003, p. 688). That Iranians want to maintain a sense of connection

and identity to their cultural heritage rather than to the nation state is nothing new in Iranian history. As scholars like Shahrokh Meskoob argue, maintenance of a connection to a cultural heritage for Iranians began with the Arab invasion, where the most important source of their pre-Islamic history was ‘remembered, imagined, and reconstructed, for the most part, in the mytho-historical narratives, such as Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* (Book of Kings)’ (1992, p. 10). Although Meskoob puts forth this argument about maintaining an identity in Iran in the face of Arab invasion through reference to cultural elements, other scholars such as Mostofi argue that the Islamic revolution caused a similar situation for many Iranian immigrants who have also maintained ‘a diasporic nationalism—for the purpose of maintaining their cultural heritage’ (2003, p. 688). Out of this diasporic experience, however, came a new ‘remembered, imagined, reconstructed mytho-historical narrative’ of the past and the meaning of culture. As Mostofi puts it,

The trauma of the Islamic revolution and subsequent immigration has left Iranian immigrants nostalgic for a homeland that no longer exists, for a constant regeneration of "the way things were," and for a construction of an identity that not only incorporates their past lives and histories but also represents the experiences of their new lives. (p. 688)

With Persian Sufi poetry being one of the most significant tropes for pre-revolutionary nostalgia, one of the mytho-historical narratives that defines Iranian cultural identity, it is no wonder then that diasporic Iranian writers draw upon it to maintain their sense of cultural identity. Added to this, there is the fact that Persian Sufi poetry also provides a language with which many diasporic Iranians could express their nostalgic sensibilities. As Nasr (1999) argues, one of the distinguishing elements of Persian Sufi poetry is its highly nostalgic sentimentality. Although in Persian Sufi poetry nostalgia refers to the concept of ‘divine nostalgia,’ which expresses a desire for the beloved, or God, its expressions, as J.T.P de Bruijn points out, are ‘derived ultimately from emotions experienced in the human psyche in the situation of its earthly existence’ (1997, p. 51). This means that this love is normally depicted through physical allegory and symbols, which were and continue to be a shared point of identification among Iranians. Among these a physical separation from a home or loved one, for instance, symbolizes the separation of man from God. It is this element of Sufi Persian poetry that speaks directly to the sentiments of many Iranians in diaspora. This is why many diasporic Iranian writers

draw upon its nostalgic elements and allegories to express their own nostalgic sentimentalities for the way things were.

One of the most common ways for diasporic Iranian writers in English to engage with this nostalgic sentimentality, it seems, is through a direct reference to some famous lines of Persian poetry. Although there are numerous Sufi poets whose memorable words of divine nostalgia are often quoted and referred to by Iranians across social, religious and ethnic divide, among them, the first section of Rumi's *Masnavi*, known as the *Nei Nameh* or *The Tale of the Reed*, is by far the most known and widely quoted. It reads,

Listen to the song of the reed,  
How it wails with the pain of separation:  
“Ever since I was taken from my reed bed  
My woeful song has caused men and women to weep.  
I seek out those whose hearts are torn by separation  
For only they understand the pain of this longing.  
Whoever is taken away from his homeland  
Yearns for the day he will return.  
In every gathering, among those who are happy or sad,  
I cry with the same lament.  
Everyone hears according to his own understanding,  
None has searched for the secrets within me.  
My secret is found in my lament  
But an eye or ear without light cannot know it.”<sup>4</sup>

These verses, which vary in translation, embody the very essence of Sufi and mystic Persian poetry and its axis of divine nostalgia and longing for the beloved. According to Firoozeh Papan-Matin, these lines speak of ‘the account of the separation of the lover, personified as the reed, from the Fatherland, the reed-bed, where it had belonged in the presence of God, the beloved’ (2003, p. 246). As such they represent a spiritual longing for returning to the maker. However, beyond an allegorical and spiritual realm, these verses also refer to the more concrete realm of physical and emotional experiences of separation from one's roots. Thus, the

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<sup>4</sup> There are various translations of these verses. This version is by Jonathan Star qtd in Reza Rumi's blog <http://www.razarumi.com/2007/09/29/the-song-of-the-reed-on-rumis-birth-anniversary>.

painful laments of the reed could be read as the displaced person's cries for their beloved homeland.

These lines, repeatedly and effusively sung and recited at various diasporic Iranian events, have also been lines that some writers draw upon, in various ways, to express their nostalgic sentimentality. For example, Manouchehr Parvin in *Avicenna and I* (1996) directly quotes these lines to express his character's nostalgic yearnings. As the novel begins Professor Pirooz, a middle aged Iranian academic, living in New York, is facing a mid-life identity crisis. His loving partner has just been murdered tragically in the basement laundry of their New York apartment. Yearning for love, and feeling spiritually disconnected, Pirooz begins to feel nostalgic for his native land of Iran. He complains about his condition to everyone he sees but no one understands him. To alleviate his pain, he wishes to return to Iran. But at the peak of the war between Iran and Iraq, however, Pirooz is at first reluctant to travel back. However, through a series of unexpected events, and as the result of spiritual callings in his dreams by the famed 1<sup>st</sup> century Persian philosopher-physician Avicenna, Pirooz finds himself in the Iranian city of Hamedan where Avicenna is buried. Yet, he still finds himself unhappy. Having been called in his dream to visit the mausoleum at a certain hour of the night by Avicenna himself, Pirooz takes a cab to reach the destination of his calling. Sitting in the cab, in the middle of night, to attend what seems to be an imaginary rendezvous, Pirooz has a moment of uncertainty. At that very moment, however, the taxi driver without any prior pretence starts reciting the verses of *Ney Nameh*. Hearing these words, Pirooz suddenly finds the courage to continue his journey. Consequently, it is at the mausoleum that very night that he meets the love of his life. Alongside her, he stays in his homeland happily, the very land for which he was yearning. Eventually he finds spiritual fulfilment through his relationship with his wife and through the customs in his homeland. By the time the book ends, the happy couple have a child, Avicenna reincarnated.

The fact that all of this comes to Pirooz upon hearing the most famous and traditional lines of Persian Sufi poetry highlights the significance of this tradition for the Iranian soul. But that all the changes that take place in him lead to the creation of a child, especially one that carries the soul of one of Iran's most revered intellectuals, points to the fact this tradition is not merely about looking

back nostalgically. Rather, it is also about offering hope for the future, a future in which traditions will live on. This offers a new mytho-historical narrative for diasporic Iranians, a new utopian discursive space of expression ‘for a construction of an identity that not only incorporates their past lives and histories but also represents the experiences of their new lives’ (Mostofi 2003, p. 688).

However, while Parvin demonstrates this nostalgic sentimentality through direct reference to specific lines of Persian poetry, other writers draw upon certain significant tropes of this poetic tradition to express themselves. Although diasporic Iranian writers in English use a vast variety of tropes, one of the most recurring elements has been the garden. The garden is a significant and special element in Persian Sufi poetry, reference to which permeates across the body of work by various poets. We see, for instance, the garden depicted as a setting in the twelfth century poet Nezami’s *Haft Peykar*, as well as in his romantic *Layli o Majnun*, and *Khosrow o Shirin*. Similarly, we see the garden and various references to it abundantly across Rumi’s body of work. Significantly, Sa’adi names two of his books of poetry *Bustan* (The orchard) and *Gulestan* (The Rose Garden).

In all of these works, although the garden might be a physical setting, it is also an allegorical space referring to man’s relationship with the divine. If we recall, one of the distinguishing elements of Sufi Persian poetry is its allegorical reference to known earthly physical elements to connect the reader to hidden aspects of their being and the universe. As Julie Scott Meisami observes in her seminal essay ‘Allegorical Gardens in the Persian Poetic Tradition: Nezami, Rumi, Hafez,’ for Persian Sufi poets, ‘allegorical imagery was the natural result of the need to find a language through which to express the inexpressible, and in it, allegory is a stylistic means for the depiction of spiritual *invisibilia* through the portrayal of the *visibilia* of nature’ (1985, p. 245). In this depiction gardens were chosen because as lived in and experienced part of nature, they provided the poet and the reader with an understood earthly point of reference to depict the invisible. This is so because as Meisami observes,

Through the gardens he builds (in physical or in mental space) man expresses not only his conception of and his longing to recapture that ideal state, but also his perception of his relationship with nature: of the design of the cosmos and of his own place in it. The earthly garden functions both as an object of man’s contemplation and his setting for important human

activities; it differs from a natural landscape by virtue of being an artefact, constructed according to design (a fact no less true of literary gardens than of real ones) as well as by the frequent opposition of the garden world to the wilderness beyond it (gloomy forest or desert waste), the abode of forces hostile to man and to order. In proportion as its design and constituent elements are seen as reflecting principles of cosmic order and beauty, the garden itself becomes an ideal place wherein such principles may be observed; garden poems, as well, function as places of learning and discover as well as of recreation and delight. (p. 230)

References to garden resonate especially well with Iranians because of its historical significance in ancient Iranian culture, which predates even the Islamic invasion. According to Meisami, the importance of the garden, both as a lived in, experienced, space, and as a space that reflects an ideal state of metaphysical connection between man and the divine, dates back to the time of Zoroastrianism. Elaborate gardens built at that time, were not only spaces of leisure, but also ‘enjoyed a deep symbolic significance’ (p. 231). Referred to as ‘pairidaeza,’ from which the word Paradise was later derived, the symbolic association of the garden also heavily influenced Islamic thought and its lyrical tradition. However, within the Islamic tradition, the depiction of the garden is far more prominent in Persian verse than in Arabic. This pertinence, as Meisami concludes, has to do with ‘the survival of pre-Islamic Iranian attitude toward nature and the garden’ (p. 231).

However, it is not only in history that Iranians have had a special affinity for the garden. For most Iranians, until recently when the country’s economic instability started pushing people into high-rise apartment blocks, gardens have played a central role in their lives. Many Iranians remember growing up in the safety of the walled garden of their homes, plucking flowers, climbing trees, and looking out onto the hostile streets. Many remember sitting around idyllic afternoons in the garden, watching the stars appear as the world got ready to rest. Others remember sleeping under the starry skies in the security of their garden, wondering what lay above them in the heavens. Since the garden has been such an integral part of Iranian life, both as a physical lived-in and remembered space, and as an allegorical reflection in Persian Sufi poetry, one can argue it is an important element of Iranian cultural identity.

This is why for many diasporic Iranians the absence of the garden is a significant reminder of their diasporic life and a symbol of their loss of identity. In her memoir

*Lipstick Jihad*, Moaveni demonstrates this sense of loss associated with the absence of the garden in her own diasporic family. She writes,

The trauma of dislocation varied, of course, by generation and gender. [...] But the loss everyone felt together, among the most acute, was the loss of gardens. Trees, flowers, the garden courtyard occupy a hallowed space in Iranian culture. [...] In California, the absence of gardens seemed the bitterest part of our reconstructed lives. (2005, p. 272)

To compensate for this loss, she recalls how both her grandfather and father obsessed over trying to recreate a garden, even if it was merely a patch of green with some vegetables. When her grandfather's garden did not manifest as he had envisioned, she recalls, he turned to poetry until his only means of communication gradually became Persian poetry that he carried from memory, poetry that connected him to his Iranian identity and past.

It is no wonder, then, that within the body of work by diasporic Iranian writers, references to gardens, particularly through the allegorical language of Sufi Persian poetry, are also present to describe the difficulties of migratory life. Tara Bahrapour, for instance, opens her memoir, *To See and See Again* (1999), with the following garden poem by Rumi:

Outside, the freezing desert night.  
This other night inside grows warm, kindling.  
Let the landscape be covered with thorny crust.  
We have a soft garden in here.  
The continents blasted,  
Cities and little towns, everything  
Become a scorched, blackened ball.  
The news we hear is full of grief for that future,  
But the real news inside here  
Is there's no news at all.

This poem forms a base for her ensuing chapters, where she draws upon its words as her titles, to metaphorically follow her father's migration. The first section called 'Soft Garden,' traces her father's family history back to his grandfather and the feudal farming system in Iran, up to his departure for America. Like Rumi's Soft Garden, the ancestral land is safe and privileged by wealth. As she recalls her father's description, 'nothing ever today could be as good as those early days [in the



farm]' (p. 14). The next section, entitled 'The Landscape,' however, contrasts the safety and security of the 'Soft Garden,' and the ancestral homeland. Here she follows her family's difficult, and weathered life in America as her hybrid family of Iranian father and American mother try to make ends meet. In the 'landscape' unlike in the 'soft garden' of the ancestral homeland, life is tough for her father and family. The last section of the book, 'The Garden Again,' marks her revisiting Iran years later as a young adult, where she is reacquainted with the customs, landscapes and rituals of her ancestral homeland.

In expressing their nostalgic sentimentality towards their homeland and their childhood through garden imagery, however, some choose to write their own garden verses. In his poem, 'To the Aged Mulberry Branch,' for instance, Esma'il Kho'i represents his nostalgic memory of the garden of his childhood through a single memory of a mulberry tree.

A long string trails  
To a torn kite  
                    Hanging  
From a branch of an aged mulberry tree  
Whose afternoon umbrella of shade  
Spans over the hubbub of the barefoot children of the alley  
  
My goodness!  
My entire childhood—  
                    Summer-like—  
Caught in the snapshot of this memory!  
Look:  
Dusty earth,  
            Dusty sky,  
                    Dusty sun  
And dusty children  
Picking up dusty mulberries  
                    With dusty hands  
                            From dusty earth  
                                    To blow on  
  And place in their mouths!

And a torn kite  
On the branch of an aged mulberry tree...  
(2008, p. 49)

Kho'i's poem expresses the duality of emotions for diasporic people, caught between nostalgic memories of childhood and a desire to move beyond those memories in the new country. For Kho'i, an exilic poet living in America, the mulberry tree expresses his most nostalgic memories of an idyllic life, an image that sums up his childhood identity. However, in telling about this space, the narrator is not involved in all the playfulness. We know that he is not a child any more eating dusty mulberries. We feel this through the image of the kite, which gives us a sense of separation, a lack of intimacy with the space, with almost a desire to fly away. Yet, the kite, like the poet, is torn, caught 'on the branch of an aged mulberry tree,' rooted, unable to leave that memory in the past and move forward.

As Mostofi tells us, 'immigrants maintain a longing for their homeland and a desire to either return or preserve their nostalgia as a form of identification' (2003, p. 682). As demonstrated so far, for diasporic Iranian writers, elements of Persian poetry and Sufi literature, and their various interpretations play a significant role in maintenance of that shared sense of cultural identity. The belief that cultural identity is usually rooted in a shared unchanging historical past, and the nostalgia associated with it, is what Hall argues is the most common understanding of what actually constitutes people's sense of cultural identity. Migrants often associate with these unchanging natures of cultural identity because as Hall argues, they 'offer a way of imposing an imaginary coherence on the experience of dispersal and fragmentation, which is the history of all enforced diasporas' (2003, p. 345).

However, neither Hall nor all Iranian writers agree with the unchanging nature and elements of cultural identity as something rooted in the past, as the only definition of cultural identity. Another approach to understanding cultural identity is as something rooted in the past but with a changing nature that will reflect the complexities of present and future realities. Indeed, as we will see in the concluding section of this chapter, many Iranian writers have drawn upon those seemingly unchanging elements of Persian Sufi poetry, but transformed them to reconstruct and negotiate a new discursive space of expression that is reflective of their current and future diasporic cultural identities.

## Reflecting Diaspora

Aside from the belief of the unchanging nature of cultural identity, Hall argues that there is a second related view in understanding cultural identity. This perspective as much as acknowledging our relationship with the past is also about accommodating and reflecting 'what we have become.' As he writes, 'cultural identity, in this second sense, is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'. It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture' (2003, p. 225). Although cultural identities have histories, he believes like everything else historical, they too undergo transformation so that,

far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous "play" of history, culture and power. Far from being grounded in a mere 'recovery' of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which, when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past. (p. 225)

This is also the case for Iranian writers' engagement with elements of Persian Sufi poetry. Although for many Iranians, Persian Sufi poetry and some of its distinguishable elements form a central aspect of Iranian cultural identity, one upon which many draw to maintain a sense of historicized identity, for some, however, these elements taken in their traditional sense, do not accommodate the complexity of the diasporic Iranian experience and sense of cultural identity. If we look at Persian Sufi poetry, despite its allegorical imagery, it is highly stylized and formulaic, written mostly by elite male, educated members of the society. As such, it is usually very exclusive in who and what it represents. This is why, while aspects of it, like its nostalgic sensibilities and its appeal for reaching ideal states of life, might respond to the condition of diasporic Iranian writers today, this literature, as a whole, does not have the flexibility to represent the diversity of Iranian voices and certainly not the complexities of the current realities of diasporic Iranian life.

That classical Persian poetry, in its traditional form, does not respond to the current sensibilities of Iranian identity, however, is not a phenomenon solely associated with the current condition of Iranian diaspora. This discontent dates back to Iran's encounter with modernity and Iranian writers' realization of the inability of traditional Persian verse to reflect modern Iranian sensibilities. While the complexities of the encounter of Persian literature with modernity, however,

requires a separate study of its own, what is most important to note for the purpose of this study, is that modernist Iranian writers were much inspired by the Western literary traditions of modernism and early postcolonial theories of the time. For pioneering modernist poets, like Nima Yusij who introduced free verse to Persian literature in the 1950s, and for prose writers like Sadeq Hedayat who wrote the first modernist prose in Persian a decade earlier, this desire to adapt, decentre, and challenge traditional forms to reflect something of the new Iranian experience, was very much inspired by contemporary Western theories that spoke of challenging the dominant modes of power and representation. But, what is interesting to note about Iran's literary encounter with Western modernity is its self-consciousness. Even writers like Hedayat did not totally succumb to Western traditions of expression and were wary of an absolute break with traditions that had for so many centuries defined Iranian identity. What these modernist Iranian writers and poets aimed to achieve was a balance between traditional forms of representation, combined with modern elements that were reflective of current Iranian identity.

The negotiation between tradition and modernity in recent Persian literature is interesting because there is a similar struggle at play in the works of some first generation diasporic Iranian writers in English. If we look at some of the work by these writers, there is a clear tendency to draw upon traditional elements of Persian literature. Yet, it is also clear that in this reference, there is an adaptation, a challenge, which reconstructs its dominant elements and transforms it to an ideal utopian discursive space that speaks of the issues concerning the present and the future of diasporic Iranian identities. Their work, here, is like postcolonial writers who draw upon, challenge, and transform existing literary traditions to reconstruct a new discursive space of expression that is reflective of their new realities.

There are various ways that diasporic Iranian writers are challenging, even critiquing Persian literary tradition, to make it reflect their own current condition. While the next chapter will examine some of the responses of Iranian writers to this tradition, for instance, through the representation of women's narratives and voices—which is inherently missing in traditional Persian verse—or even adapting and reframing the sense of nationalistic sentimentality that was later applied to Sufi Persian poetry through the imagery of the mother, this chapter pays particular attention to how diasporic Iranian writers are adapting and transforming the Persian

poetic form to reconstruct and negotiate their current diasporic realities. Adaptation of Persian poetic forms, which has always been praised for its meticulous structure, therefore, is an act against its unifying dominant structure. In a way, as it is with postcolonial writers, this act challenges dominant modes of expression and emphasizes the diasporic Iranian writers' 'need for a lively heterogeneity of styles and speaking positions in their work' (Boehmer 1995, p. 227).

To do this, Iranian writers have taken on different strategies. In her novella, *Heart's Desire* (1995) for instance, Nahid Rachlin adapts a well-known Persian poem into English prose to reflect contemporary diasporic issues. The novel begins with a quatrain from the 11<sup>th</sup> century Omar Khayyam's *Rubaiyat*:

Ah, Love! could thou and I with Fate conspire  
To grasp this sorry Scheme of Things entire,  
Would not we shatter it to bits—and then  
Re-mould it nearer to the Heart's Desire!

As the book begins, Karim, an Iranian man married to an American woman, Jennifer, has returned to Iran right after the revolution, with their young child for a visit. During this short stay, however, Karim begins to fall in love again with the landscape, culture and customs of his Iranian heritage where 'everything about the sights and sounds of Iran penetrated Karim deeply as if hollows had been carved inside him during the years of his absence and were now being filled' (57). Although his heart's desire is to stay in Iran permanently and use the skills that he has learnt in America for the betterment of his country, he is conflicted between his obligations to his job as a college professor, and his wife and child, the only elements in his life that have given him a sense of solid identity. But sometime into their stay, his entire sense of identity is suddenly shattered. First, at the height of the aftermath of the American hostage crisis, Karim is fired from his prestigious job in America. Then, when in search of a job in Iran, his marriage, too, suddenly, falls apart. When Karim and his uncle are out of town on business, Karim's mother takes his son to the city of Qom and enrolls him at a religious school without Jennifer's permission. Jennifer chases after them and sneaks her son away. However, with nowhere else to go, she turns to her son's young physician and upon his insistence she moves in with him and begins an affair. Ashamed and unable to stay in Iran, she quietly leaves the country with her son. But Karim, who has lost his passport,

cannot leave the country for at least six months until his new passport is reissued. During this time, their relationship collapses and they separate; Karim achieves his dream and remains in Iran.

Initially the connection between the opening poem and the content of the novel might not be clear. However, if we draw our attention back to the poem, one can argue that the book is indeed the poem that has been transformed into prose to reflect issues relevant to diasporic Iranian experiences today. As Dutton examines Khayyam's *Rubaiyat*, the body of work from which the opening quatrain of *Heart's Desire* is taken, 'indicate[s] a utopian vision of a better future, shaped by human agency' (p. 237). Drawing upon the indicated quatrain as an example, she concludes that 'The *Rubaiyat* does not present a description of the physical incarnation of the ideal place, but it does explore the relationship between the cultural aspects of social dreaming and nature, as well as the role of human agency, or free will, in the conception of the utopian vision' (p. 237).

Elaborating on Dutton's point it can be argued that it is this very element of the quatrain Rachlin draws upon and reconstructs in prose form that reflects the utopian desires of a diasporic Iranian man through Karim. While within the verses of the poem, there are no indications of what exactly that ideal place or what the heart's desires may be, in the novella, Rachlin transforms this ambiguity to one that reflects a diasporic person's desire to maintain a sense of attachment to his cultural roots and identity. As the novel begins, we realize that although Karim has established an American identity for himself, his real desire has always been to return to Iran after the completion of this education to help his countrymen. Yet, the course of life in America, particularly his job and family, had diverted him from attaining this dream. However, when things around him that prevent him from achieving his dream start to collapse, he is able, as the poem indicates, to re-mould the situation to his Heart's Desire.

However, in transforming this quatrain to prose, Rachlin has done more than challenge traditional Persian verse to open up a new discursive space for the expression of diasporic Iranian realities. Written in English, it also has the potential to reconstruct the way diasporic Iranians are perceived by the members of their host country. As we already know, many diasporic Iranians were discriminated against after migration as the result of political tensions between Iran and the West. This

discrimination resulted in dominantly negative descriptions of Iranians and consequently hampered their integration into their host societies. In *Heart's Desire*, too, Karim tells of the discrimination he had faced in the early days following the revolution and the hostage crisis. However, the novella operates like a Persian Sufi poem and transforms the readers' perception of the reality of events. If we recall, one of the distinguishing elements of Persian Sufi poetry has been its transformative quality on the reader's perception. As James Roy King tells us in his essay 'Religious and Therapeutic Elements in Sufi Teaching Stories,' in mystic Sufi tales, the author 'retells familiar stories and meditates at length on their meaning' (1988, p. 222). These tales often operate by calling our attention to structural realities, and according to King 'they also challenge normal thought patterns, defy cultural proprieties, and suggest that problems can be approached from surprising angles' (p. 227). As such, King argues that the structural narratives of a Sufi poem is much more productive than one could imagine, in the way that it gives the readers much more than they had anticipated.

*Heart's Desire* operates in the same way as Sufi Persian poetry by challenging the expected structural realities of events, particularly for a Western reader. Although *Heart's Desire* is about Karim's story, it is told through the dual perspectives of Jennifer and Karim. In this structure, it is Jennifer's perspective that gives us much more than we expect. Throughout the novel, we hear Jennifer's story, her sense of alienation in Iran as a foreign woman. We also come to sympathize with her as a woman who has made the mistake of having an affair but who now has no way of turning back. We feel her sense of hopelessness and confusion. But, in a self-conscious manner, the novel seems to almost set Jennifer up in Iran to mirror Karim's condition in America as she gradually comes to understand some of his feelings reflected in her own situation in Iran. After the confusion and affair that followed her son's enrolment at the religious school in Qom, Jennifer has an epiphany:

[Karim] was unhappy in the United States and she would be unhappy living in Iran. At the beginning when she married Karim she had been delighted to immerse herself in his culture, but now in Iran it was as if she were impersonating someone else, just being here, conforming to the rules. And Karim had never become a true American, or his sense of identity could not be so easily threatened in a crisis. She *felt* for the first time, what before she had only understood in a cerebral way, what Karim had been

through in a culture alien to him in so many ways. Tears rolled down her cheeks. She sat at the edge of the bed and breathed deeply a few times, trying to calm herself. (p. 165)

One of the elements of Sufi poetry, as King suggests, is its emphasis on moving beyond assumptions and hypothesis in ‘confronting reality.’ This means that instead of theories and assumptions, Sufi poetry and the Sufi path often tries to direct the truth-seeker into experiencing a situation with all of their being. King believes that such ‘contact with reality can be healing and transforming,’ and it is one of the main emphases of any Sufi tale or poem (1988, p. 232). Viewed through this tradition, in *Heart’s Desire* Rachlin sets up Jennifer so that she confronts the reality of life in Iran, as Karim would perceive it in America. While, in this encounter, Jennifer herself is transformed about her own impressions of Karim, and can now easily accept his situation, her contact with reality also transforms the Western readers, who identify with Jennifer’s situation, and thus through her, understand Karim. Such transformation is significant in how Iranian identity is perceived in the West. Through understanding Jennifer’s point of view, they can no longer label Karim through historically imposed stereotypes.

While Rachlin transforms Persian poetry into prose to construct a new discursive space for the reconstruction and negotiation of a diasporic Iranian identity, other writers take up the task of transforming Iranian poetry and poets into a new setting to reflect a new set of realities altogether. Manoucher Parvin’s *Dardedel: Rumi, Hafez & Love in New York* (2003), is one such book. A novel-in-verse it tells the story of a recurring character in his other books, an Iranian migrant academic, Professor Pirooz, who fed up by his life, travels from New York to Phoenix and wanders into the desert by himself in the middle of the night, hoping to die. As he pours his heart out to nobody, two cactus plants engage him in conversation and they happen to be the reincarnations of the poets Hafez and Rumi. The two cactus poets save Pirooz and urge him to go back to New York, where they reappear in different forms as different people and continue to engage with Pirooz.

*Dardedel*, beginning with its very title, is a story that reflects the deep-seated importance of poetry in the maintenance of the Iranian identity in diaspora. The word ‘dardedel’ as Parvin tells us in the introduction to the book is a Persian word which translated into English means ‘a heart-to-heart talk, and so much more than



talk.’ *Darde* means ‘ache of.’ *Del* means ‘heart.’ ‘But put together they mean *one* and *another* sharing the most private, sincere and important things,’ which ‘unchains us from the burdens of our isolation and loneliness. By uniting our soul with another soul, our deepest thoughts and feelings are set free, without the shame of judgement or the fear of betrayal. It is this absolute trust that makes dardedel so special and sacred’ (p. 5). In this case, the problem that bothers Pirooz, about which he needs to have a heart to heart talk, is the problem that bothers most Iranian migrants: displacement and lack of connection and hostility between his home and host cultures that place him in an awkward social situation. It is these issues that Pirooz shouts out in the middle of the night in the desert:

“I am a refugee tonight,  
With two new friends whose arms stretch to the unknown  
Ask me not why I’m in this otherworldly place alone  
Thinking of death—my death  
Ask me not about cause and consequences  
Or other imponderable questions.  
But ask me what I want and I will tell you that I am starved  
As you are perhaps starved, to be loved and listened to,  
Just like the canaries who scream from their fancy cages,  
Just like the homeless who scream from their cardboard boxes.”  
“My dear saguaros,” Pirooz confesses,  
I need to dardedel with you tonight.  
[...]  
“so now listen to me,” Pirooz begs,  
“As you would listen to a sombre cello:  
My home has disappeared behind years of exile,  
I can barely mourn for losses I can barely recall.  
My mother tongue has been conquered, word by word by English,  
So that I have neither one language nor two, but two halves.  
My two homes are at war, tearing my mind and heart apart.  
I am a teacher dedicated to teaching truth,  
Yet I am afraid to teach the truths I know,  
For fear I may lose my welcome, even my job  
So I must teach the Norm, the damn Norm,

As if it was the word of God.  
I must dissimulate, dissimulate, dissimulate,  
To no end, until I am a foreigner even to myself,  
Until I'm an accent even to myself.  
That's why I've come to your desert, my dear saguaros,  
To die and be myself." (p. 15-16)

What saves Pirooz from hopelessness is the surprising response that he gets from the two cacti who reveal themselves as Pirooz's revered poets Rumi and Hafez. In the two now displaced poets, Pirooz finds his companions to dardedel with:

And so they dardedel,  
This mortal man who wants to leave this world,  
These two wise spirits stuck in hot American sand,  
Uprooted and reborn, like so many Persian immigrants in exile (p. 19).

After a night of dardedel with the great Persian poets, having been convinced by them to live for at least another year, Pirooz leaves the desert with a hopeful perspective on life. Upon his return to New York, he sets about learning new things and changing his lifestyle to live a different and fuller life. Pirooz's regeneration of hope through an encounter with two of the greatest Persian poets reveals the significance of Persian poetry in revitalizing a sense of identity for the Iranian diaspora. Parvin himself tells us in the introduction of the book that 'Persians feel at home in poems.' Thus Pirooz's salvation through an encounter with the masters of Persian poetry, who in their language of divine nostalgia, understand his laments of separation from his beloved homeland, further emphasizes the ability of Persian poetry to accommodate Iranians wherever they may be, particularly if they are suffering from some sort of nostalgia.

Although Parvin demonstrates this diasporic salvation through Pirooz, writing this book has also been therapeutic for him as the author. In the introduction Parvin tells us about his own life and the emptiness he felt despite his success as what he calls an 'accented' academic in America. He reveals 'as I climbed the academic ladder I felt emptier at each rung. Emptiness, like a cancer of the soul, invaded me, established roots in me, and grew in me.' The antidote to this emptiness, he finds in both writing and reading poetry, and as he tells us,

this book [...] is my dardedel with you [...] [it] has been a healing effort—a dardedel free of all literary restrictions, personal fears and pretensions, a dardedel where science and spirituality clash, where modernity and history clash, where the soul of man is mended, if only on paper temporarily. (p. 7)

Writing in verse, as he tells us ‘in honor of Hafez and Rumi and the other epic poets of my homeland,’ this book becomes his way of saving himself through poetry, a way for accepting his own diasporic condition. He ends his introduction with a poem, which reflects the essence of the book as a dardedel,

There is a pinch of Eastern culture and mysticism  
A dash of tenderness resurrected from industrial ashes,  
A touch of science and technology related to the fate of man,  
Drops of liquid soul from Hafez and Rumi,  
Blended with the love story of all love stories,  
Into a poem of poems, and,  
I pray, a dardedel of self-realization between you and me. (p. 10)

While on this level, *Dardedel* reveals the significance of poetry for the Iranian soul, on another level the book is making an attempt to revitalize Iranian poetry and poets by recontextualizing them as more accessible to modern Iranian readers in diaspora. When Pirooz first accidentally encounters Hafez and Rumi, as cacti in the desert, they have been made redundant and literally deserted by the modern world. Despite their wisdom, the two poets sleep all day and count stars at night to keep busy as they recall their own poetry. Their redundancy in the American desert reflects their condition and accessibility as poets for many Iranians, particularly second-generation migrants who are not familiar with the Iranian culture. But the encounter between the poets and Pirooz changes the situation. After Pirooz’s encounter with the deserted poets, their perspective of life changes. As they realize the healing effect that they have had on Pirooz the poets feel intrigued by things that are going on around them in the modern world, of which they are unaware. Hafez, who in his life never travelled outside his city of Shiraz, desires to experience the world, and decides to go to New York:

I do respect the old wisdom, the old reasonings and answers.  
But man faces new questions—so he must invent new answers!  
.....Hafez shouts. “I want to go to New York!”  
[...]

“I know it and I know it that Pirooz needs me in person.  
Our old books may be of no help to him any more.  
And, I confess, I need him in person, too, Rumi Jaan.  
How much can I gain by reciting the Koran or my own *Divan*,  
Neither containing the knowledge of modern times?  
Even in death I refuse to be bound by irrelevance  
Or the glorified past!  
I know it and I know it that I must go where life has journeyed,  
Where science and art and faiths and law have journey  
While we stood still, our feet bound in sand and death.  
I must go before I cannot go, and as Pirooz has said,  
I must wake up before I can never wake up.” (p. 39)

Soon after these words, Hafez is transported to New York as a taxi driver to experience city life, to learn new things and keep Pirooz company. Rumi, left alone in the desert, eventually joins them. The surreal reincarnation of great Persian poets into taxi-drivers and various modern day New Yorkers, challenges the very notions of classical Iranian literature as an undisputable marker of Iranian cultural identity. Not able to fit into this modern world with their own ancient systems and philosophies, the poets soon adapt the new culture of the times. Although they continue to write poetry, their poetry is in line with the issues and concerns of the modern era. Rumi, for instance, begins to rap and through that he introduces himself and the poetry of his past life. Such sudden change in the great poet's attitude and styles points towards a necessity of breaking free from those unchangeable traditions and ideas that have bound us, formed our identity and prevented us from integration, even if it means having a modern take on classical Persian poetry that is reflective of our time and condition. This modern take on Persian Sufi poetry, reflects the needs for change in traditional modes of thought in order to accommodate new realities.

In transforming Persian Sufi poetry and poets into a modern context, Parvin is doing more than simply challenging traditional perception of Persian literature and opening up a new discursive space reflecting the diasporic Iranian experience. Parvin's transformation operates as a decolonizing apparatus for the way Iranians and Iranian culture have been perceived within Western culture. By physically transporting deserted Iranian poets and poetry into mainstream American life, and

even integrating them completely into the culture, Parvin is centralizing the marginalized aspect of Persian poets and poetry as a significant aspect of cultural identity for the Western reader. This is an important step in reconstructing and negotiating diasporic Iranian identities within their Western context. Although poetry is such a significant aspect of Iranian cultural identity, its importance has often been ignored and underrepresented in the mainstream representations of Iranian culture in the West. Centralizing poetry, as an important part of Iranian cultural identity, for a Western audience, allows for the opening up of a space for the reconstruction and negotiation of a new diasporic Iranian identity, one which replaces the historically imposed images of the exotic and terrorist.

In doing this, however, Parvin is not alone. Many Iranian writers are aware of the need to centralize this aspect of Iranian culture and have made a point of bringing to the fore, and sharing aspects of Persian literary tradition. Fatemeh Keshavarz, for instance, has dedicated her entire memoir to this task. In her memoir, *Jasmine and Stars: Reading More than Lolita in Tehran* (2007), Keshavarz self-consciously sums up her life in a literary-memoir as a means of reconstructing the Iranian identity in diaspora. She outlines the reasons for writing her memoir in the first few pages through an ancient universally known story recounted by Rumi. She recalls the tale where an elephant is brought into a city at night where no one has seen one before. The townspeople are insistent to know what this creature is. So, they begin to feel their way around in the dark. Each touches one part of the elephant's large body, reducing their understanding of the animal to their minimal and partial encounter in the dark. Rumi, according to Keshavarz, concludes the tale by saying "if they each had a candle, they would all be looking at the same beast" (p. 1). Keshavarz soon draws a parallel between this tale and how the Middle East, particularly Iran, is viewed in the West. She believes, particularly, after 9/11 people in the West, as a 'matter of life or death,' want to know about the Middle East. In this attempt, like the townspeople in the dark, people reach out to anyone, 'tourists' 'scholars' and particularly 'eyewitness narratives' with the hope of learning anything they can about the Middle East. But the problem is that most of these views, like each person's interpretation of the elephant, is partial and 'the feel-in-the-dark method of describing life in Iran [...] hampers the critical ability to question the narrow and slanted vision provided by the popular media' (p. 7).

In her memoir, Keshavarz hopes to shed some light on some important elements of Iranian culture that are missing in the existing narratives about Iran but which form Iranian identity in diaspora. Through an 'in depth critical understanding' of literature about Iran, which claim to provide an insiders' account into Iranian life and culture but which in reality she believes are like 'tapestry or mosaics' with holes or missing pieces, she hopes to create 'an alternative approach for learning about an unfamiliar culture' (p. 2). What she feels is missing in this tapestry of narratives, particularly, is a representation of the rich and ancient literary culture that shapes every aspect of Iranian life and identity but which has been underrepresented in many tales about Iran, particularly in those written by some popular diasporic Iranian writers. Thus, Keshavarz's alternative approach is to fill in the gaps and to introduce this element of Iranian culture through a 'literary and cultural analysis' with the hope to 'plant the seeds of interest in learning about aspects of Persian and Muslim life not yet known to most American readers' (7).

One of the ways in which Keshavarz fills this gap is through the representation of the importance of literature in her own life as a typical Iranian woman. Thus, every chapter that narrates significant events in her life is told through a literary anecdote that not only demonstrates the importance of literature in forming her life, but also introduces different aspects of Iranian literature to the readers. For instance, she recalls how she and her father bonded over hours of reading and interpreting classical Persian poetry and how they drew on the expressions they read in the poems to communicate with other people. Through these personal accounts, she takes the chance to introduce readers to various classical Persian Sufi poets, explaining their poetry and significance in Iranian culture. But Keshavarz's explanation of Iranian literature is not limited to classical Persian literature for she also introduces various modern Iranian writers and poets and their importance in her life through similar stories. For example, she recalls how she met her best friend on the first day of high school when she walked into a new school to see her favourite poem by Forogh Farrokzad, one of the most controversial Iranian women poets, written on the chalkboard. The person who had copied the poem onto the chalkboard immediately becomes her friend. The love they both shared for poetry and Farrokzad forms the basis of their life long friendship. Here, once again Keshavarz uses this opportunity to introduce Farrokhzad as one of the most

important figures of modern Iranian literature known for her brave and controversial poems and admired by many women for her public amorous affairs at a time when most women dared not break strict social sexual taboos.

However, for Keshavarz the reference to the Iranian literary tradition is much more than a mere introductory lesson on Iranian literature and its significance on the lives of Iranian people. Rather, her engagement is also a critique of what she calls New Orientalist narratives which are ‘exaggerated and oversimplified at best and fully distorted at worst’ (p. 111), in their representation of life in the Middle East, particularly when it comes to the representation of Iranian women, culture and literature. Keshavarz announces this critical intention self-consciously early in the book by explaining ‘when speaking of meaningful instances in my personal experience, I add my literary/cultural analysis,’ focused ‘mostly on a harmful rhetoric infusing our modern popular culture through the lens of a New Orientalist narrative’ (p. 110). One of the examples that Keshavarz bases her criticism of New Orientalist narratives—as the title of her memoir also suggests—is on Azar Nafisi’s *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, a book that she believes presents the view that “‘we [Iranians] lived in a culture that denied any merit to literary work’” (Nafisi qtd in Keshavarz 2007, p. 19). Although, revolving around the healing power of (Western) literature for seven of Nafisi’s students over several years in a private book club, *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, ironically as Keshavarz argues, fails to acknowledge or reflect the importance of Iranian literature in the lives of ordinary Iranians, like the women who attended her book club. Instead, Keshavarz believes, it paints the picture that ‘all good things in the Muslim Middle East belong to the past [...] all that are left in the culture that once produced giants such as Attar [classical Persian Sufi poet] are domineering runts’ (p. 70). While, according to Keshavarz, the book does mention the names of great Iranian poets like Attar, they are portrayed as if ‘they are a thing of the past.’ Quoting Nafisi “‘there was such a teasing, playful quality to their words, such joy in the power of language to delight and astonish [...] I kept wondering: when did we lose that quality?’” Keshavarz puts forward her own response, ‘the answer is rather simple, we have not lost them’ (p. 70).

The works of people like Parvin and Keshavarz not only reveal that this literature is still alive and a significant aspect of Iranian cultural identity, but they also ensure that this aspect of Iranian culture lives on through the English literary tradition. By

entering the very tradition that had been used to formulate the Iranian identity in stereotypical images of the terrorist and exotic, they transform it. One of the most significant strategies of postcolonial resistance in challenging domineering representation, as we know, has been that it 'takes the dominant language and uses it to express the most deeply felt issues of post-colonial social experience' (Ashcroft 2001, p. 5). This form of expression 'becomes the key to transforming not only the imitator but the imitated' (p. 5). That Parvin's Rumi, for instance, begins to rap in English, the very language which has often been used earlier to discriminate against Professor Pirooz, transforms both elements of Persian literature and the landscapes of English literature. This is a significant point to note about this literature as it has the potential to open up new discursive spaces of expression and cultural exchange that are no longer bound by our limited historical perceptions. To put it in Ashcroft's words, 'the engagement of post-colonial writing is one which had transcultural consequences, that is, dialectic and circulating effects which have become a crucial feature of the world we experience today' (p. 5).

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has argued for the significance of Persian Sufi poetry as an important marker of Iranian cultural identity, and it has demonstrated how this tradition has also informed the works of diasporic Iranian writers in English. While it has examined how by drawing upon elements of Sufi Persian poetry, like its nostalgic sensibilities and the tropes of the garden, diasporic Iranian writers are maintaining a sense of historicized identity, it has also addressed the way this tradition has formed a basis upon which many draw to reconstruct and negotiate a new sense of diasporic identity for themselves. This chapter, particularly, touched upon the way this reconstruction and negotiation is achieved through the adaption of a new poetic form. However, what needs to be added to this is that diasporic Iranian writers are also drawing upon elements of Persian literary tradition as a form of social critique of certain aspects of Iranian society, as well as the Western setting into which they are now residing. For example, one of the biggest issues concerning the Iranian literary tradition is the fact that it has been predominantly a male-centered and male-constructed tradition, in which women's presence has always been minimal. While for instance, women existed as symbolic images of the mother, they have



until recently, been absent as both authors and individual subjects of the Persian literary tradition. Additionally, in the Western tradition, Iranian women's presence has always been associated with silences and veils. The next chapters of this study, thus, focus on women's issues. While the next chapter examines the reasons and consequences of the popularity of Iranian women's narratives in English, in light of their absence in Iran and their presence as stereotypes in the West, the following chapter focuses on the symbolism of the mother as nation and examines how diasporic Iranian writers are responding, and critiquing its implications.

## Chapter Three

### The Memoir—"double-edged" narratives by Iranian women

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My maternal grandmother never learned to read or write. Living well into her seventies, she always relied on her children and grandchildren to read things to her. It always fascinated my cousins and I to know why her parents had not insisted on her education, when she herself had made sure all her children received adequate schooling. When I was a teenager, I asked her once why she had not been encouraged to go to school. She looked me straight in the eye and told me that parents of her generation did not like girls to receive an education because if they did learn to read and write they would start communicating. They would start writing and sharing things with the world. Families did not like this. What happened in the family was supposed to stay in the family.

I did not fathom the cultural and societal gravity of my grandmother's statement until years later when I had, with the encouragement of my own parents, received the best education possible. Having studied English literature, I developed an interest in writing about my life and planned to write a memoir. This memoir, as much as being about my diasporic life, would also have been about life in Iran and the nostalgic sentimentality that I held towards my homeland. Writing autobiographically, it seemed, had become my way to maintain a connection with my past and to assert my Iranian identity. One day, however, when I was thinking about my life in Iran, particularly about my grandmother, it dawned on me that many women of my grandmother's generation, and prior, had never had a chance to express themselves in writing. In their illiteracy they had not authored any books in Persian. When they did appear as the subject of men's books, it was often in passing, and as symbolic characters who aided the male hero in his quest. Even Sufi Persian poetry, for instance, the literature loved by everyone in Iran, has always been a strictly male-dominated form of expression. It was not only in Iran, however, that these women's voices and stories had remained absent. When Iranian women

did appear in Western literature, their presence was marred with Oriental mystery, passive subjects of Western male gazes, often victims of patriarchal societies. Until recently very few Iranian women had written about their lives themselves, making their narratives, both in Persian and English, rare to find. This realization gave me a new direction in my writing. I no longer wanted to write only about my own experiences. I wanted to write in a way that through my writing, non-Iranian readers would know more about women's lack of presence in the Iranian literary system. I wanted to give these women the voice they never had.

Although this project preoccupied me for a while, despite numerous outlines and drafts, it never materialized. While part of the reason that I never finished the memoir was circumstantial, the greater reason was the sudden explosion of Iranian women's memoirs into the English-speaking market after 9/11 and the controversial debates that surrounded them upon their reception. While between 1980 and 2001 there had been only sixteen memoirs published by Iranians abroad in English, at least fifty more have been published since then. No less than eight of these came out in 2004 when I was also contemplating producing a memoir of my own. Although I knew that my narrative would be considerably different from the ones emerging, I was reluctant to make myself part of the heated debates that surrounded those works. Instead, I started to read most of the memoirs and debates, and through them I fulfilled my desire to construct and maintain a sense of Iranian identity for myself. After all, I felt there were people who shared the same sense of displacement and nostalgia, and their voice was a relatively strong representative of the Iranian women's experience. I felt as though I belonged to that community, even though I never wrote about it myself.

The sudden increase of Iranian women's memoirs also brought with it a whole new genre of writing. Although Iranian women's memoirs were often placed alongside other Middle Eastern Muslim women's autobiographies on bookstore shelves, they were distinctively different from other Middle Eastern women's accounts. Not only did they speak of a specifically Iranian experience from a woman's perspective—something that was radically new in Iranian history and society—but they were also received within a historically conflicted atmosphere between Iran and America, where most of these memoirs were particularly popular. This gave them a unique

position within both the literary history of their home and host cultures. It was this uniqueness that gave me the incentive to analyze them as part of the body of diasporic Iranian writing in English, instead of making myself part of the debate by writing my own memoir.

Given this personal experience, this chapter, sets out to analyze the diasporic Iranian memoir, as a unique body of work, within the socio-historical context out of which it has emerged. Considering the specific socio-historical and political context out of and into which these books are emerging, as well as the specificities of the memoir form, this chapter argues that these memoirs can be seen as discursive sites through which diasporic Iranians are maintaining, constructing and reconstructing their sense of identity in diaspora.

In researching about diasporic Iranian women's memoirs, one of the most interesting analyses that this study has come across is a short essay by Gina Nahai, the author of *Moonlight on the Avenue of Faith*. In an anecdotal approach, Nahai puts forth two questions that she is constantly asked at various book signings. She is asked, 'why so many memoirs?' and 'is there a market for all those books?' (2007). These two questions are fundamental, and it is upon them that this chapter also draws to develop an argument. Nahai herself answers these questions briefly by saying that there are so many women's memoirs because these women 'live in a place and a time when they can speak the truth without fear of morbid consequences [and] they are getting published [...] because [...] publishers think there's a market for all those books' (2007). Although her response sums up well some of the factors for the sudden increase in Iranian diasporic memoirs, the reasons leading to such a rise are far more complicated and have far-reaching historical, personal, social and political roots and implications for both writers and readers. As Gillian Whitlock, one of the leading scholars on women's postcolonial memoirs and the first critic to bring to the fore Muslim women's memoirs, argues there is a great interconnection between the 'ebbs and flows [of] history,' and 'networks of consumption, pleasure and agency that carry life narrative' (200, p. 7).

Since history has played such a significant and inevitable part in the way these memoirs are shaped and received, this study too will analyze the rise and

importance of these memoirs within the historical context of both their home and host countries. However, in this context the memoir form itself is important since its nature and shape offers specific possibilities for expression unique to its form. Consequently, in the overall argument of this chapter, too, there is emphasis on the memoir form and what it offers its readers and writers.

In arguing for the memoir's significance as a discursive sites through which diasporic Iranians are maintaining, constructing and reconstructing their sense of identity in diaspora, this study asks the same questions that are often asked of Nahai: 'Why So many Memoirs,' and 'Is there a market for all those books.' It takes these two questions as the point of departure and delves into the socio-historical situation, as well as the various elements of the memoir form, that have made it a popular form of expression. This study is aware that other scholars have already addressed diasporic Iranian women's memoirs within a socio-political and historical context. Therefore, it aims to add to existing arguments by focusing on the memoir form as a therapeutic response. Thus, the first part of this chapter draws on Suzette Henke's theory of autobiographical writing as 'scriptotherapy,' and Kelly Oliver's theory of subjectivity, and argues that the memoir form has offered a new space of expression through which diasporic Iranian writers can reconstruct their sense of identity against historically imposed silences, stereotypes, and traumas of their home and host countries. While the first part focuses on these narratives as individual accounts manifested out of the narrators' need to respond to a situation, the second part examines the operation of these individual narratives within the socio-political context into which they have been emerging. Here, it situates these books historically, particularly, in relation to the American interest in captivity narratives, American Orientalism and declaration of 'war on terror' after 9/11. It argues that these socio-historical narratives have had a profound effect in the way diasporic Iranian women's memoirs are constructed and consumed. Finally, it demonstrates the effects of these socio-historical narratives on the way the memoirs are received, consumed and interpreted by undertaking a close reading of some of the texts in relation to Gerard Genette's concept of 'paratexts,' which are liminal features that surround and cover a book.

### **‘Why so many memoirs?’**

The reason for the popularity of the memoir among diasporic Iranian writers today has deep historical roots. A glimpse at centuries of Iranian history reveals a highly dichotomous society with distinct public/private segregation in which the revelation of personal stories was not only taboo, but could also have significant consequences in the family and society. As Farzaneh Milani observes in her seminal book *Veils and Words* (1992), in Iran the autobiographical form, as we know it today, which leads to the revelation of private and personal information, had not been a favourable form of expression. In a chapter entitled ‘Disclosing the Self,’ Milani puts forth several factors that have contributed to the scarcity of the memoir form in the history of Iranian literature. Among many factors rooted deep in Iranian history and culture, one of the reasons for the unpopularity of the autobiographical form among Iranians, according to Milani, has been the ‘fear that the information revealed by them can be used, or rather, misused against their authors’ (p. 209). This, she argues, stems from the strict censorship of the totalitarian regimes that have ruled thousands of years of Persian literature and culture. As she puts it ‘a manifestation of the strength of totalitarian regimes, religious fanaticism, and chaotic, and ultimately repressive historical periods, this tradition of official censorship is important in any study of Persian literature’ (p. 210).

Milani goes on to argue that although censorship has always been externally imposed, gradually, it has also become part of the Iranian discourse of communication. People gradually began to self-censor for fear of the consequences of revealing too much information. Emerging out of this has been a cultural tradition of strict censorship of disputes, scandals, or involvement of family members with criminal and political activities. This is why, according to Milani, proverbs such as ‘hefz-e aberu [to save face], Hefz-e zaher [to protect appearances], Ba sili surat-o sorkh negah dashtan [to keep the face red with a slap]’ (p. 213) play a central role in the Iranian family dynamics, even to date. Consequently, ‘avoiding voluntary self-revelation and self-referentiality, most Iranian writers have turned their backs on autobiography’ (p. 202). This is not to say, however, that Iranians have never written about their lives. In fact throughout recent Iranian literary history one does encounter so-called autobiographies. But these are normally written by

public male figures, in an impersonal manner, avoiding self-importance, and revolving around their public office, lacking any depth about their private affairs.

While for Iranian men, at least for those with public presence, there was a choice of writing about their life, until recently that chance never existed for Iranian women. Milani relates the lack of women's public voice to the concept of veiling. She writes, the majority of Iranian women 'were suppressed physically and verbally by the conventions of the veil and public silence' (p. 46). If we look at characteristics of Iranian society, traditionally, it has been a highly gender segregated society in which men belonged to the public sphere and women to the private. In this culture, women's domain 'was a private world, where self-expression, either bodily or verbally, was confined within the accepted family circle' (p. 46). Within this tradition, propriety demanded that 'a woman's body be covered, her voice go unheard, her portrait never painted, and her life story remain untold' (p. 46). Milani blames this segregation for the lack of women's autobiographical accounts. She writes,

Erased from the public scene and privatized, the Iranian woman has for long been without autobiographical possibilities. Textual self-representation of individuals is not divorced from their cultural representation; and in a culture that idealizes feminine silence and restraint, not many women can or will opt for breaking the silence. Most will not name the formerly unnamed, move beyond the accepted paradigms of female self-representation. In a sexually segregated society where access to a woman's world and word is limited, and the concept of honour is built around woman's virginity (proof of her inaccessibility) women's autobiographies, with their assertive self-attention and self-display, cannot easily flourish, and they have not. (p. 201)

It was this social dynamic, coupled with the general lack of women's education until Reza's Shah's modernization scheme that has led to the absence of women's autobiographical voices in Persian literature. Despite this, however, some brave and educated Iranian women had attempted at writing autobiographies. For instance, the highly rebellious and educated Princess Taj-al-Saltaneh (1848-1896), the daughter of Nasser-e-din Shah, did write a memoir. However, it did not get published until eighty-six years after her death.<sup>1</sup> But the first Iranian woman to ever transgress this

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<sup>1</sup> Her memoir was first published in Farsi, in 1982, under the title *Khatirat*. It was then translated by Ana Vanzan and Amin Neshati and published in English under the title *Taj Al-Satlana Crowning Anguish: Memoirs of a Persian Princess from Harem to Modernity 1884-1914*, (1994).

boundary and write about her very personal life openly while she was still alive was the controversial and celebrated poet Forough Farrokhzad (1935-1967) who lived a highly scandalous life of amorous affairs and wrote autobiographical poems that reflected her unconventional life. Women like Taj-al-Sultaneh and Farrokhzad, however, were few in Iranian history. Unlike them, the majority of Iranian women upheld the social conventions of silence and segregation because they knew that 'public disclosure of any [...] aspects of a woman's life was considered an abuse of privacy and a violation of societal taboos [...] for which punishments [...] were many and varied' (p. 46).

Added to this has been the trauma of the revolution, which not only brought stricter censorship policies, but also tightened gender dichotomy. As Haleh Isfandiari argues in her book *Reconstructed Lives: Women and Islamic Revolution*, a book which played a part in her later imprisonment in Iran,

the Islamic revolution had a marked and transforming impact on all areas of Iranian life. But for women, its consequences were especially profound—legally, socially, professionally, psychologically, both in the home and in society. [...] The state set out deliberately and consciously to reconstruct and redefine the place of women under the law and in the public and the private spheres. (1997, p. 1)

Such transformation, however, was not towards more freedom. If women's inability to write about their life experiences had been mostly due to family and self-censorship prior to the revolution, after the revolution, added to this was the state's censorship of their voices. For many Iranian women the Islamic revolution had a traumatic impact on their lives. While those who stayed had to live with everyday oppressions, silences, and even impositions in the way they dressed, for those who left, they faced the trauma of exile.

It is in response to the absence of autobiographical accounts, particularly women's narratives, that diasporic Iranian writers have chosen the memoir form as a favorite medium of expression. Distanced, by time and space, from the dichotomous society that had held many in silence, diasporic Iranian writers are 'free, at last, to shape the boundaries of [their] own story' (Nafisi 2010, p. xxi). But the memoir, as opposed to other forms of expression, has become particularly favored because of its therapeutic effects.



### *Memoir as Scriptotherapy*

In *Shattered Subjects: Trauma and Testimony and Women's Life Writing*, Suzette Henke puts forth the argument that all autobiographical forms of writing have the potential to be what she calls 'scriptotherapy.' Scriptotherapy is 'the process of writing out and writing through traumatic experiences in the mode of therapeutic reenactment' (2000, p. xii). She believes that,

the authorial effort to reconstruct a story of psychological debilitation could offer potential for mental healing and begin to alleviate persistent symptoms of numbing, dysphoria, and uncontrollable flashbacks. [It] [...] might provide a therapeutic alternative for victims of severe anxiety and, more seriously, of post-traumatic stress disorder. (p. xii)

This therapeutic potential has to do with the very form of the memoir. The memoir, by the nature of its form, is a utopian mode and space, offering its writers endless possibilities of expression of realities of a distant, sometimes dystopian, traumatic, or at times nostalgic, past that would have otherwise not been expressed. The term utopian is used here to describe the memoir because I believe it is one of the few forms that allows for candid expression of those people and ideas that would otherwise not have a chance to be heard. As Ashcroft argues,

utopias are not so much concerned with the future as much as with sketching the present and our ways out of it. [...] The issue is not what is imagined, the *product* of utopia so to speak, the imagined state or utopian place, but the *process* of imagination itself. (2007, p. 418)

For the memoir, too, although the result might be a representation of a dystopian memory, it is the process of writing, the very act of narrativity that allows for it to operate as a therapeutic space of expression. As Kelly Oliver argues about the psychology of oppression, individuals and groups who have been tortured, traumatized and discriminated against have been objectified and their sense of identity and agency has been taken away. One of the means through which such people can regain that sense of identity is through the process she calls 'bearing witness to oppression and subordination' (2001, p. 7). She believes that those affected can heal themselves and 'repair damaged subjectivity by taking up a position as speaking subjects' (p. 7), and being recognized by others as sharing with them the same human feelings. In this process, the memoir, because of its emphasis on recalling and engaging with very personal experiences, often traumatic, provides

the perfect formal space through which this kind of private/public interaction can play out. As Whitlock, too, acknowledges in *Soft Weapons*,

autobiography is fundamental to the struggle for recognition among individuals and groups, to the constant creation of what it means to be human and the rights that fall from that, and to the ongoing negotiation of imaginary boundaries between ourselves and others. (10)

According to her, one of the significant elements of the memoir is that it can mediate ‘between the public and private. (2007, p. 16) It ‘is a cultural space where relations between the individual and society are thought out intensely and experienced intersubjectively’ (p. 11). Psychologically, for many, breaking boundaries between private individual experiences and locating them in society at large can be an important process in reconstructing and even negotiating any kind of personal or group identity. This is why the memoir or autobiographical narrative can be a powerful form of scriptotherapy. As Henke puts it,

Autobiography has always offered the tantalizing possibility of reinventing the self and reconstructing the subject ideologically influenced by language, history, and social imbrication. As a genre, life-writing encourages the author/narrator to reassess the past and to reinterpret the intertextual codes inscribed on personal consciousness by society and culture. Because the author can insatiate the alienated or marginal self into the pliable body of a protean text, the newly revised subject, emerging as the semifictive protagonist of an enabling counternarrative, is free to rebel against the values and practices of a dominant culture and to assume an empowered position of political agency in the world. (2000, p. xvi)

This is also why the memoir can be seen, and picked up as, a site of resistance by postcolonial and diasporic writers who want to foreground forgotten narratives and transform the way they are perceived. The memoir allows for the voices of the marginal to regain their agency and subjectivity through very personal and remembered experiences by transcending boundaries of public/private, dominant/dominated, colonized/colonizer and offering multiplicities of alternative social narratives to the grand narrative of History. It becomes a space where by drawing on the past, and looking into the future, identities can be negotiated. As Whitlock observes in the introduction to *Intimate Empire: Women’s Autobiography* ‘autobiographic writing can suggest the multiplicity of histories, the ground “in between”’ (2000, p. 5) where the oppressed can regain their sense of subjectivity, thereby resisting and dismantling totalizing discourses, practices, and institutions that had objectified them.

It is by taking this therapeutic aspect of the memoir that this chapter argues that most post-revolutionary diasporic Iranian women's memoirs serve as a form of scriptotherapy as individual exercises of healing and reconstruction from trauma and oppression. Although the trauma that is referred to here is particularly as the result of the revolution and migration, for it is in response to and consequence of this that many are writing, the oppression that is mentioned has a wider historical and social implication. Although this analysis will address the various historical conditions to which many are responding, since the Islamic revolution has played such a significant part in the lives of many Iranians, and because it has also been the reason for much trauma and oppression, this analysis begins with an examination of these memoirs as a response to the trauma of the revolution.

In establishing the revolution as a traumatic event, mentioned in the earlier parts of this thesis, I draw from Whitlock's essay 'From Tehran to Tehrangeles: The Generic Fix of Iranian Exilic Memoirs,' where she argues that most diasporic Iranian women's memoirs 'share experience and articulation of the revolution as a traumatic event, as a wound inflicted during a key period in the author's personal development' (2008, p. 80). Looking at the body of diasporic Iranian women's memoirs, whether as exilic narratives of aristocrats or royalty, or return stories of second generation daughters of the revolution, or even recent prison memoirs, it is clear that the lives of each and every one of these writers has been affected dramatically by the revolution. While the restrictive Islamic codes of conduct had relegated many to the margins of society, eventually forcing some into exile, the revolution had also been discriminatory against many minority groups. It is to this sense of oppression and discrimination that many have responded in their memoirs. Perhaps the oppression unleashed by the revolution is best summed up in the words of Azar Nafisi who in her memoir *Reading Lolita in Tehran* complains 'of a loss, the void in our lives that was created when our past was stolen from us, making us exiles in our own country' (2004, p. 76) where 'they invaded all private spaces and tried to shape every gesture, to force us to become one of them, and that in itself was [a] form of execution' (p. 77). This is why as Whitlock observes, these memoirs, 'constitute a "gathering of the wounded," a working through revolutionary trauma, and the disclosure of memory marked by the events of the

revolution: the loss of home and culture, shaped by the nostalgia that scars life in the diaspora' (2008, p. 80).

Considering the works of first generation writers who experienced the revolution and its aftermath first hand, their memoirs vividly bear witness to painful personal accounts of alienation, loss, dismay and ultimately exile. This reflection of loss can be seen projected, in various forms, from the earliest and more obscure memoirs emerging in late 1980s to better-known accounts published post 9/11. For instance, in *Out of Iran: One Woman's Escape from the Ayatollahs* (1987), one of the first memoirs by an Iranian woman in English, Sousan Azadi bears witness to the personal subordination that she faced following the revolution. As a great-grand daughter of a Qajar King, she narrates her life through her husband's death from cancer, to her difficulties of child custody from her in-laws through the Islamic regime, her imprisonment and her eventual escape through Turkey into Canada. This book, republished thirteen times through two different publishers between 1987 and 2003, begins with the narrator recalling the discrimination her family faced immediately after the events of the revolution. She begins,

The *taughtout*. Satan. A ruler who has transgressed the limits of his authority. Such was Ayatollah Rholah Khomeini's title for Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, King of Kings, Shah of Iran. And we, the Shah's loyal subjects, were condemned by Khomeini as the *taughtouti*, the followers of Satan [...] We were the rich of Iran, the ruling elite, the nation's leaders. We didn't want to accept a vengeful religious leader as our new master. In his view, because we were Westernized, we must have been immoral. I have known what it is like to be hated just because I wanted basic rights as a woman in a Moslem country. Within three years I found myself an unwilling exile, purged by a society that I barely recognized as my own [...]. (p. 1)

Azadi's opening paragraph bears witness to the oppression that she and her family had faced following the revolution, something she would not have been able to express had she been in Iran. By explaining her own position, and ideological beliefs, Azadi uses the autobiographical form to become a speaking subject, to reinvent herself anew, not as a 'taughtouti' but as an educated, honorable member of Iranian society who had been discriminated against by the oppressive forces of the regime. Azadi is not alone in wanting to reinvent herself against the discriminating label of 'taughtouti.' In her memoir, *Unveiled* Cherry Mosteshar, too tells us about the discrimination she had faced as the result of her social position. From a similar

background as Azadi, Mosteshar also tells us,

there was a day, before the revolution of 1979, when I had been one of the richest young women on our street in wealthy North Tehran. With the coming of the Islamic state I was transformed into evil Taghouti. [sic.] [...] I was marked as a traitor in my native Iran even before I had a chance to be anything other than my parents' rebellious youngest child. (1995, p. 6)

Here, similarly, the memoir form allows for the narrator to reconstruct her own sense of subjectivity against the historically imposed image of the 'taughtouti.' In both cases, it allows them to become speaking subjects by bearing witness to the discrimination that they had faced at the hands of newly established regime. To put it in Henke's words, the autobiographical form, provides them with a space in which they can 'rebel against the values and practices of the dominant culture and to assume an empowered position of political agency in the world' (2000, p. xvi).

For those who encountered the revolution as children, the memoir allows them to tap into their childhood memories, recount and bear witness to horrific events of that era, perhaps understanding them more now as adults than they did as children. Afschineh Latifi, in *Even After All This Time* (2005), for example, recounts the traumatic story of her father's execution, a high-ranking colonel under the Shah's regime, and follows her family's harsh journey into exile. Similarly, Banafsheh Serov, one of the first Iranian-Australians to write a memoir, in *Under a Starless Sky* (2008) remembers her family's illegal and dangerous escape after the revolution through Turkey and eventually to Australia. Roya Hakakian, too, in *Journey From the Land of No* (2004) recalls the discrimination her family faced as a Jewish family after the revolution causing their eventual journey to America.

Recalling these traumatic experiences, as adults, can be healing, as it not only allows them to bring to the fore repressed memories but it also offers them a sense of closure. As Eve Zibart writes in an online interview with Hakakian, 'the word is the expression of the essential self, and the manner in which we re-create our universe' (2004). About Hakakian she writes, she 'thought she had understood pretty well the upheaval of the late 1970s and early '80s in her native Iran [...] but once she began to write about that time, the act of writing both clarified and reshaped those events.' Indeed Hakakian confirms the therapeutic effects of writing as she tells us once she started writing 'everything came into focus and I was able to make sense of things I thought were unconnected' (Zibart 2004).

While for most of these writers writing a memoir is a kind of scriptotherapy without the narrator acknowledging it openly throughout the book, for a few writers, it is the therapeutic effects of writing that has attracted them to write a memoir. For instance, in Marina Nemat's *Prisoner of Tehran* (2007), which deals with her imprisonment and forced marriage to her interrogator at the age of sixteen, Nemat overtly addresses the therapeutic effects of writing in regaining her subjectivity. *Prisoner of Tehran* opens with Nemat's arrival in Canada by drawing upon an ancient Persian proverb. She writes, 'there is an ancient Persian proverb that says: "The sky is the same color wherever you may go"' (p. 1). But she quickly breaks that well-known proverb, recreating its meaning as she continues:

But the Canadian sky was different from the one I remembered in Iran: it was a deeper shade of blue and seemed endless, as if challenging the horizon [...] the vastness of the landscape astonished me. [...] we had to build a new life in this strange country that had offered us refuge when we had nowhere to go. I had to concentrate all my energy on survival. (p. 1-2)

This opening establishes and acknowledges that it is distance from Iran that has allowed Nemat to survive and eventually bear witness to the traumas of her imprisonment, for in fact as Paul Sheehan of the *Sydney Morning Herald* observes, 'had she written this book in her native Iran, she would have been executed by the state' (2007). But these lines also set the tone of the entire memoir. Set in a new land with an endless horizon we immediately know this is a personal narrative of survival, healing, reconstruction, new beginnings and possibilities. This self-consciousness, which becomes even more obvious as the narrative proceeds forms a running theme throughout Nemat's memoir. For instance later in the memoir Nemat clearly reveals the reason why she had, after nearly twenty years of silence, and after becoming a 'proud middle-class Canadian,' decided to speak. She writes,

This is when I lost the ability to sleep.

It began with snapshots of memories that flashed into my mind as soon as I went to bed. I tried to push them away, but they rushed at me, invading my daytime hours as well as the night. The past was gaining on me, and I couldn't keep it at bay; I had to face it or it would completely destroy my sanity. If I couldn't forget, perhaps the solution was to remember. I began writing about my days in Evin—Tehran's notorious political prison—about the torture, pain, death, and all the suffering I had never been able to talk about. My memories became words and broke free from their induced hibernation.

I believed that once I put them on paper, I would feel better—but I didn't. I needed more. I couldn't keep my manuscript buried in a bedroom drawer. I was a witness and I had to tell my story. (p. 2)

Although this reveals Nemat's writing as a conscious therapeutic exercise to keep her own sanity, her emphasis on the fact that without sharing her manuscript her healing is not complete, points to her realization of the need for intersubjective recognition to fully reconstruct her sense of subjectivity. After all, as both Oliver and Henke argue, it is by being recognized by others that those oppressed can regain their sense of subjectivity. When someone, like Nemat, writes a memoir, a significant part of their healing takes place only when they are read and acknowledged by others.

The fact that Nemat has the urge to share her manuscript with others bears witness to something beyond her own personal story and desire to be recognized. In reading these memoirs, we must keep in mind that they are not narrated nor should they be read exclusively as one woman's experience. Rather, through the narration of their individual stories, they are also bearing witness and responding to larger, often generational, historical and socio-political oppressive forces. As Oliver argues those traumatized 'do not merely articulate a demand to be recognized or to be seen [...] they bear witness to a pathos beyond recognition and to something other than the horror of their objectification' (2001, p. 8). Seen in this light, these memoirs, too, though articulated in and through personal accounts, should be read as witnesses of horrors beyond personal desire for recognition. They are witnesses to a larger discriminatory socio-political and historical pathos and their narratives are a way for the recognition of those groups and individuals who had been marginalized and objectified under various oppressive forces. While, without a doubt, the revolution was a historical event that created an oppressive force, there are many other socio-historical issues to which diasporic Iranian memoirists are responding.

One of the most recurrent issues with which many diasporic Iranian memoirs engage has been the issue of silence. In looking at various diasporic Iranian memoirs, the majority bears witness to the pathos of silence and self-censorship that has ruled Iranian society and family through history. As already established, Iranian society has always operated on a dichotomy of public/private domains, resulting in a kind of self-censorship. Although these practices operated mostly on the dynamics



of the public/private domains, as Milani believes, ‘external restrictions sustained over time eventually generate[d] internal ones’ (1992, p. 212). Over time, this created a kind of individual/family dichotomy, a form of self-censorship, that separated the individual, especially one who had been in a potentially shameful or harmful situation, from the rest of the family by a veil of silence. However, such silence fails to recognize the trauma of the oppressed person, so that as ‘these private, sacred precincts protect, they also imprison,’ because ‘the sophisticated mechanisms that shield the inner self from exposure and intrusion also amputate and silence part of the self’ (p. 212). Nafisi observes the operation of this silence in her second memoir *Things I’ve Been Silent About*:

There are so many different forms of silence: the silence that tyrannical states force on their citizens, stealing their memories, rewriting their histories, and imposing on them a state-sanctioned identity. Or the silence of witnesses who choose to ignore or not speak the truth, and of victims who at times become complicit in the crimes committed against them. Then there are the silences we indulge about ourselves, our personal mythologies, the stories we impose upon our real lives. Long before I came to appreciate how a ruthless political regime imposes its own image on its citizens, stealing their identities and self-definitions, I had experienced such impositions in my personal life—my life within my family. And long before I understood what it meant for a victim to become complicit in crimes of the state, I had discovered, in far more personal terms, the shame of complicity. (2010, p. xxi)

This veil of silence has always ruled Iranian families and formed one of the major themes of diasporic Iranian women’s memoirs. But among the silences, one of the most dramatic forms of silence has been that of ex-prisoners, particularly between the prisoner and his or her family. Ex-prisoners in Iran, especially female prisoners with political sentences, have had an invisible existence. Fuelled by a kind of usually self-imposed rigid censorship that dichotomizes boundaries between public and private, their silence frequently stems from fear that personal information revealed can be used or misused against the authors and their families. For many, fear of exposure is magnified as it entails risk of further persecution for them and their families. In listening to political prisoners who have now come forward to speak, one common experience has been the threats they had received during their imprisonment. Unable to speak about their experiences publicly, ex-prisoners are frequently doubly oppressed as they are received into silent families who are fearful of knowing what has happened, and are afraid of the consequences of knowledge.



Ex-prisoners often complain about being received into shrouds of silence upon their return. Zarah Ghahramani a young political activist who was imprisoned for a month in Evin during the student protests of 2001 and who recounts this ordeal in her memoir *My Life as a Traitor* (2007), for instance, reveals the silence into which she walked after being released. In an interview with Keira Butler for *Mother Jones Online* she speak of her experiences after being picked up by her father from the side of the road where prison guards had dropped her off blindfolded.

He came, and we hugged and cried and all that, and then we went home. My sisters came over, and my father made breakfast for us, like when we were kids. It was all really normal. I was expecting them to ask me what had happened, where I had been, but we just had normal, everyday breakfast. Then I went to have a shower and I saw my face for the first time after a month. It was really scary. I hardly stopped myself from screaming, wondering what my family was going through seeing me like that, and not even saying anything. It was really frustrating for me—I really wanted to talk. But when I think about it now, it was the best thing they did. It was hard enough for them, what happened to me. I'm sure they didn't want to know any more. (2009)

While the very act of writing is liberating and therapeutic for those who have experienced such silence, for some, writing has become a deliberate and conscious attempt of breaking down the boundaries of silence. In *Prisoner of Tehran*, for instance, Nemat seems driven to write with a deliberate and self-conscious attempt to bear witness to this particular social pathos of silence. When she is freed from prison, after two years, like Ghahramani, she is received into a web of silence. Instead of asking her about what has happened, she is made to dress in fine clothes, and attend parties. No one, not even in her family, asks, acknowledges, or wants to know what happened. But unlike Ghahramani, frustrated by this silence, she confronts her grandmother,

“Why doesn’t anyone ask me anything about the last two years?” I asked.

“The answer is very simple. We’re afraid to ask because we’re afraid of knowing. I think this is some kind of a natural defence. Maybe if we don’t talk about it, and maybe if we pretend it never happened, it will be forgotten.”

I had expected my homecoming to make things simple again, but it hadn’t. I hated the silence surrounding me. I wanted to feel loved. But how could love find its way through silence? Silence and darkness were very similar: darkness was the absence of light and silence was the absence of sound, voices. How could one navigate through such oblivion? (p. 250)

However, Nemat, too, would have lived with these stories in her own heart, as she had for twenty years, had it not been for the sudden realization that there are many such women whose voices needed to be heard. The decision for her to break this silence comes after a life-changing encounter with another ex-prisoner. Early in the memoir, after establishing her personal reasons for writing, Nemat tells of an event that redirected the course of her narrative. In 2005, at a dinner party in Canada, Nemat meets a girl, Parisa, who had been an inmate at Evin the same time as her. In talking to Nemat, Parisa reveals that she had not until that night ‘talked to anyone about her prison experiences’ because “‘people just don’t want to talk about it.’” (3) It is this silence to which Nemat responds in her writing,

This was the very silence that had held me captive for more than twenty years.

When I was released from Evin my family pretended that everything was all right. No one mentioned the prison. No one asked, “what happened to you?” I ached to tell them about my life in Evin, but I didn’t know where to start. I waited for them to ask me something, anything that would give me a place to begin. I guessed that my family wanted me to be the innocent girl I had been before prison. They were terrified of the pain and horror of my past, so they ignored it. (p. 4)

After this meeting she contends, ‘if I had doubts about speaking out, they vanished’ (p. 3). It is Nemat’s recognition of Parisa, and the similarity of their silence, coupled with the significance of Zahra Kazemi’s death—the Canadian-Iranian photojournalist who was captured and beaten to death in Evin in 2003—that makes her break her silence. This decision allows her to speak and heal herself, and consequently through her own narrative, bear witness to the larger socio-political situation that had affected others in similar condition. Nemat’s last words in the postscript reveal her intentions:

I knew what I had gone through in Evin was still happening behind its walls, but seeing Zahra’s picture, and her beautiful smile gave this knowledge, a painful and shocking power that cut through me. [...] The world had now taken notice because Zahra was a Canadian. If the world had paid attention, if the world had cared, Zahra would not have died; many innocent lives would have been saved. But the world had remained silent, partly because witnesses like me had been afraid to speak up. But enough was enough. I was not going to let fear hold me captive any longer. [...]

I had a story to tell. Zahra had given Iran’s political prisoners a name and a face; now it was my turn to give them words. (p. 301)

Memoirs like Nemat's that highlight oppressive silences of others through their own personal stories recuperate silenced experiences on multiple levels. On a personal level, they allow for the narrator to bear witness to the trauma that they had faced. Narration, thus, becomes a form of scriptotherapy, a way of gaining personal recognition and regaining subjectivity. On another level, these narratives operate on a social level and bear witness to something beyond the narrator's need for personal recognition. They bear witness to a social and historical pathos of silence, and allow for the recognition of the voices of those who otherwise might not have a chance to express themselves. As such they are important milestones in helping those who have been oppressed historically to regain their subjectivity, as they 'render human the dehumanized and convey the fullness of voice and presence to those denied their rights' (Whitlock 2008, p. 81).

So far we have seen the ways in which the memoir can operate as a therapeutic mode of writing for first generation diasporic Iranian writers in response to the trauma they had faced in their homeland. However, one of the most traumatic experiences for diasporic Iranians has been the process of exile and resettlement. While for adult migrants, having grown up in Iran, they often have a sense of belonging and community, enough so that its memories could help them maintain a sense of identity, even if that shared memory is of a traumatic period, for those who migrated as children, or those who were born to migrant parents, they often do not have enough personal memories to be able to construct a continued sense of belonging to Iran. For these people their only maintained sense of Iranian identity is either of early idyllic childhood memories, nostalgic reveries from their parents and relatives, and contradictory and often negative images shown in the media in their new home. For them, there is great conflict in their sense of continued identity, belonging and allegiances. For this generation, the formation and negotiation of a kind of diasporic hybridity has been a great trauma in the way they construct a sense of identity. As Tara Bahrapour tells us in her memoir *To See and See Again*, 'those young enough to have adjusted to America but old enough to still remember Iran seem to have the most difficulty choosing their cultural allegiances, perhaps because they were too young to have made their own decisions about staying in Iran or leaving' (1999, p. 357). Similarly as Azadeh Moaveni demonstrates in *Lipstick Jihad*, 'growing up Iranian in America had been arduous and awkward. We had

little consciousness of assimilation, because we were in denial of our permanence in America [...] mentally still in between' (2005, p. 28).

This 'dispersal and fragmentation' of identity, and the split of allegiances between two cultural identities, as Stuart Hall reminds us, is part of the history of all diasporic experience. But Henke believes that testimony to this identity crisis through the autobiographical form can be effective 'in working through episodes of psychic fragmentation' (2000, p. xii). As such, the memoir form offers these writers the opportunity to bear witness to and work through the trauma of this fragmentation. However, while for first generation writers, writing is about giving voices to silenced experiences to reconstruct a sense of damaged subjectivity, for this group of writers, writing becomes a way of negotiating a sense of hyphenated identity by bridging the gap of cultural differences between their home and host cultures. However, in this process, not many of these young writers remember Iran very well. To negotiate this sense of duality they must first gain an understanding of their home country and culture. One way through which some writers have bridged this gap has been through a return trip to Iran. As Bahrapour writes in her memoir,

No one could give me a full picture. People might tell me stories about what Iran was really like, but they were not talking about "my" Iran. We had left at the end of my childhood, and like childhood it had frozen in my mind into a mythical land. Once we landed in America, I lost the power to separate Iran from my memories of what it had been. The only way to do that would be to go back and see it for myself. (1999, p. 203)

This is why in recent years the return memoir has become popular for second generation diasporic Iranian writers. These memoirs, of which there are several, such as Tara Bahrapour's *To See and See Again*, and Gelareh Asayesh's *Saffron Sky: A Life Between Iran and America* (1999) and Azadeh Moaveni's *Lipstick Jihad: Growing Up Iranian in America and American in Iran* (2005), are all accounts of a personal quest for negotiating a sense of cultural identity. As Stuart Hall reminds us, cultural identity is 'a matter of "becoming" as well as "being." It belongs to the future as much as to the past' (2003, p. 236). In light of this definition, what the return memoir allows these women to do is to negotiate a space in which instead of carrying the burden and trauma of cultural hybridity, they can understand and celebrate their own unique hyphenated cultural identities through

the process of understanding and by coming to terms with their alienated home cultures. As Moaveni tells us,

As life took its course, as I grew up and went to college, discovered myself, and charted a career, my Iranian sense of self remained intact. But when I moved to Tehran in 2000 [...] it, along with the fantasies, dissolved. Iran, as it turned out, was not the Death Star, but a country where people voted, picked their noses, and ate French fries. Being a Persian girl in California, it turned out, was like, a totally different thing than being a young Iranian woman in the Islamic Republic of Iran. [...] So, I learned for myself, as I endured a second, equally fraught coming of age—this time a Californian in Iran. I never intended my Iranian odyssey as search for self, but a very different me emerged at its end. [...] (2005, p. vii-viii)

In these memoirs, it is often through the process of the return and writing about the return, that the narrators come to embrace their hybridity. Frequently, through this process, the trauma of duality is transformed into a celebration of multiplicities and unique cultural identities in a world where identities are no longer bound by a sense of nationalistic belonging. As Amy Motlagh observes,

while first-generation authors are still invested in the depiction of a national story and the possibility of a return to power in the home country, members of the second generation [...] sense the fragmentary nature of the world they live in and simply want to claim that fragmentariness as their own condition. (2008, p. 29)

Towards the end of her memoir, Bahrampour demonstrates this as she writes:

We had not fit into any mold; compared to Iranian kids in Iran or American kids in America, we had had a sense of being untethered in the world. We had travelled all our lives; we were seasoned experts on jet lag and layover. [...] Our futures too were uncharted. With no model to follow, we could imagine ourselves anywhere in the world. (1999, p. 355)

For many diasporic Iranian writers, these memoirs serve an additional purpose than simply being discursive spaces through which they negotiate their own sense of personal identities. For many second generation diasporic Iranians, and those who migrated as young children, adding to the trauma of having to navigate and construct a sense of identity at the intersection of two cultures, has been the troubled relationship between their home and host countries. As such they operate on a social level through which the narrators also negotiate a social sense of identity within their diasporic environment.

As argued throughout this thesis, the situation of diasporic Iranians within their host communities, until recently, has been one of ambivalence and virtual invisibility, fuelled by the still-looming resonances of the revolution, the hostage crisis and hostile political relationships between Iran and the West. As Moaveni complains,

as a teenager I felt there was nowhere to turn, and I often felt invisible, alone with my two irreconcilable halves. Sometimes I felt like we didn't even exist, even though I had proof we did. [...] We weren't reflected anywhere—not on television, not on radio. [...] It was too overwhelming to dwell in a home wracked with inter-cultural turmoil, within a larger community wrapped up in the awkwardness of arrival, to attempt to bridge my two identities. (2005, p. 26)

It is this need to negotiate a social identity and existence within their host communities that also compels the popularity of such memoirs. As Oliver argues, subjectivity is constituted intersubjectively so 'that we come to recognize ourselves as subjects or active agents through recognition from others' (2000, p. 4). But the lack of recognition—and even at times negative recognition—both of individuals and a community, had oppressed diasporic Iranians within their host communities. They often had little sense of positive intersubjective recognition in their new homes. As Oliver believes, this sort of 'oppression creates the need and demand for recognition' (p. 9). This demand can range from the desire to be 'recognized by their oppressors, the very people most likely not to recognize them,' to 'demands for retribution and compassion' from the dominant culture. The memoir, particularly one that speaks of the perils of hybridity and misrecognition of a community, then, is in effect a space where negotiations for this kind of recognition are taking place. As Henke believes 'in the very act of articulation, the trauma story becomes a testimony, a publicly accessible "ritual of healing" that inscribes the victim into a sympathetic discourse-community and inaugurates the possibility of psychological reintegration' (2000, p. xvii). What this means is that these narratives are, like postcolonial writing, negotiating a space of belonging for diasporic Iranian communities through recognized discourses of dominant cultures that had failed to recognize them to begin with. In effect, these memoirs could be seen as sites of resistance from a dominant and stereotyped perspective, and as spaces for negotiating and forming a new kind of identity. But, as will be discussed in the next part of this chapter, the process of negotiating this kind of belonging is highly dependent on recognition, in this case recognition through readers and in turn

through the publishing market. Although this recognition does have positive influences for diasporic Iranians, it is also very complicated and could paradoxically lead to other forms of misrecognition and oppression. As we will see, in the next part of this chapter, these texts can be taken up, decontextualized and interpreted, within various post 9/11 discourses and causes, turning a personal narration of healing to a political manifesto or a social commentary about the masses of Iranian and Muslim women. In this case these texts can be interpreted as supporting ideologies of particular groups that ‘advocate certain foreign policies towards the Middle East and purport to defend women’s rights’ (Bahramitash 2005, p. 221), and be seen as ‘complement[ing] the current military agenda of the US foreign policy’ (p. 223), in the name of feminist causes.

### **‘Is there a market for all those books?’**

In *Soft Weapons*, Whitlock argues, after 9/11 ‘Muslim life narratives have been taken up variously in the recent past, in a time of crisis when recognition of viable speaking subjects in the public sphere has become an urgent issue’ (2007, p. 12). According to her, these autobiographical accounts are often approached ‘emphatically identifying in and through trauma and in terms of human rights campaigns for social justice that play to Western traditions of benevolence’ (p. 13). There is no doubt that this tradition has greatly benefited the reception and recognition of books by Middle Eastern, including Iranian, women. The events of 9/11, which created an avid readership interested in consuming these narratives, has, for the first time, recognized Middle Eastern women’s voices and given them the opportunity to bear witness to personal trauma. Considering the historical background of silences and oppressions of Iran and the difficult diasporic conditions out of which many of these narratives arise, this type of recognition could be very beneficial for the narrators. As we have already seen, for those traumatized and oppressed, narration or writing could be a way of being ‘recognized by their oppressors, the very people most likely not to recognize them,’ or even as a form of ‘demand for retribution and compassion’ from the dominant culture. Furthermore, this interest and recognition has provided a space through which diasporic Iranians could also negotiate spaces of belonging and their sense of diasporic identities. Consequently, it has been this reciprocal relationship between Iranian narrators and



their readers, which has led to the publication of over sixty-five memoirs by the Iranian diaspora over the last three decades.

However, the reception of and interest in Iranian women's accounts has deep historical roots, which although seemingly provide a space of expression and recognition also has a predefined scope of reception. As Amal Amireh and Lisa Suhair Majaj argue in the opening of their book *Going Global: The Transnational Reception of Third World Women Writers*, 'the efforts of feminist scholars inside the academy to correct the limitations of a Eurocentric feminist movement and to make space for....[other] women to speak of their own experiences instead of being represented as the "Other" seemed to be coming to fruition' (2001, p.1). However, they feel that this 'gesture of inclusion [has] not [been] innocent, but instead often functioned to contain our voices within a predefined space' (p. 1). This predefinition stems from historical, and socio-political backgrounds and interests into which these books are received. As Whitlock observes, these books have been 'hostages to publishers, the taste of the reading public, and shifts in the political, cultural and social life of the nation' (2000, p.146). What this means is that often, instead of being spaces for affirmation of a sense of identity, these memoirs appear to re-affirm certain preconceived perceptions about East/West relationships, in particular, about Middle Eastern women, driven alongside socio-political interests. This has made them 'easily co-opted into propaganda' (Whitlock 2008, p. 81).

In this context, given the interest in diasporic Iranian women's narratives over the last decade, the question that I believe should be asked is not 'is there a market for those books?' but rather *why* is there a market for all those books, particularly in the last decade? What are the effects of this demand on their production and consumption? And do these demands affect interpretation and limit the voices and intentions of authors? In fact one of the most crucial questions that I believe should be asked, that Whitlock also puts forth in her study of diasporic Iranian memoirs, is 'what is at stake when memoirs by Iranian exiles trade as best-sellers in these times?' (Whitlock, 2007, p. 161)

The rest of this chapter sets out to answer these questions and analyze the diasporic Iranian memoir, not just as a personal healing device, but rather as a popular piece of public discourse. While the earlier part of this chapter examined the benefits of the memoir form for its writers, here we investigate the value of the memoir form



for its readers. Here, we pay attention to the popularity of the memoir form and the Western fascination with the 'Other' historically, particularly in relation to the exotic Orientalist imagination of the Middle East by the West, the recent conflicted history between Iran and America after the American hostage crisis in Iran, as well as the more recent events of 9/11. However, this study proposes that the popularity of diasporic Iranian women's memoirs today has an additional cause dating further back than most scholars have recognized. It argues that the recent popularity of these accounts today is linked to the popularity of the American captivity narrative and America's encounter with the native Other. This argument, however, does not claim that diasporic Iranian memoirs are replacing or directly congruent to the captivity narrative genre. For indeed, the American captivity genre in its traditional form has certain conventions and is representative of a particular era of American history. However, based on the landscape of the history of American literature in particular, we can see that certain elements of the captivity genre continue to captivate the imagination and interest of readers. These elements include a particular set of assertions of race, gender, and culture dichotomy and hierarchy, which not only reflected the condition of the American encounter with the native Other, but which also continue to inform America's encounter with the global Other in an age of multiculturalism and transnationalism. Drawing on what Brian Edwards (2010) describes as 'American Orientalism,' this study analyses the popularity of diasporic Iranian women's memoirs today within this context.

This chapter argues that the socio-historical context into which diasporic Iranian memoirs are received, in which certain kinds of literature still operate to maintain a particular racial, gender and cultural hierarchy, has directly influenced the reception and consumption of these narratives. Here, a brief history of the American captivity narrative will be useful, highlighting in particular certain elements of the genre that continue to hold the interest of publishers and readers today. A central pillar of the argument consists of those elements that continue to inform America's relation with the world in a globalized age – such as its ongoing hostility with Iran since the hostage crisis and its declaration of War on Terror after 9/11. The detailed analysis of Iranian women's memoirs that follows draws on Gerard Genette's concept of 'paratexts' (1997) and considers how liminal markers that cover and surround these books inevitably frame the way they are marketed, perceived, and consumed, not as

a personal narrative of healing, but on the contrary as narratives that can feed into and continue to maintain certain kinds of hierarchies.

### *Captivity Narratives and American Orientalism*

In the introductory pages of his book *Puritans Among the Indians*, Alden T. Vaughan identifies the captivity narrative as ‘one of America’s oldest literary genres and its most unique’ (1981, p. 2), the origins of which dates back to early days of settlement when European settlers made contact with the unknown native of the land, and consequently ‘stories of captivity by an alien culture began to excite the public imagination’ (p. 2). According to Vaughan, early literature of American colonization is dotted with tales of seizure, torture, adaptation, and eventual escape or release of the European settler/explorer by the natives of the land. But it was not however, until the late 17<sup>th</sup> century that the captivity narrative became a popular and distinct genre when Mary Rowlandson’s *A Narrative of the Captivity, Suffering and Removes of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson* (1682), which sold a minimum of a thousand copies with four editions only in the year of its publication became the first American bestseller (Derounian 1988, p. 239). Over the last four hundred years, there has been a string of accounts by other women that follow on from Rowlandson’s account of captivity by the native Other. These narratives often operate by asserting a certain kind of social hierarchy and a dichotomy between us/settlers/Europeans and them/natives of the land. However, as studies of captivity narratives reveal, the captivity narrative, though maintaining some of its elements, has not been static throughout history, and has always been closely linked to the socio-political atmosphere of the times. In fact as Catharine Stimpson, the series editor of *Bound and Determined*, explains ‘the laws of this genre are very clear.’ Of its characteristics she tells us that they are often told in a way that they ‘maintain the established interlocking hierarchies of race and gender’ (Castiglia 1996, p. ix-x). Often, they appear ‘during the periods of gender and racial tension in the United States that challenged these hierarchies—for example, during the colonial confrontation with Native Americans and during the Civil War’ (p. ix-x). Stimpson goes on to explain that these accounts usually tell the story of brutal, murderous group of savages who capture ‘a frail, vulnerable white woman.’ Traditionally, these savages are American Indians or in some cases they are black. According to

Stimpson, they ‘threaten to rape and enslave the white woman. White men must kill them in order to rescue the woman and restore her to civilized society’ (p. ix-x).

This interlocking system of racial and gender hierarchies has more or less informed much of American history and its literature. However, as Brian Edwards argues in his essay ‘Disorienting Captivity’, we cannot claim ‘too neat a continuity between the captivity narratives of the eighteenth and twenty first centuries’ (2010, p. 364). Shifts have occurred inevitably in American society that have also affected the way these hierarchies are perceived. One way in which we can better understand this shift, Edwards suggests, is through ‘something we can call tentatively American Orientalism’ (p. 362). Edwards begins to situate American Orientalism, like the Orientalism described by Edward Said, as having a ‘dual focus on the putatively exotic other and his customs’ (p. 362). But then he quickly adds to this by arguing that American Orientalism is much more complicated, for not only does it revolve around the relationship of the us/them, but added to this for Americans has been the presence of a ‘European other’ who is ‘always present in the background or foreground, as a model, negative or not, of imperial political presence’ (p. 362). Moreover, he argues, America’s global hegemony in mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, at the wake of globalization, transnationalism and multiculturalism, further complicated the situation, so that the dichotomy and hierarchy that informs Orientalist discourses can no longer be neatly divided by a racial boundary.

Twentieth century America was a postmodern nation, as Melanie McAlister points out, ‘in which territory, community, and political affiliations were reconfigured’ (2005, p. 6). In this society, Iranians, Arabs, Asians, and Latinos—all those who were essentially the Other—were as American as the descendants of early settlers. In this new America, migrants, like Iranians, had integrated and had gradually become part of the fabric of American society. Consequently, racial barriers that defined American superiority became more porous. In this America, as Dominic Tierney puts it, ‘to be American is not to hark from a particular ethnicity, but to profess a creed of liberal ideals rooted in the ideas of John Locke: freedom, individualism, democracy, limited government, the rule of law, and free expression’ (2010, p. 134).

In this new America, the captivity narrative continued to exist, but it, too, changed its shape to reflect the complexity of the new society. These narratives no longer told of domestic encounters and threats of captivity from the native Other. Instead, they

told of American adventures in a globalized, international world, where American citizens were being held hostage by Others in exotic and distant locales. These American citizens were no longer the Puritan Anglo settlers, but a cross-culture of a variety of people who were part of the American nation. Their encounter and capture in other countries, was no longer simply a threat to the racial hierarchies that early Americans had assumed as the creed of their nation state, but the capture and threat of these multi-racial Americans was a threat to the very ideological cores that distinguished America from other nations.

Throughout America's encounter with the Other on an international scale, the Middle East and the Muslim Other has greatly excited the American imagination. Although this relationship between Middle East, Islam and America is far more complicated than could be addressed in this thesis, it is important to note that there has been great enthusiasm by the American media about the encounter of Americans with the Middle Eastern Muslim Other. As Douglas Little argues in *American Orientalism*, 'few parts of the world have become as deeply embedded in the U.S popular imagination as the Middle East' (2005, p. 9). One of Little's arguments throughout his book revolves around the way this encounter has been represented in American media, which he believes, has been 'reflected in everything from feature films and best-selling novels to political cartoons and popular magazines' (p. 10). Among these, as McAlister also observes 'tales about the capture and rescue of hostages have been told and told again -- in novels, autobiographies and, later, in movies and TV' (2003). These works as Edwards puts forth have been filled with 'sensationalistic accounts in the mainstream press that would reincorporate a period two centuries or more ago in the vocabulary and logic of the period' (2010, p. 340).

Although the American encounter with the Middle East and the American captivity in the region, dates back to the earlier days of American history, according to McAlister it reached its 'television-age apotheosis only with the Iranian [hostage] crisis' (2003). The American hostage crisis, as it unfolded, was one of the most widely covered stories in American television history, gaining as much attention as civil rights, Vietnam and Watergate (McAlister, 2005, p. 198). The representation, reception and interest of the American hostage crisis in Iran, as McAlister believes was very much informed by the captivity narrative. As she argues, 'the discourse of terrorist threat formed in the context of the Iran hostage crisis depended on the

underlying structure of [early American] captivity narrative' (p. 199). The sensationalistic media coverage of the 444 day event, as Catherine Scott also observes, 'echoed Puritan captivity stories of confrontation with the "other," [with] fears of innocents being violated, and the call upon heroic leadership to rescue both the hostages and the nation from threats to American identity' (2000, p. 178). In this saga, Iranians replaced native Americans, and 'the hostages in Iran, like those early captives came to represent an entire nation in its conflict with another culture; the public concern over their captivity was part of a larger story about national identity, foreign policy, and racial constructs' (McAlister 2005, p. 199).

The Iranian hostage crisis and its aftermath gave rise to a frenzy of books, television shows, and movies that dealt with threats to American national and cultural identity. Among the books, however, one that most closely replicated the earlier captivity narrative in an Iranian setting was Betty Mahmoody's still-best-selling memoir, *Not Without My Daughter* (1984). Set in Iran, after the hostage crisis and in the early days of the Islamic government, it tells the true story of Betty, an American woman's captivity in Iran at the hands of her own husband and her eventual dangerous escape to America. Mahmoody's narrative, emerging at a time when the hostage situation was still fresh in the psyche of American readership, resonated elements of the captivity narrative in a modern setting, and reminded people of the hostility and cultural differences that existed between America and Iran.

However, accounts such as Mahmoody's became popular, not only because they were timely and capitalized on America's conflicted relationship with Iran, but also because they offered glimpses into the lives of Middle Eastern women. In Western and American encounters with the Middle East and Iran, women have always been shrouded in mystery. The dichotomous structure of Iranian society had not only made it impossible for women to speak of their own experiences, but had made it even more difficult for non-Iranians to understand details of Iranian women's lives. This has been a cause of curiosity for the Western world, which desperately wanted to unravel and demystify details of the lives of veiled Middle Eastern women.

Additionally, the recent political situation following the events of 9/11, and the particular interest in women's issues after America's declaration of 'war on terror,' has constructed a new interest in narratives by and about Iranian and Middle Eastern women. The lack of women's voices, coupled with an American mission to 'rescue'

these women, as Jasmin Darznik puts it, created ‘an insatiable curiosity for both the intimate details of [their] lives and descriptions of forbidden landscapes’ (2008, p. 57). It is within this context that recent diasporic Iranian women’s memoirs have been received, consumed and interpreted. Such narratives, like modern captivity narratives, in a time of continued conflict with Iran, highlight certain elements of the cultural hierarchy that American society continues to uphold.

Among the many narratives that have been emerging by Iranian writers, the memoir has become particularly popular for Western readers, as opposed to fictional narratives of the same accounts, because of what it offers its readers. Because of its intimate nature, the memoir promises first hand experiences from spaces that were previously inaccessible to Western readers. Heavily invested in the personal and emotional life of its narrator, it ‘offers lived experiences; it professes subjective truths; and [...] it signals to the reader an intended fidelity to history and memory’ (Whitlock 2007, p. 12). This creates a personal bond between narrator and reader, which ‘engages the reader powerfully, imaginatively, [and] intimately’ (p. 12). Given the nature of the memoir, it is bound by an autobiographical pact, which assumes that there is a degree of truthful relationship between what the narrator has experienced and the world outside. Although this ‘truth’ might be variable depending on from whose perspective these accounts are narrated, there is a general assumption that the memoir has the ability to bring to the reader, to the world outside, insider truth about certain aspects of life. Middle Eastern Women’s memoirs, in particular, then have become popular because of their ability to offer supposedly rare and insightful glimpses into forbidden landscapes of women’s lives in the Middle East. As Whitlock puts it, these ‘life narrative[s] [are] of course one of the most seductive forms for the projection and naturalization of the exotic and an offering of authentic others’ (2007, p. 54).

In addition to this, it is the human connection created through the memoir between the narrator and the reader that has readers taking up these narratives, time and again, ‘emphatically, identifying in and through trauma and in terms of human rights campaigns for social justice that play to Western traditions of benevolence’ (Whitlock 2007, p. 12). It is this interest in the private lives of Middle Eastern women, embedded in historical and political influences, that, according to Whitlock, ‘allows these life narratives to move from East to West rapidly and to become highly

valued commodities for a “primed” readership’ (p. 13). Among these, in the post 9/11 apotheoses of Middle Eastern memoirs, Iranian women’s memoirs have been particularly appealing for an American readership because of the still-lingering bitter resonances of the hostage crisis. As Whitlock observes, ‘contemporary memoir from Iran attracts American readers again now, and it revisits and folds the events of the Islamic revolution and its aftermath into the present one more time’ (p. 163). Emerging at the height of tensions between Iran and America these narratives were received by ‘the curious and uniformed American readership eager to know about Iran and primed for the stories of disenchantment by exiles’ (p. 165). It is no wonder, then, that after 9/11 there was a sudden rise in the number of memoirs by diasporic Iranian women. Between 2003 to date Iranian women have published over forty books with reputable publishers, most recounting a delayed yet timely account of the Islamic revolution and its traumatic consequences in hindsight of conflicts between Iran and America.

The socio-political and historical context into which these books are received, coupled with certain expectations of the memoir form, has inevitably affected the way these memoirs are produced, received and consumed. These aspects influence the patterns of production, consumption and interpretation of diasporic Iranian women’s memoirs. As French theorist Gerard Genette argues in his book *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* (1997), all literary works consist of accompanying elements, beyond their actual words and content, that ‘mediate the book to the reader.’ These elements, which he calls paratexts are essentially influenced by the socio-political and cultural situation of the time in which a book becomes part of the public domain. Paratexts, according to Genette, are elements that are within and outside the book, which he distinguishes as peritexts and epitexts. While peritexts are all those elements between and on the cover of the bound copy of a book, including ‘titles and subtitles, pseudonyms, forwards, dedications, epigraphs, prefaces, intertitles, notes and afterwards’ (p. xviii), as well as the visual imagery of the cover, epitexts are elements beyond the bound copy such as interviews, reviews, and scholarly examination which are also heavily influenced by both the private history of the author and the public history of the situation into which books are received. An examination of the paratextual elements, according to Genette, can help critics and readers better situate and understand a book. He believes,



defining a paratextual element consists of determining its location (the question of *where?*); the date of its appearance and if need be its disappearance (*when?*); the mode of its existence, verbal or other (*how?*); the characteristics of its situation of communication – its sender and addressee (*from whom? to whom?*); and the functions that its message aims to fulfill (*to do what?*) (p. 4)

In examining diasporic Iranian women's memoirs, paratexts have played a particularly significant part in the way these accounts are constructed, received and consumed. In *Soft Weapons*, Whitlock examines in detail how paratexts have affected the production and consumption of Afghan women's memoirs after 9/11. In what follows, this study draws on and extends Whitlock's argument to paratexts that surround diasporic Iranian women's memoirs. This analysis, like Whitlock's, examines these memoirs as products produced and received at the juncture of America's declaration of war on terror after 9/11, and the developing interest in Middle Eastern women's lives. However, it extends this, and argues that as much as being influenced by the recent socio-political events, the popularity of these books are also due to the fact they are framed to replicate a new kind of American Orientalist captivity narrative, particularly one which still hinges on the legacy of hostilities between Iran and America as the result of the hostage crisis in hindsight of renewed conflicts between Iran and America. What is examined in the remaining part of this chapter is how these paratexts, which are heavily influenced by the socio-political and historical background have, as Catherine Burwell argues, constructed a pattern of reception and consumption that has 'predefined the discursive space in which [these] works are received [...] [generating] particular *modes* of reading' (2007, p. 288), often regardless of the actual content of the book. Then it argues that this predefined space can be seen as transforming the memoir from one that is supposed to give voice, to one that can inevitably lead to a different kind of silence.

### *Paratexts*

If we walk into any major bookstore today in any Western country, it is the peritexts, covers, titles and the blurbs, that attract us to the books by Iranian and Middle Eastern women. Upon entering these bookstores, we are confronted with rows and rows of half-veiled faces of women or of women with the veil loosely hung around their neck or body, peering out with exotic eyes. While this has become convention for books that deal with Middle Eastern women's issues, particularly for the memoir



or autobiography, a survey of Iranian women's memoirs in particular, reveals how telling these covers are of the formulated space into which these narratives are received. Of the fifty or so memoirs published by Iranian women over the last thirty years, nearly half comply with this formula. These images (some seen in the pages ahead) are the first point of communication and interaction between the book and the potential readers.

If we look at these veiled images closely, particularly in an American setting, they are telling of an American Orientalism that affects the way these books are marketed and consumed. The presence of the veil operates on several layers that invite curious readers to pick up these books. On the one hand the image of a chador-clad woman, an indistinguishable figure in the shadows, such as on the covers of *My Prison*, *My Home* and *Persian Girls*, appeal to the stereotypical Western imagination of Middle Eastern women. Women, here, are shadowy figures, hidden in the backgrounds, without any agency, just as the Western reader imagines her. The chador-clad figure is the symbol of the passive and silenced woman and her appearance on the cover is an invitation for unveiling by the Western reader.

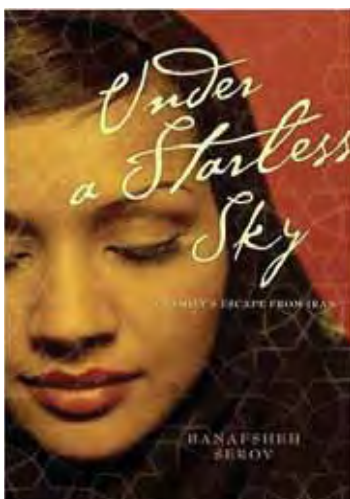
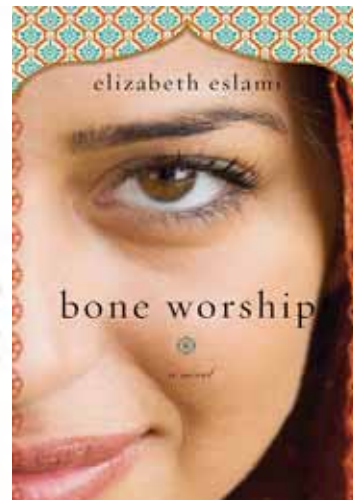
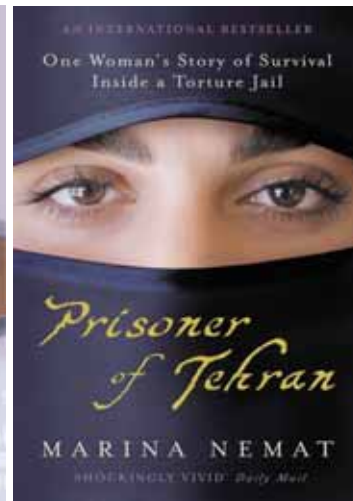
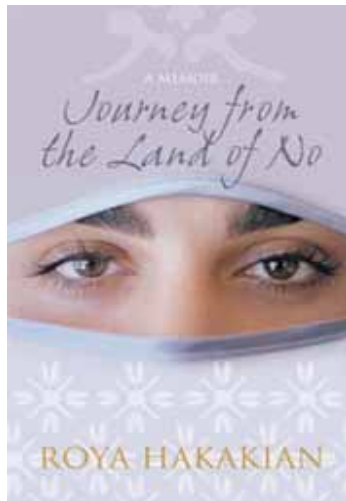
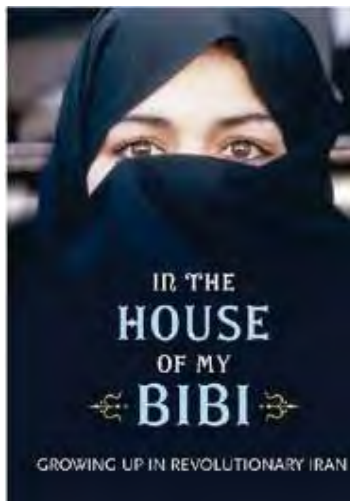
On the other hand, others dare to break this silence and are stepping forward to seek recognition. The veiled women, with only their eyes peering out at the viewers, as in the covers of *Unveiled*, *Out of Iran*, *Prisoner of Tehran*, and *Journey from the Land of No*, *Rage Against the Veil*, *In the House of the Bibi*, and *Watch Me*, are inviting and yet challenging the viewer/reader to pick up the book to enter into their mysterious, hidden world. The eyes in these images, sharp in focus, distinguishes each woman from the other under the veil, a humanizing strategy suggesting that the woman behind the veil 'can look back at the spectator mute but eloquent' (Whitlock 2007, p. 59). However, what is interesting to note is that despite this humanizing strategy, there is a sense of generalization, a kind of 'one woman's story is every woman's story' approach. If we look, for instance, at the covers of *Journey From the Land of No* and an edition of *Prisoner of Tehran*, it is the same eyes that are peering back at us, hinting at the similarity of these two narratives. All of these images despite their slight variation, tap 'into a [Western] fantasy of the illicit penetration of the hidden and gendered spaces of the "Islamic World"' (p. 58). They are 'invit[ing] and encourag[ing] the Western imperial gaze, offering Westerners a glimpse into the presumably forbidden world beneath the veil' (Whitlock 2008, p. 81).

This invitation is almost a call for acknowledgement by the Western reader, an appeal for recognition, by women who have so far been silenced in their own country. However, the fact that the Western reader is involved in this act of unveiling and recognition operates on an acceptance of cultural dichotomy between the narrator and the reader, appealing, as Whitlock also reminds us, to the Western tradition of benevolence. It is only by the book being picked up by the Western reader that Iranian women can be recognized and thereby regain their sense of subjectivity. This recognition, however, operates on a presumption that Iranian women are oppressed, and imprisoned behind the veil, and who need Western readers/values to liberate them from their social imprisonment.

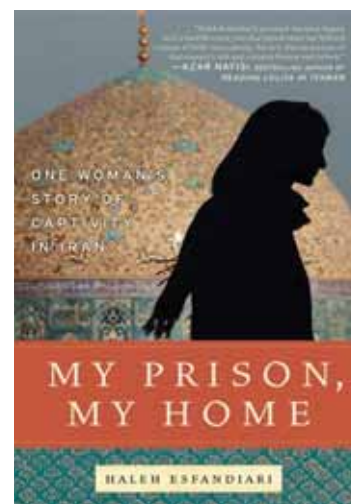
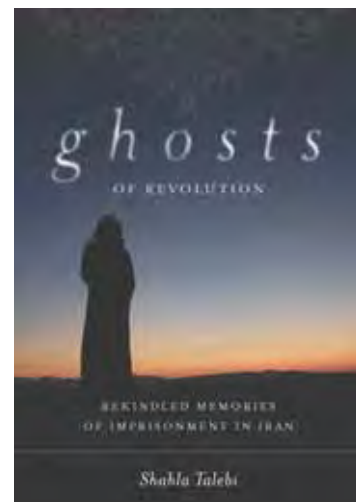
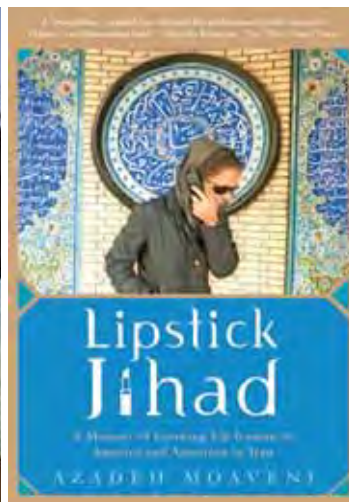
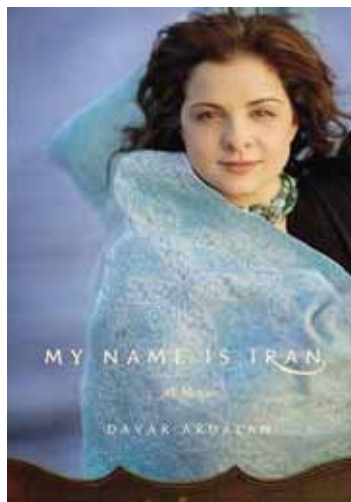
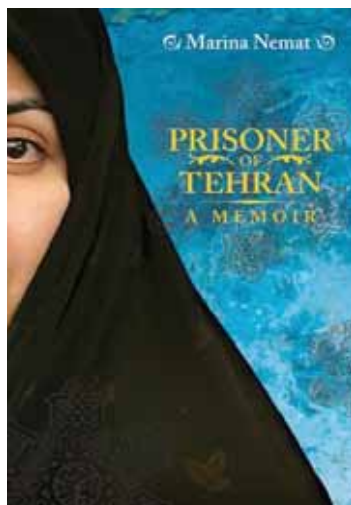
The use of the images of young veiled girls—the kind of pictures usually used for passports, birth certificates, and school records in Iran—on such covers as *Living in Hell*, and *The Last Living Slut*, further highlights the dichotomy and the seemingly oppressive force on women's lives in Iran. On the cover of Omid's *Living in Hell* this message is more emphasized as the girl's face is framed, bound, almost branded with the logo of the Islamic republic, indicating her oppression under the regime.

On another note, the image of the unveiled woman with the scarf around her neck, staring straight at the camera, invites the reader into a different kind of story. These women, like Saberi and Davaran, on the covers of *My Name is Iran* and *Between Two Worlds* appear liberated. They have taken the chance to speak for themselves in line with the Western traditions of freedom of speech. They are inviting the viewers to read about their passage from oppression to freedom. Here, their stories are not so much about the oppression, but about the process of liberation, and unveiling. These women have demystified themselves, by unveiling, and are offering curious readers a chance to glimpse into their lives.

The titles and promotional blurbs also heighten these elements by feeding off the current socio-political interest of the time in which the books are marketed. A survey of titles reveals an almost equally conventional set of key phrases that appear on the titles of many of these memoirs as the cover images. Titles like, *Unveiled: Life and Death Among the Ayatollahs*, *Out of Iran: One Woman's Escape from the Ayatollahs*, *In the House of Bibi: Growing up in Revolutionary Iran*, *Honeymoon in Tehran: Two Years of Love and Danger in Iran*, and *Rage Against the Veil: the*







*Courageous Life and Death of an Islamic Dissident*, draw on the urgency of life, death, and revolution, and debated issues of veil and unveiling. They feed into American Orientalist perspectives, and are as Whitlock argues, 'designed to grab the Western eye and with a glimpse of absolute difference, of the exotic' (Whitlock 2007, p. 59). At a time of America's declared 'war on terror,' and Iran's presence in the axis of evil, these titles feed into this discourse and are 'a way of positioning them for metropolitan markets' (p. 59). Other titles, such as Haleh Esfandiari's *My Prison, My Home: One Woman's Captivity in Iran* and Roxana Saberi's *Between Two Worlds: My Life and Captivity in Iran*, directly draw on well-known American tradition of captivity as they once again reframe the story of the American(-Iranian) woman caught this time in the web of extremist society. In both Esfandiari and Saberi's titles the word captivity, juxtaposed with the word Iran, reminiscent of the hostage crisis and looming hostility between Islam, the West and Iran and America, transforms them immediately into accounts of modern American captivity narrative.

In framing the way these texts are received and consumed, epitexts, such as the media, scholarly articles and reviews, also play a crucial role. In examining the importance of epitexts in the way these books are framed, Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* is particularly interesting. When Azar Nafisi had the idea of writing a memoir-in-books about a private book club that she conducted with seven of her students and her life in Tehran between 1979 and 1997, Random House bought the concept for \$30,000 in 1999 with the promise of a small print run of only 12,000. (Burwell 2007, p. 290; Whitlock 2007, p. 21) However, the events of 9/11 and ensuing war in Iraq, which brought with it a sudden interest in Middle Eastern women's memoirs, reshaped *Reading Lolita in Tehran's* publication so that by the time it reached print, orders from bookstores had surged to over 50,000. When the paperback was released in 2004 it sold over a million copies worldwide and remained on *The New York Times* best-seller list for over seventy weeks. (Burwell 2007, p. 290; Whitlock 2007, p. 21)

If we examine the reasons for *Reading Lolita in Tehran's* success, peritexts, without a doubt, have played a significant role. The cover of the book, depicting two veiled girls bowing their heads reading something (*Lolita* perhaps) beyond our view,

immediately places the book as one in line with all the other Middle Eastern women's memoirs that speak of the Muslim woman's veiled silence and oppression. The blurbs on the back also intensify this effect for the readers. On the back of the paperback edition, the blurb reads, 'Azar Nafisi's luminous tale offers [...] us a rare glimpse, from the inside, of women's lives in revolutionary Iran,' followed by a praise from Susan Sontag, 'Azar Nafisi's memoir contains important reflections about the ravages of theocracy, about thoughtfulness, and about the ordeals of freedom.' The emphasis on Nafisi's 'rare' insider account about the lives of Iranian women, followed by another successful writer's affirmation of the book as offering 'important reflections' on 'theocracy' and 'ordeals of freedom,' according to Burwell, not only plays on the reader's interest by 'exploiting stereotypes of oppression [...] in order to sell the memoir' (2007, p. 291) but more importantly it points to "'preferred" ways of reading and responding to such books' (p. 291). In this way, the blurb reframes and highlights Nafisi's oppression and life under the Islamic regime as its dominant theme and frames the reader's interpretation within discourses of American Orientalism, particularly at a time of renewed conflict between America and Iran. Thus, Nafisi's voice and her intention for writing has already been glossed over by the intentions of the publishers and preferred modes of reading, even before the reader has opened the first page of the book.

But in framing how Nafisi's book is received and consumed, *epitexts*, those materials outside the bound volume, like scholarly engagements and critiques, media releases, interviews, analyses, and reviews, have played a more important role than those elements on the bound volume. In the case of *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, scholarly essays in particular have been fundamental to the way this book has been received and consumed. When *Reading Lolita in Tehran* appeared, it brought with it a huge wave of scholarly essays and critiques—a search for scholarly articles that deal with *Reading Lolita in Tehran* reveals hundreds of essays—that have received and interpreted Nafisi's account from various, and sometimes times contradictory, perspectives. One of the most recurring arguments by scholars (Bahramitash 2005; Rastegar 2006; Dabashi 2006; Burwell 2007; Donadeh & Ahmed-Ghosh 2008) is that the book generalizes the position of all Iranian women as static and oppressed, who can only be saved and freed through

Western intervention (in this case Western books), conforming thereby to a kind of American Orientalist discourse.

Received at a time of America's declaration of war on terror, they argue, this could be seen as advocating military intervention in the region for the sake of women's liberation. While Roksana Bahramitash accuses Nafisi of contributing to Islamophobia as she writes, 'Nafisi's selective and partial view of Iran is not innocent but seems to have a particular agenda, namely to contribute to the Islamophobia that already exists in North America' (2006, p. 233), Hamid Dabashi, a prominent Iranian Professor at Columbia University, makes a personal attack against Nafisi. In his famous essay 'Native Informers and the Making of the American Empire,' (2006) he compares Nafisi with colonial agents in India and accuses her of being 'the personification of that native informer and colonial agent, polishing her services for an American version of the same project', arguing 'if Edward Said dismantled the edifice of Orientalism, Azar Nafisi is recruited to re-accredit it.' He concludes 'rarely has an Oriental servant of a white-identified, imperial design managed to pack so many services to imperial hubris abroad and racist elitism at home—all in one act.'

Although there is no denying that Nafisi's memoir, not only in its paratexts but also in its content, does tend to take part in a self-orientalization discourse, that is nothing new if we look at the Western educated class of Iranian women who have been writing about their experiences in Iran over the last decade. One might say that for critics the great popularity of the book had the effect of emphasizing its self-Orientalizing qualities. As it will be addressed in the final chapter of this study, Iranian women who have been educated and raised abroad with Western values have a tendency towards self-orientalization. This may appear unpleasant and hypocritical, especially when they claim to write to liberate themselves and others, but in this process they appear to be replicating and affirming the position of Iranian women as silent and oppressed. However, what needs to be kept in mind is that despite this tendency, they cannot be so easily marked as personal native informants or agents for a specific cause. Critics who are quick to point fingers at individual allegiances must keep in mind that often these narratives do not have a deliberate intention to pursue a certain discourse; rather, the socio-political context into which they are received can direct their interpretation in certain ways. In fact, if ever they



# READING LOLITA IN TEHRAN

*A Memoir in Books*

AZAR NAFISI





have a chance to break this cycle through their narration, these kinds of interpretations by the very scholars who criticize them are contributing to strengthening preferred modes of readings. These readings eradicate other aspects of these works, certainly overlooking the narratives as personal accounts of healing.

While these modes of reading were very much influenced by a kind of post-911 American Orientalism, one which anchored military attack on the basis of women's issues, the 2009 controversial and unresolved presidential elections brought a new angle for approaching diasporic Iranian memoirs. After the events of 2009, we begin to see fewer and fewer memoirs of the Islamic revolution. No longer do we have exotic eyes staring at us from behind the veil. Instead, a glimpse at the recent books by Iranian writers reveals accounts that deal with current protests and issues in Iran. The paratexts that surround these books also frame them within the current socio-political post-2009 interest in Iran's condition for a Western audience.

It is these new social concerns, for instance, that have framed Haleh Esfandiari's *My Prison, My Home* and Roxanna Saberi's *Between Two Worlds*, both of which tell of the two Iranian-American women's imprisonment in Iran. Although both women recount their experiences prior to the 2009 elections, their books are framed in line with the recent interest in Iran after the elections and emphasize a new kind of modern American captivity narrative. Haleh Esfandiari a prominent scholar working on women's issues in the Middle East, was imprisoned in Tehran in January 2007 while on one of her annual trips to visit her 93 year-old mother. Initially robbed, in what appeared to be a coincidental roadside mugging on her way to the airport, during which all her travel documents were stolen, Esfandiari soon finds herself involved with charges of leading a 'velvet revolution' and 'threat against the government.' Eventually the 67 year-old who had lived in America with her husband since late 1970s, is taken to Evin and put in solitary confinement for over three months where she is questioned regularly in relation to the Wilson Cultural Centre for which she worked in the United States as the director of its Middle East section. Although while in custody Esfandiari was almost incommunicado, news of her captivity in Iran traveled far and wide through her husband, also a prominent scholar of Middle East affairs. Soon her case became one of the biggest news headlines in America with constant media coverage worldwide. The verbal and visual discourse that surrounded her captivity in the media

replicated those of the earlier Iranian hostage crisis for American audiences as reporters, writers, and analysts around the world drew direct allusions to the thirty year old event. Esfandiari's own husband, Shaul Baksh for instance, was among one of those who contributed to this comparison as he published an op-ed piece in the *New York Times*, entitled 'Our Family Hostage Crisis.' (2007) Other media outlets, too, picked up this rhetoric, many emphasizing Esfandiari's American nationality. CNN, for instance, ran a series of articles on their website, with titles such as 'Detained American Appears to Confess on State TV' and 'Iran Releases American After Mother Posts Bail.' Similarly *Washington Post* published an article in which Esfandiari was identified as an American scholar from Potomac, only briefly mentioning her dual nationality. The BBC too published an article titled 'Bush Urges Iran to Free American.'

Throughout the saga of an American woman caught in brutal forces of Islamic extremism, there was also an emphasis on Esfandiari as a frail American woman, in the claws of an inhumane system. Every mention of Esfandiari in the media without fail points to her as a sixty-seven year old grandmother of two. *Timesonline* reporter Christina Lamb, for instance writes, 'It is hard to imagine how anyone could have thought this 67-year-old grandmother visiting her frail 93-year-old mother in Tehran was a threat. But to the Iranian authorities she was the key figure in an American plot to bring down the regime' (2010). In a photo essay after her release, the *Washington Post* emphasized her sense of family values and domesticity as it captured her in reunion with her family as a loving American grandmother unwrapping Christmas presents with her granddaughters, and in another, lovingly looking into her daughter's eyes as they hug (Wright 2007).

Two years later a similar story was repeated when Roxanna Saberi a freelance journalist working on a book in Iran was arrested on charges of espionage in 2009. This time, however, instead of an aging grandmother, it was a 31 year-old 'American journalist of Iranian and Japanese descent' a former American beauty queen from Fargo North Dakota, who was captured. Soon after her arrest, pictures of Saberi in her bathing suit competition popped up all over the internet in contrast to images of her chador-clad with camera in hand in Iran. Once again headlines attracted audiences by titles that hinted at an American journalist's captivity in Iran. Titles such as 'The Roxanna Saberi Hostage Crisis: Day Eight and Counting,'

became common google return hits for Roxanna Saberi. A similar series of events occurred for Saberi as it did for Esfandiari. Once more, petitions were signed, web pages were made, politicians intervened and Saberi was eventually released.

Although both women's capture occurred prior to the controversial 2009 presidential elections of Iran, their books were released after the world had already encountered brutal videos and accounts of the post-election protests and one could clearly see this change in the way these books were framed. By then, it was the Iranian government's human rights violations against its people that were making headlines around the world, and Evin prison had become as well-known as Abu Ghraib. There was a clear shift in the political atmosphere and world interest in Iran. Instead of interest in the silences of Iranian women who had now been seen fighting side by side the men in opposition groups, the world became interested in Iran's human rights violations. When Esfandiari and Saberi's books came out in 2009 and 2010 respectively, they, too, were framed to reflect this renewed media interest as they promised to bring insider accounts of the condition of prisons and Iran's struggles for freedom. The blurb on the back of Saberi's audiobook for instance, reads,

Now Saberi breaks her silence to share the full account of her ordeal, describing in vivid detail the methods that Iranian hard-liners are using to try to intimidate and control many of the country's people. *Between Two Worlds* is also a deeply revealing account of this tumultuous country and the ongoing struggle for freedom that is being fought inside Evin Prison and on the streets of Iran.

The blurb attracts a curious audience to a personal story, an insider account, one that can expose and bring to light what is going on in Evin. But at the same time, it promises an insight into the political situation of this 'tumultuous country.' This statement is immediately followed by a praise from Shirin Ebadi, the Iranian Noble Peace Prize winner, an expert on human rights violations in Iran, as she declares, '*Between Two Worlds* is an extraordinary story of how an innocent young woman got caught up in the current of political events and met individuals whose stories vividly depict human rights violations in Iran.' Ebadi's statement heightens the rhetoric of the captivity narrative, as it highlights Saberi as a young innocent woman, caught in an unforgiving political situation. Once again, by emphasizing its vivid depiction of human rights violations, it is directed toward readers who wish to understand more about the situation.

Reviews and praises for Haleh Esfandiari's book also frame the book in a similar fashion where they are listed on her website (<http://www.halehesfandiari.net>). Lisa Bonso of the *Washington Post*, for example, writes, the book 'goes well beyond the headlines by deftly weaving personal narrative with a political history of modern Iran.' 'Experts' like Madeline Albright, write, 'from the threads of history and personal experience, Haleh Esfandiari has woven a masterful memoir. *My Prison, My Home* is an intimate tale of bravery in the face of ignorance set against the larger tragedy of U.S.-Iran relations. Esfandiari's story—timely, suspenseful and artfully told—will fascinate experts and general readers alike.' The emphasis on Esfandiari's personal account, told parallel to the larger political context of U.S-Iran relations, contextualizes this book within a current context that is of interest for readers: not only does it promise to unravel the life of an Iranian (American) woman, but it does so in light of the recent conflicts.

Interest in post-election Iran has brought more than a new discursive frame within which diasporic Iranian women's memoirs are received. Rather, it has brought with it newly found interest in Iranian men's narratives to the point that in the last two years Iranian men have published three well-received memoirs. The well-known prominent Iranian journalist Houshang Asadi, for instance, published his memoir *Letters to my Torturer: Love, Revolution, and Imprisonment in Iran* in 2010 recounting his ordeal with the Iranian regimes over several decades. Similarly, Arash Hejazi, the man who tried to save the life of the famous protestor Neda Agha Soltani who was shot dead on the streets of Tehran during the post-election protests in 2009, published his memoir *The Gaze of the Gazelle* in late 2011. Similarly, Reza Kahlili published his thriller spy memoir, *A Time to Betray* in 2010.

While the final chapter of this thesis will analyze the growing presence of Iranian men in diasporic Iranian literature as a new genre of its own, and the reasons for their sudden popularity, here I want to pay special attention to paratexts that frame diasporic Iranian men's memoirs through an analysis of Reza Kahlili's *A Time To Betray: The Astonishing Double Life of a CIA Agent Inside the Revolutionary Guards of Iran*. Using Reza Kahlili as a pseudonym to avoid recognition by both the Iranian and CIA agencies, the narrator tells of his life as a CIA operative inside the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, Iran's notorious secret service currently responsible for the clampdowns on protestors. The bold cover of this book, unlike

any other diasporic Iranian memoir, speaks directly to urgent interests of the market. The cover has a large image of the current Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad framed by the Iranian flag above, and the American flag below, and the words A TIME TO BETRAY stamped with large lettering on the Iranian flag. That an image of the most unfavorable Iranian president after the Islamic revolution, both by Iranians and the Western world, appears as the cover of a popular book is indicative of a major shift in the way these books are produced and marketed. To place Ahmadinejad's gazing image between the Iranian and American flags, positions him as the man who is leading the polarizing relationship between America and Iran. At the same time, given his unpopularity amongst Iranians following the post-election protests and horrific human rights violations, Ahmadinejad is not only presented as an enemy of the United States, but as also an enemy of his own people. As a representative of the Islamic government, he is the one who is separating Iranian people from living with values, such as freedom of speech, and respect for human life, that the Western/American society upholds with pride. Kahlili's book, starting from its very cover, thus, is a challenge to the concept of us/them. Given the recent news from Iran and people's opposition to the regime, there has been a clear distinction between the Iranian government and its people. Unlike at the time of the hostage crisis when Iranians were collectively viewed as hostage takers, now Iranian people are no longer seen merely as anti-American fanatics. Considering the Iranian government's conflict with the American government, and Iranian people's recent opposition against the Iranian government, then the Iranian population could be seen in favorable light by Americans because they appear to be fighting the same enemy. The blurb on the back of the book, too, hinges on this dichotomy as it promises to take us on a man's mission to infiltrate the Iranian government and help overthrow it. The blurb on the dust jacket reads,

As Reza, a member of the elite Guards, my role was to look and act the part of a devout Muslim enforcing all the new rules laid down by the mullahs. A full black beard was a mandatory accessory to the Guards' uniform, and I sported one along with every other member of the Guards. Playing the part of a zealot did not come naturally to me, and there were times I had to do things I dreaded. [...] Back in Iran now, I knew that I would have to try and convince myself that doing these things allowed me to maintain my role—and maintaining my role allowed me to contribute to the downfall of the organization to which I so fervently imitated allegiance.



# A TIME TO BETRAY

The Astonishing Double Life of a CIA Agent  
inside the Revolutionary Guards of Iran



The framing of Kahlili's book brings to our attention a new kind of captivity and freedom narrative. This is not the captivity of a single man or woman; rather it is the captivity of a nation at the hands of a regime that must be overthrown in order for its people to gain freedom. Indeed, epitexts that surround this book frame it in light of this new form of captivity narrative. In an online interview with Steffan Piper, Kahlili, confirms this as tells the interviewer, 'the establishment as a whole must be changed, otherwise the regime will continue what it does best – terrorizing its own people and the rest of the world' (Kahlili 2011). Another reviewer, Joel Rosenberg, reads the book in the same frame on his blog, as he writes, 'Reza is a man clearly on a mission: to liberate the people of Iran from one of the most evil monstrosities of our time, especially before Iran gets nuclear warhead' (2011).

This chapter so far, through an examination of the above examples, has demonstrated how paratexts have influenced the way that Iranian life narratives are produced and consumed in light of socio-political interests. However, what we need to remember is that these paratexts have constructed specific modes of reading and frameworks within which these narratives are received. These frameworks, however, can be limiting and may lead to further silences. Recalling Oliver's argument that 'if recognition is conceived as being conferred on others by the dominant group, then it merely repeats the dynamic of hierarchies' (2001, p. 9) then the framework within which these books are received could be seen as repeating the very oppression that their authors are attempting to dismantle. Produced and received at the juncture of a conflicted relationship between Iran and America, these books can easily be framed within a discourse that emphasizes the cultural and political differences between Iran and America. Thus, they are not only lending themselves to interpretations within existing frames of reading, such as American Orientalism and captivity narratives, but also forming new ones, as we have seen with books emerging after the 2009 elections.

This is not to say that writers and critics are oblivious to this discourse. Some, for instance, have tried to defy these predefined modes of reading and are more self-conscious in the way their work speaks to the public. Fatemeh Keshavarz, for instance, in her memoir *Jasmine and Stars: Reading More than Lolita in Tehran* (2007) tries to reframe the position of Iran, starting even from the cover of her book.



FATEMEH KESHAVARZ

# Jasmine and Stars

Reading More Than *Lolita* in Tehran



Instead of using the conventional cover of passive exotic women gazing at the viewer, for instance, her book shows two modern Iranian girls with sunglasses, actively holding up signs, one reading 'We, women want equal rights,' and the other, 'violence against women equals violence against humanity.'

Others like Massoumeh Ebtekar, the spokeswoman for the students who captured the American embassy in 1980, have written memoirs in an attempt to break the stereotypes that surround Iran and Iranians as violent hostage takers. In a memoir called *Takeover in Tehran: The Inside Story of the 1979 U.S Embassy Capture* (2000), Ebtekar, now one of Iran's leading reformist women, writes about her perspective and the perspective of those who participated in the hostage-taking. Throughout the book she argues that over the years, accounts about the hostage crisis have all been from the Western perspective, reflecting 'not a single Iranian viewpoint, not a single Iranian voice' (p. 34). She goes on to write that,

this book—which breaks that silence for the first time in print—is intended as a long-needed corrective to the stereotypical account of which I speak, and as an antidote to the distorted images conveyed by the world media not only during and immediately after the capture of the embassy, but right up to this day. (p. 34)

Believing that the cultural gap between developed and developing countries 'has grown wider over the last twenty years,' with one of the primary sources of this gap being 'the inaccurate or even biased reporting of Western media of events that have captured the imagination of millions in developing countries' (p. 34), she hopes that her memoir will help close that gap by offering a dialogue. She asks,

Can the misconceptions and misjudgments which have been created by years of conscious disinformation ever be put right, I wondered, as I began the task of sifting through my notes, diaries and memories? Can the American and Iranian peoples ever hope to overcome the barriers of propaganda and fiery rhetoric that now stands between them, and finally come to understand one another? The only way—and this is the ultimate aim of my account of the fateful events of 1979 and 1980 in Tehran—to alleviate tensions between the two nations, is to engage the two diverse and different cultures in a constructive dialogue. (p. 34)

But unfortunately, among all the books that conform to the conventions and are framed within particular frameworks to reflect the ongoing tensions between Iran and America, Ebtekar's memoir went almost unnoticed, receiving almost no attention from the media or reviewers. The lack of adequate acknowledgement of a

historical memoir by an Iranian woman that could shed new light and demystify one of the most significant events in recent American and Iranian history, points to the predefinition of the space into which these narratives are received. What this means is that, despite having the freedom of speech to speak of those events, she has remained silent.

While beyond any doubt, the memoir in diaspora has, as Stephen Kaufman believes, provided Iranian women with 'the opportunity to tell their own stories, [by] taking advantage of new freedoms and an increase feeling of comfort in their new societies' (2006), it seems that they cannot escape the socio-political predicaments of the diasporic society into which their books are received. As Amireh and Majaj complain about the interest in Middle Eastern women's narratives, 'our identities [...] served to silence us at a time when we most felt the need to speak' (2001, p. 2). Considering the complexity of these narratives, perhaps the best way that we could conclude their description is in the words of Whitlock, as 'soft weapons' that 'captures the double-edged nature of these forms of life narrative' (2007, p. 55).

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has positioned the diasporic Iranian memoir within a socio-political context over the last thirty years. On the one hand, it has examined the popularity of the memoir for writers as a therapeutic device against the silences and oppression of their home countries. It has also signaled towards its significance as a utopian process through which memoirists establish and negotiate a new kind of diasporic identity within their diasporic setting. On the other hand, it has examined the popularity of the memoir among a Western readership, alongside existing traditions of American Orientalism and captivity narratives, a winning combination that has always attracted American readership. It has argued how paratexts and socio-political settings have been imperative in framing these books. Finally, it reached a conclusion that the production, reception and consumption of these narratives are very complicated. While they provide silenced people with a space through which they could express themselves, allowing them to become speaking subjects, they also lead to further silence and oppression within a predefined space. What we should note here, however, is that it is the memoir's assumption of truthfulness as an insider's account that has made it malleable to fit these predefined spaces. In the

next chapter this study returns to the analysis of diasporic Iranian fiction, and pays particular attention to how fictional narratives have redefined and broken down many boundaries that the memoir cannot entertain. The next chapter, following on from the theme of women's voicelessness in Iranian literary tradition and as diasporic subjects, pays particular attention to narratives that focus on the female mother-daughter relationship. It examines how writers have, in contrast to the assumption of the truthfulness of the memoir, engaged with various elements of fiction to construct realities that not only do not fit any predefined Western modes of reading, but which also challenge and reconstruct accepted notions of Iranian women's sense of identity as women, mothers and daughters, and in relation to an Iranian nationalistic sense of identity.

## Chapter Four

# Mothers and Daughters—writing “beyond” the homeland

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One of the greatest fears I faced after my parents left me in Hong Kong to continue my studies was of returning to Iran and finding my childhood home changed or destroyed; or worse still going back home and finding my mother somehow absent. Any changes, alterations, the destruction of my childhood home, or the absence of my mother was linked to a destruction of my sense of identity and belonging. I struggled with this fear for years. Although I did not acknowledge or understand it until years later, this fear translated itself into my creative expression where I wrote a novella that reflected this. The novella followed a young woman going back to her homeland where her mother has passed away and her childhood home had changed beyond recognition. As we follow her journey, we hear her mother's stories, secrets that the mother had told her only daughter. Although at the time this was written, I would have denied any autobiographical connection, or even the hint of any truth to the stories that were shared between the mother and daughter, it took me years to come to the understanding and acknowledgement that this work was a reflection of my fears of loss of a sense of belonging, which I had attached so closely to my mother and home. It also took me many more years to realize that this piece had come out of a realization that my mother and generations of Iranian women before her had never really had the chance to speak for themselves, and that through my expression I had wanted to voice their stories.

When I started my research on diasporic Iranian writing in English, I soon recognized the presence of the mother-daughter relationship as a shared theme. I found numerous titles that deal with diasporic daughters returning to their home, daughters searching for missing mothers, or daughters working through a conflicted relationship with their mother and their own daughters. In these books we usually follow a diasporic daughter trying to make sense of her connections to her past and identity. Alongside her struggle, we also usually hear generations of secrets shared between mothers and daughters. As I read book after book with a similar theme, I

became aware of the popularity of this theme. While in my work the representation of the mother-daughter relationship had emerged unconsciously out of a desire to address unresolved issues, in some of these writings the implications of this theme went far beyond its mere personal aspect, becoming a vehicle for social critique and commentary on traditional notions of identity and belonging.

This chapter, therefore, sets out to examine the reasons for and implications of the recurring mother-daughter relationship in diasporic Iranian writing in English. It argues that the popularity of this theme today originates from the lack of Iranian women's representation as mothers and daughters within the Iranian literary tradition and that it is a way of foregrounding the silenced voices of Iranian mothers and daughters. Since this theme arises in response to the lack of women's voices throughout Iran's literary history, this analysis begins from a historical perspective. It first traces the reasons for the lack of Iranian mothers and daughters in Iranian literary history as active subjects, linking this to the mother's symbolic presence throughout Iranian literary history. This analysis, is not only concerned with the lack of Muslim Iranian women's voices as mothers and daughters, but it also takes into account the experiences of the doubly marginalized minority mothers and daughters, such as Jews, in Iranian society. It argues that for them, the popularity of this theme today stems not only from their lack of presence in the Iranian literary system, but also from their complete absence in recent Iranian history.

Departing from here, this study contends that in employing the mother-daughter theme many diasporic Iranian writers are breaking down certain literary traditions, and transgressing the boundaries of the historically dominant male modes of expression. The argument is that in some of these, transgressions operate as sites of resistance that foreground oppressed voices and construct new utopian spaces of expression. Unlike the memoir, where the realist conventions and expectations of truthfulness of the form limit the ability of narrators to write beyond certain boundaries, fiction enables a much more exploratory and innovative process. This study identifies two recurring forms of boundary crossing in mother-daughter narratives – discursive and physical. On the one hand polyphonic narration overrides dominant often unified male-constructed narrative forms, allowing the expression of multiple voices, experiences, and constructions of identity. On the other there is a physical traversal, in the form of a journey, which every mother and



daughter seems to have to undertake if they are to break free from the socio-political and historical boundaries that had limited their relationship. These physical journeys, however, are not easily made since numerous obstacles prevent mothers and daughters from departure. Consequently, such journeys are almost always made possible by the intervention of some sort of metaphysical force, such as elements of magic and dreams.

### **Mothers and Daughters in Iranian Literary History**

In the opening pages of *Veils and Words* Farzaneh Milani writes, ‘if Iranian women writers, or their many mute foremothers, are to be understood and appreciated more fully, if the true impact of their writing is to be felt, then the conditions out of which the literary tradition was born have to be understood’ (1992, p. 2). Iranian literature, until the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as Milani writes, ‘has long possessed a predominantly masculine character’ (p.1). In this tradition women have been ‘conspicuously absent [...] as writers or critics, as makers of literary tradition’ (p. 1). As Azar Naficy<sup>1</sup> also puts forth in her essay ‘Images of Women in Classical Persian Literature,’ women’s lack of presence in the literary tradition stems historically from Iran’s ‘highly hierarchical and masculine society’ (1994, p. 117). This means that until mid-20<sup>th</sup> century men authored almost all of Iranian literature. When women did appear in these accounts, although sometimes as active characters, they mostly existed to ‘revolve round the male hero’ (p. 117). In this tradition, where women were absent as subjects and makers of literary tradition, the mother occupied an ambivalent position. While she played a significantly symbolic role in constructing identities of male members of society and characters, particularly in relation to notions of home and homeland, she has always been invisible as an autonomous subject of representation, her existence never extending to herself as an independent character in and of herself. She existed as a symbol in relation to male characters for the construction and support of their identity ‘without a private, individual self, without some “interiority”’ (p. 120).

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<sup>1</sup> Naficy is alternatively spelled as Nafisi. Here, it is spelled and referenced as the article cites.



In her essay 'The Vatan [Homeland] as Beloved and Mother' Afsaneh Najmabadi describes the literary process through which in Iranian literature, the mother transcended individuality, becoming a symbol of a 'nationalistic discourse representing the homeland as a female body, [...] [which was] used to construct a national identity based on male bonding among a nation of brothers' (1997, p. 442). According to her, the mother, who had always been the assuring center of the domestic realm, first came to connote the homeland, 'vatan,' in nostalgic writings of early Islamic writers who traveled the wider Islamic world. These wandering scholars, writers, and poets produced a large body of work in which they expressed their exilic sentiments towards their birthplace and homeland, which were 'akin to the grief to the pain from the loss of mother, agony of separation from a protective bosom' (p. 446). This type of sentimental and nostalgic remembrance of the homeland, according to Najmabadi, 'often expressed through the remembrance of the homeland's scents and scenes, a sensuality of seeing and smelling' (p. 446) proved productive in later nationalistic gendered associations of the homeland.

A different association of the mother to the homeland was formulated by Sufi and Irfanic poetry, which considered one's 'vatan' as 'an allegorical concept that denoted that which existed beyond the material and mundane—the spiritual world, the abode of unification with the divine' (p. 447). This correlated with the idea of 'vatan' as the mother, where 'the return to earth was also a return to the womb whence one had been born' (p. 447). From this perspective, one could argue that the grave and earth could be like the mother's utopian and peaceful womb to which one yearns to return. As Najmabadi explains, 'the Sufi desire to reach the grave and to unite with the divine expressed a desire to return to the mother's womb, to that original state of pure, uncontaminated existence' (p. 447-448).

The introduction of nationalism in the nineteenth-century into Iran, however, shifted the nostalgic Islamic writings and allegorical Sufi concept of 'vatan' to a territorially and politically defined concept. While prior to this, Iran considered itself part of an Islamic abode at large, after the encounter with nationalism it began to be defined in terms of nationalistic boundaries under the domain of the political and military rule of the Qajar Dynasty. In this new context, 'vatan' was no longer religiously defined or simply the place of one's birth, but articulated through a 'nationally imagined community' (p. 449) as a political and physical geo-body with

defined boundaries and threats from enemies. This 'vatan' was 'the bounded territory within which the collectivity of national brothers resided' (p. 444). Thus, in its vulnerability to foreign invasions, the homeland came to be 'envisaged as the outlines of a female body: a body to love and be devoted to, to possess and protect, to kill and die for' (p. 445), the body of a beloved mother.

In short, the mother's symbolic existence gradually formed a source of belonging for male writers and characters on different levels. Early Islamic writings formulated the mother into the nostalgic symbol for the home, through which male travelers and writers could maintain their sense of belonging. Later, Sufi spiritual poetry transformed the mother into a spiritual symbol. Finally, with the articulation of nationalistic discourses, the mother was transformed into a nationalistic symbol, a physical geo-body, defining identity in relation to a nation of brothers where she became an 'icon of national values, or idealized custodian of tradition' (Boehmer 1995, p. 225). However, despite forming a major part of the literary discourse that had created and sustained a collective sense of male belonging, spiritual affinity, and a sense of national identity, the mother as an individual, as both a writer and a character, had always been absent in Iranian literature. Iranian mothers who were, like African and Caribbean mothers described by Susheila Nasta, defined as 'powerful symbolic forces, repositories of culture and creativity,' and who formulated and defined male identity, 'were essentially silent and silenced by the structures surrounding them' (1991, p. xiv).

While the mother, at least, enjoyed this symbolic presence, the daughter, and women of minority such as Jews, have been almost completely absent, not only from the Iranian literary scene, but also throughout the discourse of Iranian history. For Jews living in the Middle East, their traditions developed surrounded by a Muslim society, influencing their outlook onto the world. In Iran, strict gender segregation and lack of women's presence in public had also impacted the position of Jewish women as mothers, daughters and wives. However, Jewish Iranian mothers were doubly marginalized due to their social status. Already living on the fringes of Iranian society, their position was affected with the onset of nationalistic sentiments and religious devotion. As Eliz Sansarian observes in Iran 'nationalism [...] turned into an intense anti-other diatribe and religious devotion [...] moved to bigotry' (1985, p. 24). These women, to use Boehmer's words, were 'doubly or

triply marginalized [...] [as] they were disadvantaged on the grounds not only of gender but also of race, social class [...] religion and caste' (1995, p. 224). Needless to say, in this tradition, Iranian Jewish women have had no presence in the Iranian literary history. Their absence has left a deep gap in Iranian literary tradition as Farideh Goldin, a Jewish Iranian novelist explores in her essay 'The Ghost of Our Mothers.' When Goldin as an avid reader decides to compile a list of Jewish Iranian women in Iranian literary history, her search leads her to a 'complete vacuum of literary tradition for Iranian Jewish women' (2009, p. 88).

It is in response to this literary vacuum, silences and symbolic representations that many diasporic Iranian writers are engaging with the mother-daughter and homeland theme. In their various responses one can see a parallel between their work and postcolonial theories that write back to the singularity of narrative and voice in a dominant tradition. Particularly relevant here is Homi Bhabha's definition of postcolonialism as the realm of the 'beyond,' where the beyond 'is neither a new horizon, nor a leaving behind of the past,' but rather it is a movement in 'transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion' (1994, p. 2). In this movement there is 'a sense of disorientation, a disturbance of direction, in the "beyond": an exploratory, restless movement' (p. 2). As he puts it,

it is the move away from the singularities of "class" or "gender" as primary conceptual and organizational categories, [that] has resulted in an awareness of the subject positions - of race, gender, generation, institutional location, geopolitical locale, sexual orientation - that inhabit any claim to identity in the modern world. (p. 2)

But for Bhabha to move beyond these singularities, there is a need to think 'beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences' (p. 1). He writes 'these "in-between" spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood - singular or communal - that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself' (p. 1).

While Bhabha speaks generally about what a postcolonial experience entails, Elleke Boehmer, contextualizes this particularly to postcolonial women's responses in literature in *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature*. She puts forth some strategies

that postcolonial women writers employ to write beyond dominant unifying modes of representation, which included an insistence of the representation of the 'diversity and layeredness of women's experiences, and on the validity of forms of self-expression' (1995, p. 226). For these women 'social determinants of class, race, national affiliation, religion, and ethnicity, [...] necessarily cut across and made more problematic a politics of identity based on gender' (p. 226). Consequently, in their writing these postcolonial women often 'demanded a different complexity' which reflected their unique experiences. Considering their stress on multiplicity of difference, Boehmer argues, 'a crucial feature of postcolonial women's writing is its mosaic or composite quality: the intermingling of forms derived from indigenous, nationalist, and European literary traditions' (p. 227). In this tradition there is great emphasis on 'the need for a lively heterogeneity of styles and speaking positions in their work' (p. 227).

Diasporic Iranian writers, particularly women writers, too, share this desire for transgression and the expression of the multiplicity of their untold experiences as mothers and daughters. One of the major ways through which they are breaking down limitations has been, like postcolonial writers, through transgression of dominant singular forms of narration and expression. For them, too, this has translated itself into resistance of dominant forms and narratives that had formulated their identities. Through this resistance, as we will see, they also aim to 'bring to the fore the specific textures of their own experience' by 'work[ing] against the unifying viewpoint [...] typical of [...] nationalist male writers' (p. 227). In this process they are aware of 'the need for a lively heterogeneity of styles,' which can accommodate and 'retrieve suppressed oral traditions, half-forgotten histories, unrecorded private languages, moments of understated or unrecognized women's resistance' (p. 227). However, often times, this expression is not solely about the experiences of mothers and daughters in Iran, but as we will see, it is also inclusive of the often untold experiences of diasporic Iranian women as mothers and daughters, and the damages that migration might entail on the mother-daughter relationship. In foregrounding the mother and daughter's voices and experiences, one of the strategies that they have employed has been a kind of polyphonic narrative form.

## Polyphonic Narration

If we look at a range of narratives by diasporic Iranian writers in English with a strong mother-daughter theme, we are confronted with many stories that are told from multiple perspectives and voices of Iranian mothers and/or daughters. In Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet's *Martyrdom Street* (2010), for instance, we hear the voices of three women: Nasrin a young exilic woman in New York; Fatemeh, her mother who lives in Iran; and Yasaman, Nasrin's best friend who also lives in New York. Told in a mosaic form, the narrative jumps from one woman's story to the next, giving all an equal chance to tell their stories. Similarly in Farnoosh Moshiri's *Against Gravity* (2005), we hear the touching story of a young exilic mother, Roya, and her young daughter, Tala, as they try to navigate their way in their new environment, working through exilic pressures that affect their relationship. In these books each woman speaks, and tells of tales never before told, because the multiple narrative form gives them the ability to do so.

Multiplicity of narratives, this 'cross-hatched, fragmented, and choric' (Boehmer 1995, p. 227) style of writing that enables each woman to speak, is one of the most significant techniques in postcolonial resistance against unifying modes of narration. For a marginalized group of people, like Iranian mothers and daughters whose voices had been suppressed throughout Iranian literary history, a polyphonic form of narration can be empowering on a number of levels. On one level, it allows for marginalized women's voices to be brought forth and heard and their experiences recognized. This recognition, as explained in the earlier chapters of this thesis, has psychological impacts that can contribute to the ability of those who had been silenced to reconstitute their damaged sense of identity. In fact, each of the women above that speaks, changes for the better by the end of the story because she has been given the ability to heal psychologically through the process of narration.

Returning once again to Kelly Oliver's argument, 'subordination, oppression, and subjectification' damage and distort one's sense of identity and selfhood as they 'affect a person at the level of her subjectivity, her sense of herself as a subject and agent' (2001, p. 7). In looking at the position and subjectivities of Iranian women as mothers and daughters, particularly those from minority backgrounds, they had been subordinated by many years and layers of social and cultural oppression. This,

as Oliver argues has the ability to ‘render individuals or groups of people as other by objectifying them, [and] objectification undermines subjectivity [since] objects are not subjects’ (p. 7). It is this objectification that has historically led Iranian mothers and daughters to silence. To counter this process, Oliver believes subjectivity can be regained and identities reformed ‘by taking up a position as speaking subjects’ (p. 7). She defines a speaking subject ‘by virtue of addressability and response-ability,’ or their ‘ability to respond to, and address others,’ in a dialogical manner, an action she believes is ‘the root of subjectivity which is damaged by the objectifying operations of oppression and subordination’ (p.7). A polyphonic narrative, which gives many a chance to express themselves can allow them to become response-able and address-able subjects through which they can regain their sense of damaged subjectivity.

However, while in most books by diasporic Iranian women mothers and daughters begin their stories willingly and thus become response-able and address-able by virtue of sharing their stories, in some cases, it is the structure of the novel that forces them into becoming speaking subjects. In *Moonlight on the Avenue of Faith* (2000) (from here on *Moonlight*), for instance, Gina Nahai, a Jewish Iranian-American writer, forces the oppressed Jewish Iranian mothers and daughters into much needed response-ability and address-ability through the polyphonic form of the novel. Although the main plot revolves around Lili as she tries to find her mother, Roxanna, who had opened wings and flown away from their house in Tehran, *Moonlight* is a novel that spans generations of conflict between Jewish Iranian mothers and daughters as it follows them from the ghettos of Tehran into eventual exile.

Before setting out to examine how the polyphonic narrative form reconstructs the identities of Jewish Iranian mothers and daughters, however, we must begin by an analysis of the importance of this form on the psychological aspects of the mother-daughter relationship. To begin here is important because the reconstruction of the historically damaged mother-daughter relationship in *Moonlight* is inevitably linked to the reconstruction of the individual identities and subjectivities of the mother and daughter.

The mother daughter relationship in *Moonlight* is negative, one that has been historically full of fear and paralysis. In explaining the nature of this relationship Luce Irigaray's essay 'And the One Doesn't stir Without the Other' (1981) is extremely useful, portraying the paralysing potential of the mother-daughter relationship. Irigaray describes this relationship as one in which the mother and daughter are bound together, their voices inseparable. Although beginning with the daughter's voice, the essay soon yields into a multivocality in which the mother and daughter's voices become indistinguishable, reflecting the inseparability of the mother and daughter from each other. But this inseparability is limiting, for neither can ascertain their individuality. For the mother and daughter to establish themselves as individuals, they must break free from each other. But separation is not easy. As Irigaray writes from an ambiguous position that could be both the mother and/or the daughter: 'And if I leave, you lost the reflection of life, of your life. And if I remain, am I not the guarantor of your death?' (p. 66) Here, the mother and daughter's roles are reciprocal. Neither has the power to change it yet both are its agents. But as the essay ends, there is a sense of hope, a kind of rebirth, that allows both the mother and daughter to break free from this paralysis and reinvent themselves by breaking down barriers of silence that had shrouded their relationship. 'This breach of silence where we constantly reenvelope ourselves in order to be reborn. Where we come to relearn ourselves and each other, in order to become women, mothers, again and again' (p. 67).

The nightmarish paralysing repetition of the mother-daughter relationship, like Irigaray's, looms over *Moonlight* from its early pages. But for mothers and daughters in *Moonlight* this paralysis is rooted in a patriarchal history. As the novel begins Lili has just found her mother, Roxanna, after thirteen years. But instead of being joyful, she holds bitter resentment towards her for abandoning her and refuses to utter a word to her. Roxanna, too, does not have the physical ability or the desire to speak to her daughter. But what Lili does not know is that through this resentment and inability to speak she is unwittingly perpetuating the oppressive matrilineal cycle that is rooted back in their foremother's attempt to break free from the patriarchal Jewish society which had, as we learn, all begun with the rabbi's wife in the year 1800. To set an example for the community, the rabbi had forced his wife to stay covered at all times, even indoors. He had forbidden her to speak,



even among her daughters lest strangers hear her voice. The community, who had only seen her completely veiled in black, had given her the nickname 'the Crow.' One day on Yom Kippur, the holiest day in the Jewish calendar, when everyone had been outside praying, the Crow appears naked from her house. With a white shining body and glistening hair she sings songs that only lower caste women would sing and circles among the participants. As everyone watches in awe, she walks out of the city gate, never to be seen or heard of again. It had been her sudden madness and very public and naked departure, which 'augured a series of escapes among the female members of the rabbi's offspring' (14), that had led to the destructive matrilineal cycle within the rabbi's family. As the result of their foremother's 'devastating act', within every generation of the rabbi's family, mothers feared their daughters for the shame they might cause by running away. Daughters, too, were paralysed, not only by the fear of being the one to fulfill the role of the runaway, but also of their mothers and motherhood. The need to prevent the shame of having a daughter run away had forced mothers into monstrous acts of torture and even attempted murder. Thus, motherhood – instead of the nurturing potential which would normally would have been the epitome of a woman's life in that culture, a definition of identity – had been transformed into a cursed cycle of madness, 'an invincible determinism' that had trapped 'each succeeding generation of mothers and daughters in a cycle of rejection, self-denial and cruelty as unbreakable as any hereditary curse' (Meaney 1993, p. 21). Similarly, the identity of every daughter was formed around this fear, as she was 'raised on stories of her wayward ancestors, many wandering naked and sorry through the deserts of central Iran, where scorpions perished, wanting to return home and beg forgiveness but not being allowed to' (p. 15). Every girl was suspected of having the potential of running away 'in her blood.' But this unfortunate and shameful lineage was a secret and never discussed openly. It had severely damaged the mother-daughter relationship, until the polyphonic form of the novel forces the mother and daughter to address it openly.

When we first encounter Lili, after she has found her mother, she is oblivious to the destructive cycle of the mother-daughter relationship. Her aunt, Miriam the Moon, however knows this and is determined to break it. This is why, as soon as Lili expresses her resentment, Miriam interrupts her and begins to tell her Roxanna and

their foremothers' stories. As she begins, however, Miriam's narrative gives way to a myriad of tales and voices that eventually allows both the mother and daughter to become speaking subjects and to heal their conflicted relationship.

This healing operates successfully because it replicates the oral tradition of women's story telling in Iranian society. As Goldin argues although Jewish women in Iran did not have the education to write about their experiences historically, they shared their stories orally with other women. She highlights how women's afternoon gatherings were the space where they shared their stories, where they could 'dard-e del' or have a heart to heart talk with each other. She believes that 'dard-e del' had many functions. One of its functions is that it provided a kind of therapeutic space in which women could speak about their problems and eventually heal themselves through this sharing. She writes, 'dard-e del' 'worked as a healing tool, as a source of empowerment, as a psychotherapy, and as a Middle Eastern version of a "support group"' (2009, p. 93). These groups provided a safe space where women could have a voice and speak without fear of consequences.

In *Moonlight*, as well, the polyphony of the narrative operates almost in the tradition of a 'dard-e del' session. Set in a time when women no longer shared their stories orally, and where dominant male narratives had led to their silence, *Moonlight* once again replicates this space for women to share their stories through the polyphonic narrative form. It is this form that eventually leads to both the mother and daughter's address-ability and response-ability. By cutting up and responding to Lili's short narrative in the first pages, and demanding that Lili listen to her in order to understand her mother's reasons for running away, Miriam immediately positions the daughter as an address-able character in relation to her mother and foremothers' untold stories. As Miriam begins, and Lili listens in silence, Lili eventually responds, becomes a speaking subject, and her voice becomes integrated with Miriam's narrative. As Miriam's narrative leads into Lili's birth for the first time her story is interrupted and we hear Lili's voice in response to Miriam's: 'Like my mother, I would be raised alone. Like Roxanna, I would be despised by my grandmother' (p. 123). Although Lili's voice is initially sparse, it gradually increases to the point that it becomes one of the dominant voices of the novel.

Similarly, it is the dynamics of this dialogical relationship between Miriam's third person narrative and Lili's dominant first person narrative that forces Roxanna, the mother, into an address-able and thus response-able position. When Miriam begins her tale, Roxanna lies in bed filled with a mysterious fluid that is choking her, unable and refusing to utter a single word, but close enough to hear her sister and daughter's conversation. It is Lili and Miriam's intentional proximity to Roxanna that makes her bear witness to all their foremothers' sorrows. It is this that forces Roxanna into an address-able and thus response-able position. While throughout the novel Roxanna's story has been told in third person, near the end of the book, her voice is foreground for the first time in response to her daughter and sister's stories:

"All the secrets," Miriam promised Lili last night.

They were talking in the living room, but I could hear them as clearly as if they were standing next to me. Miriam has a high-pitched voice, but she knows how to moderate it, how to be louder or more quiet depending on what she wants me to hear at any given time.

"I will tell you everything you want to know," she said, hoping to coax Lili into her scheme, trying also to warn me, I think, that the time to speak is now. (p. 359)

Although not until the very end does Roxanna's actual silence break when she eventually speaks to Lili, it is upon hearing those stories that she feels a sense of responsibility to speak to correct her perception. She tells us,

*There is a sorrow within me so deep, I have not been able to give it a name, I want to tell Lili.*

*It is my mother's sorrow, and her mother's—the tears that they shed in the tear jar, that they drank alone, inconsolable.*

*I did not want my daughter to have this sorrow. I did not want to leave you those tears.*

*That is why I left: to take the sorrow out of your eyes.*

*It is not as if I sacrificed myself to save you. It was not your needs I was thinking of, but my own. More than anything else, more than the need to be with my child [...], more than the instinct simply to live, I wanted to end this sorrow.*

*I came back and saw that I had lost. (Italics original p. 367)*

It is this forced address-ability and response-ability that helps both the mother and daughter regain their individual subjectivity. However, the effects of this resonate

into the mother-daughter relationship as it establishes a new sense of recognition between mother and daughter, a recognition that breaks the destructive cycle. As Oliver reminds us, a significant part in the process of regaining subjectivity is recognition and being recognized, as 'subjectivity is dialogic because the subject is a response to an address from the other' (2001, p. 9). Recognition, according to her, occurs only when a 'subject recognizes [...] something familiar in that other, for example, when he can see that the other is a person too' (p. 9) through the process of address-ability and response-ability, and visibility. Oliver argues that apart from speech, vision connects us to the world and other people and allows people to recognize similarities in the other. It is by this process of recognition of similarities through speech and vision that the destructive and oppressive mother-daughter cycle is broken in *Moonlight*. By making the mother and daughter become response-able and address-able characters through multiplicity of narrative, they also gain the ability to recognize and see the similarities of their experiences in each other. For instance, it is through hearing Lili's perspective and her repetition of a sense of isolation and abandonment that Roxanna recognizes her daughter's similarity to herself. Lili narrates her feelings after her mother's departure:

I had become invisible to myself and to everyone else. I had vanished in the cloud of fear and anxiety that had surrounded me on the flight to America—or maybe before it, on the night Roxanna left, when I called her and she turned around, looked at me, and did not *see* me. (emphasis original, p. 238)

It is the repetition of Lili's horrors of abandonment, doubled with Miriam's narratives that remind Roxanna of her own forgotten past and of 'how [her] own mother tried to kill [her]' (p. 367) that triggers a sense of recognition of herself in Lili so that when she first sees her daughter after thirteen years, Roxanna tells us,

I saw her and felt I was looking at myself [...] she has the same air of isolation about her that I have always felt, the same sense of being removed and unreachable. With her frail, thin body, without the weight that I have gained, she still looks like an island alone in the infinite sea.' (p. 365)

As Roxanna recognizes the similarities of herself in her daughter, she remembers how she had tried to break the predicted destructive mother-daughter relationship by rendering her daughter invisible, hoping that in this invisibility, in her lack of recognition of her daughter, the cycle would break. She confesses,

I tried to make her vanish while I was with her—all those years when I told her I was going to leave and refused to see her, when I thought only of my own need to escape. I made her vanish then. (p. 359)

However, as she recognizes resonances of herself in Lili, she realizes that instead of closing her eyes on her daughter, she needs to acknowledge her by looking at her. It is only then that Roxanna looks into her daughter's eyes, recognizes her as an address-able subject, and breaks the bond, freeing her daughter from the impersonal cycle of oppression. In looking into her eyes, she tells us, 'in her eyes I see it now: she has understood me [...] Lili has seen the *possibility* of another truth' (p. 374). Similarly, it is Lili's recognition of the similarity of her own anxious existence in her mother and the realization that her mother's departure 'had not been Roxanna's idea but the result of forces that had been in motion for centuries' (p. 6), that allow her to forgive her mother. The novel's conclusion, like Irigaray's essay, is hopeful. It gives a chance for the mother to become a speaking subject; it celebrates the ability and possibility of breaking the cycle of oppression and silence, and offers a renewed mother and daughter relationship. As Roxanna finally breaks her silence and tells her daughter, 'it is possible to know and, at last, feel at peace' (p. 374).

While in *Moonlight* we do eventually hear the mother's voice, in some novels, the mother's voice is so deeply oppressed that we can only hear her through another character, usually the daughter. In 'Sexual Violence/Textual Violence,' Geetha Ramanathan (1993) proposes that in some cultures, such as in Iran, there is an elision between femininity and maternity. Given that in this elision femininity or feminine expression are obfuscated by dominant male narratives, and male interpretations of femininity, maternal voices and narratives have very low audibility. Ramanathan goes on to argue that one strategy that writers employ to 'achieve an oblique articulation' of the mother, is through a process she names 'transpositioning.' Transpositioning as she puts it,

suggests that the power of the maternal in the text is so drastically abbreviated by the narrative structure, (which mimics the master narrative of society in silencing the mother), that the maternal voice, if it is to be heard at all, can only be "spoken through" since the other does not have the status of a speaking subject. (p. 21)

Ramanathan demonstrates how transpositioning operates by drawing on Mani Shirazi's *Javady Alley* (1984), a novel about a young girl's life, Homa, in Tehran in

the 1950s. Through Homa's first person narrative, we are taken on a journey into the everyday workings, gossips, and difficulties of the domestic sphere. We hear stories of the domestic realm and her mother's stories only through Homa because her mother, who is bound by both her husband and mother-in-law, does not have the ability or agency to speak herself. Ramanathan argues that in *Javady Alley*, the mother's subjectivity is asserted through the daughter, but within the bounds of expected social norms that uphold the mother's position. As she puts it, the novel establishes 'the authority of the mother in non-traditional terms without sacrificing a stringent critique of Iranian society's positioning of the mother' (p. 28).

The weakness of Ramanathan's argument, however, is that although the mother's authority is asserted through the daughter's voice, the narrative is still bound within a patriarchal narrative form in which the mother is, and will remain silent. Indeed, the novel does not provide the mother or the daughter with any opportunity for breaking away from the silencing patriarchal tradition. It merely highlights the nature of this culture. The novel fails to break free, to offer us alternative perspectives, because of the young girl's narrative voice. Homa is simply too young and too inexperienced and bound too close to her mother, and too afraid of her father, to be able to break free or offer us any alternatives for understanding the mother's subjectivity. One can argue that transpositioning, as a method of reframing the mother's position really works only when the daughter, through whom the mother is speaking, has herself broken down the boundaries and has the ability to assertively offer us new perspectives.

This is why transpositioning operates more effectively in diasporic Iranian daughters' narratives, the narratives of those who have already gone beyond the domestic restriction of their home and country. If we look at a range of books by diasporic Iranian women writers, particularly the memoirs, we realize that in many there is a kind of transpositioning where the diasporic daughter is speaking on behalf of her mother's repressed experiences. These mothers are silent, deceased, or simply do not have the ability to recount their own stories. For instance in Jasmin Darznik's *The Good Daughter* (2011), we hear her mother's account of her first secret marriage through Darznik because her mother chooses not to speak about it herself. Similarly, in *Things I've Been Silent About* (2010), Nafisi focuses on her relationship with her mother, who has now passed away and who, even if she were

alive, would not have had the ability to coherently tell her own story since in her old age she had lost sight of the boundary between actual and made up events. In *After All This Time* (2005), too, Afschineh Latifi tells us of her mother's sacrifices to raise her and her siblings as a single mother in exile after her father's death.

In effect all these narratives bring forward the mother's silent voice through the daughter's gained ability to speak. Since these daughters themselves are outspoken members of their diasporic society – Darznik is an Assistant Professor in English Literature in Washington and Lee University, Nafisi is a visiting fellow at John Hopkins University, and Latifi is a lawyer – who have transgressed the social and cultural boundaries of their home country, they can now assertively speak on behalf of their mothers.

Sometimes, however, when distance between mother and daughter is too great, due to migration, separation, the mother's sudden departure, or even socio-political restrictions, the voice of the mother cannot directly speak through the daughter. As will be addressed later in this chapter, in such cases, transpositioning can take place only through an intervention in the form of dreams, or other metaphysical elements such as magic, that are beyond the realist conventional modes of representation.

### **The Journey**

Although polyphony and multiplicity of narrative voices allows mothers and daughters to regain their subjectivity by becoming speaking subjects, it seems, however, that for many this ability cannot be obtained unless they embark on a journey beyond the physical boundaries of spaces that had silenced them in various ways. In what follows, this chapter takes into consideration the journey as a form of transgression as the result of which the mother and daughter can regain their subjectivity and the mother-daughter relationship can be healed. In explaining the reason for the need of a journey, Martha Marotta's article, 'MotherSpace' is a good starting point. Marotta believes that mothers' identities are framed in relation to the built spaces that they inhabit. She argues 'built spaces and discursive spaces that [...] mothers inhabit constitute a powerful force that helps shape their subjectivities and their possibilities, define who mothers can be and what they can do at any given point in time' (2005, p. 15). She believes that the male/female, public/private



dichotomy, usually instigated by male members of most societies that fix the mother within the domestic space is 'not only spatial control but also a social control on identity' (p. 22). One of the aims of this control, she claims, is 'to produce in mothers the desires and preferences, beliefs, and values that prompt them to keep themselves in [that space]' (p. 23). Any transgression beyond this space, for instance, 'when [mothers] leave it or stay away for too long, [entails a risk] of being classified as "bad" mother' (p. 23). This risk of scrutiny limits the mothers' movement and 'the limits on their movement also limit their identity' (p. 23), both in the way that the mother sees herself and is seen by others. Since the mother cannot see herself, or her relationship with her children, any other way but within what is defined in that space, her sense of subjectivity and identity, and her relation to others, cannot be asserted any differently inside the limitations of that space. This, Marotta believes, is 'one of the reasons many women have to leave home in order to form their own identities' (p. 22).

This is why this chapter argues that in the works of many diasporic Iranian women writers, the mother and daughter's departure is of utmost importance for those who want to regain their sense of subjectivity and reconstruct the mother-daughter relationship. For mothers and daughters who journey, however, transgression begins by their very departure. The journey itself is important in this process since it is, as Pauline Dagninio puts it, 'often seen to symbolize the pursuit and achievement of a sense of personal identity' (1993, p. 65). However the journey in literature as she argues, traditionally also, 'seems to follow the paradigms of a masculine identity formation' (p. 65). In Iranian literary tradition, in particular, the journey is almost always about a man who embarks on a trip but whose sense of identity is always defined by the mother's stable presence and her symbolism of the homeland to which he belongs and yearns to return.

Taking the particularly masculine form of the journey in Iranian literature, and the physical spaces that had bound the mother's sense of identity within Iranian society, this section argues that the journey operates on two levels to redefine the mother's sense of identity and reconstructs damaged mother-daughter relationships. On one level it allows mothers and daughters to physically transgress the borders that had defined their sense of identity and relationship. On another level, by adapting the very formula that had hampered the mother's sense of identity, the journey becomes

part of what Boehmer identifies as ‘subversion by imitation [as] [...] an important mode of resistance’ (1995, p. 174) in post-colonial discourse. This means that the mother and daughter’s journey becomes a vehicle for the reconstruction of the identities of mothers and daughters and their relationship with each other and carries with it wider connotations that reform traditional modes of expression and male-established ideas of identity and belonging, particularly in relation to the Iranian concept of homeland and nationalistic identity.

In many books by diasporic Iranian writers that deal with the mother-daughter and homeland theme, the mother and/or daughter, embark on a physical journey; or by the time they are able to tell their stories, they have already traveled beyond the borders of their homeland. For most, however, departure is not an easy task and requires the breaking of numerous boundaries, including the fear instigated by society in mothers about their movement. In *Moonlight* for instance while limitations of movement and segregation, imposed upon women by ancient Jewish laws of virtue and segregation, had already formulated their sense of identity within the patriarchal domain of the ghetto, their foremother’s defiance had highlighted this limitation with a sense of fear of the consequences of movement beyond that space. Mothers and daughters had become paralysed with the fear of movement. For them, this fear had different roots. First, there was fear that departure or movement carried with it the stigma of being labeled as bad or even mad within the family and ghetto. Then, there was a fear of life outside of the ghetto in a society that rejected them as Jews. Consequently, over centuries mothers themselves had defined this space for themselves, and had gradually gained the desire to remain in that state because of the fear and stigma attached to movement. Hence, they could only define their identities and the identities of their daughters within this limited space.

This is why the journey becomes such a significant step in Roxanna and Lili’s story. Roxanna’s journey for instance, gradually breaks through the many layers of oppressions, definitions and fears that had formulated the mother’s sense of identity. First, her move away from her mother’s house rescues her from her mother’s attempted murder and initiates a break in the destructive mother-daughter relationship. Then her departure from the ghetto marks a daring new beginning for Jewish-Iranian women outside of the ghetto. However, although leaving the ghetto already frees Roxanna from the limitations imposed within it, she finds herself

trapped within the patriarchal and anti-Semitic systems of Iranian society at large. This new setting not only binds her within the social and traditional contracts of marriage and motherhood—the fear of which she had carried with her from the ghetto—but also rejects her as a Jewish woman. It is only by ultimately journeying beyond the physical boundaries of Iran that Roxanna finds a new space in America in ‘the land of choices and chances’ (p. 358), where she has the opportunity to start over and reconstruct her own sense of self free from the many layers of limitation.

While this journey offers hopeful possibilities for the mothers’ sense of identity, it also allows for the reconstruction of the conflicted mother-daughter relationship. In examining how the journey operates to resolve this conflicted relationship, psychoanalytical theories of mother-daughter relationship are useful. In her feminist and psychoanalytical approach to stages of mother-daughter relationship and the daughter’s evolution as an individual in her book *Mothers and Daughters: The Distortion of a Relationship*, Vivien Nice argues that in traditional psychological and psychoanalytical theories of a daughter’s development as an individual there is a process called ‘separation-individuation’ which follows ‘on from the symbiotic mother-infant tie, the period of separation of mother and infant and of individual psychological growth for the infant’ (1992, p. 50). According to these theories this process is essential for the daughter to gain a sense of individual identity. As Nice puts it,

this process if successfully completed leads to the child’s psychological separation from the mother and the beginnings of the autonomous self. The move, then, is from symbiosis to separation, from dependency to autonomy, from identifying with the mother to the establishment of the ego and the beginnings of a separate identity. (p. 50)

According to this theory, if the daughter ‘fails to separate’ from her mother, she cannot gain a sense of independence, develop her own identity or move away from any traits or beliefs that her mother carries. Nice, however, goes on to argue that although separation of mother and daughter is a necessary step in the child’s development, the implications of this theory have been ‘distorted’ since they have been ‘interpreted via psychological theories of development which are steeped in male-defined concepts’ where ‘individuation, separation, independence—the language of the individualized, competitive, hierarchical male—are considered developmentally mature, whereas women’s connectedness, mutuality, concern with

relationships are seen as developmentally immature' (p. 9). What this means is that many theories that advocate mother and daughter's separation undermine the necessity of intimate mother-daughter connection in maintaining a healthy relationship. In fact some feminist theorists of mother-daughter relationship psychology, like Elaine Savory Fido, believe that 'there is a link between a woman's loss of mother and home and problems with [the daughter's] sense of identity' (1991, p. 339). As she argues, 'let there be a break in nurturing support [of the mother] [...] and there is a danger of self-rejection or self-doubt which can cripple the confidence and dispose a young woman to risky ventures in order to escape' (p. 331). What this means is that for resolving any conflicted relationship, even the conflict aroused by separation, a reunion and reconnection, outside the boundaries of constrained definitions of the relationship, 'is all important and necessary if both mother and daughter are to feel free to pursue their own lives whilst still maintaining connection with each other' (Nice 1992, p. 12).

Roxanna and Lili's journey, their separation and reunion, thus, can be read from this perspective. In *Moonlight*, mothers and daughters are caught in an inability to separate from each other, preventing the next generation of the daughters to regain their sense of individual identity. But, it has been the socio-historical religious patriarchal authorities of the ghetto, which had set up this relationship and instigated a fear of the mother and daughter's separation. Within a highly patriarchal society, what the rabbi's wife's departure had left mothers and daughters in the ghetto had been a sense of ambivalence, a fear of the previously harmonious mother-daughter relationship. It is only since then, when the similarities and connections between mothers and daughters carried with it a sense of negativity and hatred—that every mother and daughter had the potential to be a runaway passed down through the matrilineal link—that a stigma was attached to the connection between mother and daughter. The irony in this situation lies, not only in that the very basis of this desire for separation is the fear of separation, but also in the fact that the patriarchal ideologies that encourage this separation between mothers and daughters to prevent further instances of running away, limit, both physically and discursively, the possibility of separation. Thus, torn between the need to separate and the inability to break away mothers and daughters of the ghetto were bound together in a cycle of fear and oppression.

This is why Roxanna's journey breaks the destructive male-instigated cycle of mother-daughter relationship by separating herself from the society that had dictated that negative relationship. While Roxanna's initial departure, from her mother's house to her neighbour's, breaks the cycle by distancing her from her mother, her final flight as a mother from her daughter completes the break of the cycle. But while separation allows for the mother and daughter to construct their own separate and individual sense of identity, it does not necessarily resolve the conflicted relationship. In fact it leaves both mother and daughter more distraught. Lili, for instance, is traumatized by her mother's sudden departure and sees it as the main source of her conflict with her. Roxanna, too, is guilt-ridden after her departure. In their separation, neither feels a sense of satisfaction or freedom. Rather, like Irigaray's daughter and mother, they yearn to reunite. But for them a healing reunion can only happen when they have both journeyed outside the physical boundaries of the limiting borders of the ghetto, Tehran, and Iran. In this way the novel not only reconstructs the mother-daughter relationship and their damaged identities but it also, in the words of Adrean O'Reilly, 'challenge[s] the various patriarchal practices that undermine the mother-daughter connection,' and offers us a feminist perspective for understanding the relationship, where 'a strong mother-daughter connection [...] is what makes possible a strong female self' (2000, p. 145).

*Moonlight*, however, operates beyond merely offering alternative perspectives for understanding the mother-daughter relationship. On an allegorical level, the reconstruction of the mother's identity and the renegotiation of mother-daughter relationship, particularly as they happen outside the physical boundaries of Iran, rewrites established notions of identity and belonging which the journey theme usually entailed in Iranian literature. As explained earlier, the journey in Iranian literature was a common theme through which often male writers emphasized a physical, spiritual and nationalistic sense of identity and belonging to the homeland, particularly by centralizing the symbolic mother figure. However, the journey in *Moonlight* subverts those connotations that emphasize belonging and identity by rewriting certain parameters of the traditional journey theme.

In his PhD thesis 'Toward a General Economy of Travel: Identity, Memory, and Death' Mohamed Hafizi examines 'some of the theoretical and philosophical

conventional discourses of travel and displacement' (2004, p. 2). He argues that 'voyage, in its traditional sense, implies that one leaves a familiar shore to confront the unknown and return back home' (p. 2). In this kind of journey, what he calls a 'restricted economy of travel' there is an 'apparent closed structure of departure (from home and origin) and arrival (at a destination)' (p. 2). It is circular and guarantees or at least anticipates a return to the safety and security of the departed home. The restricted economy of travel, according to Hafizi, is usually teleological in its movement from origin to destination and 'more often than not, as an incarnation of knowledge and light, an unveiling of the secrets of the other' (p. 2). Taking Hafizi's proposal, we can argue that early Islamic writers, Sufi poets and nationalist writers, were involved in this kind of restricted economy of travel in their writing, whereby the hero embarked upon a voluntary journey from a homeland he loved, and anticipated the return to it. Through his travels and encounter with the other, his sense of belonging and identity to his homeland was strengthened. In this process the symbol of the mother as the home and homeland, as the 'warm bosom' formed a strong part of the shared sense of identity and anticipation for the return back home.

However, Iranian writers are constantly challenging the implications of the journey theme by adapting its various elements. In *Moonlight*, for example, the journey as employed by Nahai offers a different set of meanings. While traditional writers were involved in the circular restricted economy of travel, mothers and daughters, like Roxanna and Lili in *Moonlight* are involved in what Hafizi calls the 'general economy of travel,' whose traveler 'departs from a non-origin, whose trajectory is not continuous, ordered or controlled, and whose destination is, what Derrida calls, a *destinerrance*, the being-destined-to-wander' (p. 2). Roxanna's journey stems out of the idea of destinerrance. For her, departure is involuntary as a means of escape and survival with an unknown destination. It is through this general economy of travel that the novel questions established notions of identity and belonging denoted traditionally through a restricted economy of travel.

By adapting a general economy of travel, the novel subverts the belief of safety and security of the home and homeland, particularly one in which the mother's presence plays a significant part and contributes to one's sense of belonging and identity, an idea to which the restricted economy of travel writing adheres. In *Moonlight* the

idea of home offers the opposite of what it does in a restricted economy of travel. For Roxanna, and many other women in the ghetto, home does not offer any sense of security, safety or identity. On the contrary, it is the insecurity of home that instigates her departure. Her maternal home, with her mother's murderous rage never provided her any safety or security. The ghetto imprisoned her with a set of rules. Her married home became her second prison where she was physically locked up, and her country never accepted her as a Jew. Considering that nothing in Roxanna's home or homeland provided her with a sense of safety, security or any sort of psychological or physical belonging, the journey for her does not anticipate a circular return as it did for the male hero in traditional narratives. On the contrary, this journey is about breaking repressive cycles by moving forward and away, surviving and not turning back. Unlike what is implied in the restricted economy of travel where return is necessary in strengthening one's sense of identity, here it is only by breaking away that a new sense of identity can be established.

This, consequently, offers new utopian possibilities for notions of identity and belonging. In *Moonlight* the mother and daughter's settlement and reunion in America subvert historically ingrained ideas of belonging and identity as necessarily associated with the homeland and point towards alternative post-national implications of belonging and identity. As Roxanna herself expresses near the end of the novel 'you could love the old country all you want. Sometimes, exile is the best thing that can happen to a people' (p. 360).

While on a micro level this points to a new found space of belonging for individual oppressed Iranian mothers and daughters, on a macro level, the mother's embrace of these exilic possibilities allegorically offers a sense of hope for the large Jewish Iranian population in Iran and diaspora. To soothe the Jewish-Iranian population who have endured years of oppression, the novel indicates that one's identity does not necessarily need to be attached to one's birthplace, nor does one have to return to the home country to find a sense of identity. As Tina Jackson, former Arts Editor of the Big Issue writes in the postscript of the novel, it offers the 'chance of a new beginning' (p. 380) where one could construct one's identity independent of the homeland. Nahai herself comments about being exile in 'Elegy for a Dream,' 'there was something about being cut loose [...] [which offered] possibilities I wouldn't



have dared contemplate as a woman or a Jew back there, that gave me a sense of exhilaration and optimism' (2007).

*Moonlight*, and other texts that encourage a new beginning, offer readers, particularly those who like the Jewish Iranian community might feel bound, opportunities for being part of imagined and hopeful communities in the future. As Phillip Wegner observes in his book *Imaginary Communities* about diasporic communities and their literature, such texts are utopian in the way that they construct imagined communities where despite the fact that 'most of their members will never encounter one other, each believes they all share some deep, transhistorical bond' (1997, p. xvi). This is why such books can have 'political effects, shaping the ways people understand, and as a consequence, act in their worlds' (p. xvi).

However, while writers like Nahai point towards the necessity of transgression outwards from the physical boundaries of the homeland and challenge the nationalistic ideas of belonging, particularly in relation to the mother's position, other writers challenge and reframe concepts of identity and belonging by transgressing back inwards to marginalized and forgotten centres of one's deep-seated sense of cultural identity. This is particularly true when a diasporic daughter who has been separated from her mother and who has marginalized her sense of Iranian identity, journeys back to her homeland. In many such cases, the narrative adopts the traditionally male-narrated journey, which symbolizes the pursuit of achievement of a sense of personal identity for the male traveler, at the heart of which the symbolic figure of the mother emphasizes the traveler's sense of nostalgia, spiritual and national identity. But instead of adhering to its conventions, these new narratives rewrite it from the neglected modern perspective of an Iranian diasporic daughter. In adopting a journey inwards these narratives usually subvert traditional male narratives of journey and use it to highlight the experiences of underrepresented daughters. Consequently, they become sites for the contestation of the identity crisis of diasporic Iranian daughters. At the same time, they can be seen as critiquing the situation that has led to the migration of millions of Iranians.

This kind of journey inwards to the forgotten aspects of oneself is best reflected in Nahid Rachlin's *Foreigner* (1979). As the novel begins, Feri, an Iranian-American

woman returns to Iran after fourteen years. During her stay in America, she had worked hard to assimilate, consequently forgetting all aspects of her Iranian identity. When she returns to Iran, it is to reconnect to her forgotten roots. However, upon her return, her journey becomes more than a mere reconnection with her culture. Instead it transforms into a search for her missing mother, Banoo, who had suddenly abandoned her family when Feri was a child. Since Banoo had left Feri abruptly as a child, their relationship, like Lili and Roxanna's in *Moonlight*, is conflicted. It had been in response to this disrupted relationship that Feri had escaped and gone into self-imposed exile. As Fido reminds us, often when daughters are faced with the sudden departure of their mothers, they 'might be willing to perform that fundamental act of betrayal, that of loving someone, somewhere else' (1991, p. 331) as they try to seek a substitute for the disrupted connection and love of the mother. Fido argues that it is through the daughter's relationship with her mother, 'the first country that lies outside' (p. 331), that the daughter first discovers her own sense of identity. This is why, she argues, an abandoned daughter might escape and seek 'not only substitute relationship with another woman, an adoptive mother, a substitute, but also an adoptive country, a place where [she] might hope to lose the sense of pain and inadequacy which stems from difficulties in [her] relation with [her] source of self-image' (p. 331). As Feri herself recalls after her mother had left, 'I ached with memories of my mother' (p. 45). The home, which had reminded her of her mother in every corner, soon had become a site of distress and unbelonging. Soon after her mother's departure, Feri, too, had begun to insist on leaving Iran and 'dreamed of escape into a different world' (p. 27). Her choice to leave had been clearly based on a need to distance herself from the situation and to seek an adoptive substitute for her loss where she could reconstruct her sense of belonging.

However, according to Fido, the adoptive country breeds what she calls a 'false self,' where the daughter's image of herself is constructed in the eye of the other. Abandoning her 'true' self, Feri had successfully assimilated into America, married a blue-eyed American in whose gaze she envisioned herself. But, after many years, when she suspects her husband is having an affair and no longer views her as before, her sense of identity starts to become undone, becoming 'empty of everything' (p. 137). It is this that ignites in her the desire to return to her homeland

and seek her oppressed 'true self.' Upon her return to Iran, however, Feri is caught in what Helena Grice calls juxtaposition of '*un*belonging alongside the desire for home' (2002, p. 206). Although she had been filled with a sense of excitement 'in Iran, things had quickly reversed' (p. 38) and instead of a sense of belonging Feri begins to feel anxious, particularly in the absence of her mother. She feels uncomfortable in a house where every object and room reminds her of her mother, and soon realizes that she must search for and find her mother if she is to overcome her identity crisis and feel at peace. Thus, the journey of self-discovery transforms into a journey for the discovery of the missing mother.

The mother's physical absence, the daughter's discomfort in her absence and her eventual search for her, rewrites the traditional connotations of the symbolic mother and reconceptualises notions of identity and belonging. Recalling that in traditional Iranian literature the mother functioned as a symbolic figure of the homeland to whose warm bosom travellers returned safely, the absence of Feri's actual mother de-symbolizes and de-mythologizes the mother figure. Here, the mother is not simply a symbol or a myth who connotes belonging, but rather she has a name, an individuality and a physical presence who is greatly missed. Furthermore, the mother's absence and the daughter's search, criticizes and undermines traditional nationalistic notions of identity and belonging to the homeland. In the beginning of the novel it appears that Feri's sense of unease in America was due to her neglect of her Iranian identity combined with distance from her homeland. But upon her return to Iran, where she reconnects with aspects of her Iranian identity in her homeland, she still feels unsatisfied. This dissatisfaction undermines nationalistic notions of identity, the belief that one's sense of identity is necessarily associated with an external sense of belonging to a politically defined physical nation. Rather, the novel offers an alternative possibility where one's sense of belonging and identity is connected to one's neglected aspects of self. For Feri, this lies in reconnection with her mother who had been 'sealed inside [her] like an illusion too real to discard' (p. 39). This is why the mother and daughter's reunion, a return and reunion with forgotten aspects of herself, gives Feri a sense of complete belonging and peace. Feri's last words, after she had decided to stay in Iran indefinitely to be near her mother, point to this:

I stood there for a while, listening, watching my mind filled at the same time with other similar scenes from the past. I suddenly thought of my body as an immense shell, emptying from one side and filling from the other. The stars, the pink flowers on my chador, the knobs on the singer's black hair, the dark eyes of a young man standing in the crowd and smiling at me just then—were all little grains being fed into me. I took them with each breath, slowly....

I turned over and looked at my mother. Her face was so serene in her sleep. I knew soon I would have to make decisions beyond the day, but for the moment I lay there. Tranquil. (p. 192)

There is, however, another way that this novel could be read. If we consider Banoo's role in the traditional sense, the mother as a symbol of the homeland, as Mother Iran, and Feri as her children, then the novel could be seen as a critique of Iranian society at large. Seen from this perspective, Banoo's sudden abandonment of her family could be seen as Iran's abandonment of its own people. As mentioned earlier, there was a strong gendered nationalistic discourse in Iran, with great emphasis on envisioning Iran as 'a female body: a body to love and be devoted to, to possess and protect, to kill and die for' (Najmabadi 1997, p. 445). In this society its male members were strongly involved in the construction of this vision through poetry, prose, and even in the press, during the earlier part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>2</sup> However, while they were involved in envisioning this body, Mother Iran had abandoned the interest of its people, making alliances with other countries, the result of which was forced secularization and modernization, and a general sense of discontent amongst the population. While prior to the revolution this forceful ideological invasion had left many in 'crisis of cultural identity and anomie' (Mirsepassi 2000, p. 76), the Islamic government brought with it new policies that further alienated its people and forced many, like Feri, into exile. Feri's return to Iran and reunion with her mother, consequently, points towards a new possibility of national identity in relation to the homeland: one in which there is separation between the ruling government and certain aspects of one's homeland to which one will always feel a sense of belonging.

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<sup>2</sup> For an interesting discussion about this topic see Cameron Michael Amin's 'Selling and Saving: Mother Iran: Gender and the Iranian Press in the 1940s.' in *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 33 (2001): 335- 361.

### **Magic and Dreams:**

Although in the works discussed above, mothers and daughters traverse various formal and physical barriers, whether in gaining the ability to speak or to embark on a journey, frequently the many thick layers that they have to traverse can only be penetrated with the aid of elements from other realms, such as magic realism and magical dreams. In fact sometimes the mother and daughter's very survival and reunion depends on the interference of such forces. In explaining the importance of other-worldly elements, such as magic and dreams, in the transgression of mothers and daughters, Wendy Faris' essay, 'Scheherazade's Children: Magical Realism and Postmodern Fiction' in *Magical Realism* is useful. Faris defines magic realism as a genre that 'combines realism and the fantastic in such a way that magical elements grow organically out of the reality portrayed' (1995, p. 163). She goes on to 'invoke Scheherazade's children as its standard bearers because they might be imagined as "replenished" postmodern narrators, born of the often death-charged atmosphere of high modernist fiction, but able some-how to pass beyond it' (p. 163). According to her, Scheherazade's children are all

postmodern story tellers [who] may need magic to battle death, a death more depersonalized even than the one their mother faced from King Shariyar; they inherit the literary memory, if not the actual experience, of death camps and totalitarian regimes, as well as the proverbial death of fiction itself. (p.164)

But Faris argues that while Scheherazade is 'concerned with epistemological questions, with figuring out how to extend her store of knowledge to stave off her death,' her children need strategies for a different, narrative, kind of survival. She believes, that although these children have 'come into being as epistemological objects,' attached to Scheherazade, if they are to survive, they 'must go forward as subjects, crossing into the ontological domain' (p. 166). These children must find their own narrative voices; they have to 'contend with their own narrative existence [...] they must invent their fictional identities for themselves' (p. 166). But as Faris argues, these narrators need to invent ways to surpass the crushing forces of their past, elements which realism and male dominated realist modes of narrative would not let them surpass. This is why she argues these narrators need magic to secure their own survival. As she writes, 'the difficulty of that task is perhaps another reason why they need magic to perform it' (p. 167). Although Faris focuses on Latin

American, Caribbean and Indian writing, her argument may be extended to include the new writings emerging from diasporic Iranian writers in English. This is not only because Scheherazade's Persian background and Iranian women's responses today make this parallel relevant but also because many of these mothers and daughters also need magic and elements from other-worlds to help them cross over into the ontological domain as subjects of their own narratives.

In *Moonlight*, for instance, it is Roxanna's magical ability to fly that contributes to her epistemological and ontological survival. Had it not been for her ability to grow wings and fly she would have died as a child at the hands of her own mother who had thrown her off the roof to avoid the shame of having her daughter run away, at which case the destructive mother daughter cycle would have continued in silence. It is also this ability that allows her to escape her marriage and her own doomed relationship with her daughter, and to transcend the boundaries of Iranian patriarchal society where, as her husband claims, 'no woman can get beyond a city's borders without her husband's permission' (p. 143). In America, too, it is magic that leads to her eventual reunion with her daughter. As Roxanna settles in America her once frail body gradually fills up with over three hundred pounds of mysterious liquid, and when doctors are tending to her, her family accidentally discovers her and informs Lili. It is only after she is bedridden with this liquid that Roxanna is forced to silently listen and become an address-able and eventually a response-able character, which consequently leads to the reconstruction of the mother-daughter relationship. The liquid, Miriam tells Lili, is made of unreleased sorrow and guilt:

She's dying of Guilt, you see. Over what she did to you, and to your father before you. She's dying of Sorrow, over the life that she wasted, that she could have fixed but didn't. So much pain bottles up in you, so many tears, and after a while it has nowhere to go, and it begins to kill you. There is a word for it in Farsi: *Degh*, 'to die of Sorrow.' I figure Roxanna never got the chance—gave herself the chance—to go back and ask forgiveness. I figure if she did that—with you, at least [...]—she might release some of those tears and start to recuperate. (p. 356)

After hearing all the stories, followed by a ritual performed by Lili to release the pain, Roxanna begins to shed bucketfuls of tears, releasing the guilt and gaining the ability to speak to her daughter and heal the damaged relationship.

In Rachlin's *Foreigner*, too, it is Feri's magical dreams that allow her to turn inwards to come to terms with her shattered sense of identity and enable transpositioning—the mother speaking through the daughter—to take place. This is not to collapse dreams and magic into one category. Rather, while magic allows characters to break out and away from externally imposed obstacles, such as the patriarchal society in which they live, dreams allow a turning inward from personally imposed limitations. The role of dreams in fiction can be described as 'the gate to the unconscious mind, that unruly territory over which the ego claims something like a colonial jurisdiction, the peripheral, colonized side of the self,' that 'break into the daytime unitary narration of the self and bring forth other-worlds of hidden possibilities, usually kept under by the conscious mind' (Fotouhi 2004, p. 4). It is through this function of dreams that neglected aspects of the daughter's identity are manifested in *Foreigner*, leading not only to her eventual return to Iran and her reunion with her mother, but also to foregrounding the mother's silenced voice.

Although dreams in *Foreigner* appear only briefly and their significance may even be overlooked within the dominant realistic first person narration, their importance lies in driving the narrative forward and in helping the inward reflection of characters. The most significant dream in *Foreigner* occurs just after Feri has felt a sense of dissatisfaction with her life in America and begins contemplating a return to Iran:

The plan had begun to form in my mind one late afternoon as I stood behind the picture window of our living room in Lexington, looking out at the grass-covered backyard, actually aware of a stillness all around me. The trees, a bird sitting on a branch, the backyards of neighbors, seemed to have gone to sleep or frozen to death. Color had bled out of them. How different this was from that other world, I had thought. Our sun-choked, dust-swept courtyard, the melancholy sunsets and hazy noons. The hum of prayers pouring out of mosques, a child climbing an ancient tree. Uncertainty, a mystery in the air.

That night I had dreamt of Iran, something that I had not done since I married Tony. In the dream I was sitting in the hollowed-out stump of a tree in our courtyard. It was a very clear day and all the flowers and leaves were vividly outlined in the sun. Then the air suddenly changed; a harsh wind began to blow and it quickly turned into a hurricane. Someone was walking towards me in the darkened air, calling my name, asking for help. I jumped out of my enclosure and ran towards the figure whose voice became more and more desperate—a tiny, featureless figure with its hands stretched out, trying to move forward but not able to. As I came closer I



could see that the figure was someone very much like me, only she was smaller and younger.

‘Who are you?’ I asked.

‘Don’t you know me?’

I shook my head.

She began to laugh, trembling all over, her features becoming distorted and frightening. It was as if I were looking at my image in a broken mirror. (p. 37-38)

Considering dreams as agents that manifest suppressed sides of one’s unitary sense of subjectivity, and according to Hermans-Janson and Hermans’ distinction between subject and object levels of dream interpretation, this dream could be interpreted as subconsciously featuring those oppressed aspects of Feri’s life. According to them, when a dream is interpreted on the level of the subject ‘the other people refer to aspects of the dreamer’s self [...] the coactors are to be interpreted as characteristics of the dreamer’ (1995, p. 128). At this level of interpretation the other figure in the dream could be seen as aspects of Feri herself. Thus the distressed figure who is crying for help could be seen as Feri, who is immobilized and calling out for help to herself. Her inability to recognize herself, coupled with the image of the broken mirror, points to her shattered sense of identity.

However, when interpreted on the object level, ‘the other people in the dream refer to characteristics of other people in the dreamer’s actual social situation’ (p. 57). Although unrecognizable, the other figure in Feri’s dream arguably refers to characteristics of Feri’s mother, who alongside her Iranian side had also been reduced to ‘a dark memory’ (p. 40). Read on the object level, Feri’s inability to distinguish herself from her mother reflects a close bond between mother and daughter. Although at this point the mother’s ‘function remains faceless’ (Irigaray 1981, p. 63), the dream establishes a deep sense of connection between mother and daughter, and it is this invisible and private connection that finalizes the daughter’s decision to return to Iran. Furthermore, if we are to believe that the other person in the dream is Feri’s mother, then the cry for help could be interpreted as the mother’s cry for help to her daughter. Feri’s decision to return to Iran after this dream could be interpreted as her response to her mother’s cry for help and a desire for reconnection. It is this internal connection that is maintained throughout the novel

with other dreams that leads to transpositioning, where we eventually hear the mother's voice in silence through the daughter. As Feri returns to Iran guided by the dreams she becomes the mouthpiece for Banoo's experiences, the speaking subject, the missing daughter of Iranian literary tradition, who rescues the Iranian mother from her symbolic and mythical death.

But the use of magic and other-worldly elements such as dreams play another significant role in establishing the position of Iranian mothers and daughters, as well as the position of Iranian writers at large within the arena of world literatures in English. Magic realism according to Stephen Slemon 'carries a residuum of resistance towards the imperial centre and to its totalizing systems of generic classification' (1996, p. x). This forms resistance as it focuses on what Theo D'Haen calls the 'ex-centric' by 'speaking from the margins, from a place "other" than "the" or "a" centre' (1995, p. 195), by 'a voluntary act of breaking away from the discourse perceived as central' (p. 196). In relation to traditional Iranian literature, magic realism, and dreams which operate in a similar manner, act as a kind of resistance towards the realism of the unitary, and coherent narrative forms of patriarchal Iranian literature in which mothers and daughters had very little presence. Like Scheharzade's daughters, for these women to survive, they need magic and elements of dreams to breach the boundaries of realist Iranian literature. But more importantly, magic and dreams provide them with a unique discursive space in which diasporic Iranian women writers can express themselves and their foremothers according to their own needs, as 'subjects, and protagonists of their own reality rather than objects and antagonists in the Father's drama' (Wenzel 1981, p. 59).

Furthermore, magic realism and other worldly elements operate as a vehicle for foregrounding the Iranian experience within the larger discourse of Western and English literatures. As D'haen argues magic realism can be a

way of access to the main body of "western" literature for authors not sharing in, or not writing from the perspective of, the privileged centers of this literature for reasons of language, class, race, or gender, and yet avoiding epigonism by avoiding the adoption of views of the hegemonic forces together with their discourse. (1995, p. 196)

While in this manner magic realism, according to Faris, ‘seems to provide [...] a revitalizing force that comes often from the “peripheral” regions of the Western culture—Latin America and the Caribbean, India, [and] Eastern Europe’ (1995, p. 165) these writers’ appropriation of the magic realist discourse and use of other worldly elements, has not only contributed to a resistance, foregrounding, and recontextualizing of the identities of Iranian mothers and daughters. It has also contributed to the centralization, foregrounding and construction of a new discourse for Anglophone Iranian literature in the same manner that Gabriel Garcia Marquez contributed to Latin American literature and Salman Rushdie to Indian literature.

## **Conclusion**

As this chapter has demonstrated, the engagement with the mother-daughter relationship, against a history of silences in Iranian literary tradition, has enabled the reconstruction of the image of the mother from a symbol to an actual speaking subject, in turn reconstructing the mother daughter relationship itself. Just as diasporic Iranian writers tap into various elements of traditional Iranian literature to construct a new hopeful space of belonging for themselves, so, too, diasporic Iranian daughters are drawing on and challenging those literary elements to renegotiate certain deep-seated elements that traditionally defined Iranian nationalistic sense of identity. But while much attention has been paid to diasporic Iranian women writers, thus far, little attention has been paid to male diasporic Iranian writers in English. In the last several years, there has been an increase and interest by publishers and readers in works produced by male Iranian writers. Given this current interest, any study of diasporic Iranian writing would be incomplete without taking into account the sudden increase of diasporic Iranian male narratives. The final chapter of this study, therefore, examines the increasing popularity of diasporic Iranian male narratives in English.

## Chapter Five

# Iranian Masculinities—reconsidering “hypervisiblity/invisiblity”

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When I was about twelve years old in the early 1990s my father was given a post as the manager of a nearly inoperative representative branch of an Iranian bank in Tokyo. Since this post was authorized during the school season, my father decided to travel ahead and prepare everything for our arrival during summer holidays. Because the bank for which he worked was a governmental bank, it was made clear to us, even before our departure, that we would be representatives of the Islamic Republic of Iran. This meant abiding by the ethical and moral rules of the Islamic regime. For my mother and I this meant wearing the headscarf in all public places, as if we were still in Iran. For my father, this translated into wearing a beard, an unspoken rule agreed by most men with some sort of government related job. My mother and I followed the rules and continued to wear the scarf in Japan; but my father, who despite having studied at the seminaries of Qom and working for a governmental organization had never worn a beard, was not about to start.

In Tokyo, our new home was a three-bedroom mansion of an apartment by Japanese standards decorated with seventies furniture, which had been in the lease of the bank for thirty years, twenty years of which the bank was inoperative and the apartment empty. The owners of this building were a Japanese-Chinese couple named Toba. As dedicated occupants of one of their twelve luxury apartments, the Tobas were very kind to us and often invited us for dinners and lunches. Mrs. Toba became a good friend of my mother's and took her places and taught her the ropes of living in Japan. She was very excited by the concept of Iran and often boasted about having Iranian tenants. As a frequent traveler to exotic locations, Mrs. Toba was keen to visit Iran and every time we extended an invitation for her to go to Iran when we are there, she complemented us on our kindness and hospitality. She particularly admired the tall, handsome bachelor-banker with 'romantic eyes' who had occupied the apartment twenty years before us.

About a year and half after our arrival, however, this relationship was permanently damaged when the Japanese cable television showed the film *Not Without My Daughter* (1991). An adaptation of a memoir by Betty Mahmoody by the same name, and starring Sally Field, the film tells the story of Betty, an American woman who had married an Iranian doctor in America. In 1985, following the revolution and at the height of the Iran-Iraq war, Dr. Mahmoody, who had been faced with racial discrimination at work, decides to travel to Iran for two weeks with Betty and their daughter, Mahtob. After much conviction, Betty is persuaded to travel to Iran. It, however, is not what she had imagined. Iran is depicted as a dirty desert of a country, with basic facilities, and 'primitive' customs that she does not understand. Betty wants to return to America as soon as possible, but on the day of their return, her husband reveals that he has been fired from his job in America and that he has decided to stay in Iran indefinitely. It appears that he had known this all along, even before swearing on the Quran and promising a two-week return. As Betty protests, Mahmoody, led on by others in his family, becomes violent and abusive. When she attempts to run away to seek help at the American consulate, he separates her from Mahtob, imprisons her in an abandoned house and brings her only water and food; when she decides to 'behave' and is let into the family again, he has his family monitor her every move. But Betty manages to sneak out occasionally and meets some people who are willing to help her escape. After eighteen months of abuse and mistreatment, with help from those she met, Betty and Mahtob eventually escape through dangerous mountains into Turkey, where they seek refuge at the American consulate and find their way back to America.

The film, which we found a grotesque and culturally inaccurate representation of Iran and Iranian culture, offended and appalled us. But, shown at the height of Western conflict with Iran, it also single-handedly changed the dynamics of our relationship with the Tobas. After the film, Mrs. Toba, who had usually kept in touch with my father, calling him in the office to make sure that everything was well, did not contact him for several months. It was as if she chose not to see my father anymore. When she would bump into him in the elevator, it would be an awkward encounter, an uneasy and casual hello, the greeting of someone confused, fearful and whose trust, like Betty's, had been betrayed. It felt as if somehow my father had become invisible as an individual but visible in relation to that type of

man depicted in the film. During this time, however, Mrs. Toba became more of an ally to my mother. She would take her to places more often, and soon the conversation would turn towards the situation of Iran. Although my mother had always felt Mrs. Toba's discomfort with us wearing the scarf, after the film, she could sense her unease even more. She would tell my mother that no one would be in this restaurant, shopping centre, little spa town, that she took her to and that it would be okay for her to take off her scarf. And by 'no one' she meant my father. She felt that it was he who had been forcing us to wear the scarf, and once or twice she had even asked outright if that was the case. My mother was clearly offended every time, as she effusively narrated the conversation for us later in the day. In her broken English, however, she could not explain the complexity of the Iranian society to Mrs. Toba, but she always made sure that she realized that my father was not the one forcing us to wear the scarf. Despite all this, Mrs. Toba did not recover from the shock of the film, never regained her full comfort with my father, and never again during the three more years that we were her tenants did she express interest in traveling to Iran.

But it was not only our relationship with the Tobas that *Not Without My Daughter* affected. I can argue with assurance that the book has had a much more consequential effect than the film on the way Iranian culture, particularly Iranian men, are perceived today in the West. Mahmoody's memoir (1987) has been one of the most successful bestsellers of the genre ever since its publication in the early 1980s, to the point that in the year of its publication it was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize. According to the information on Andrew Lownie's website, Dr. Mahmoody's literary agent, until 2010 the book had sold 11 million copies, and translated into numerous languages. Even to date, it is still listed as one of the top 100 books to read in bookstores like Dymocks, alongside other classics as *Catcher in the Rye* and *Sense and Sensibility*. Betty herself went on to become a spokeswoman on issues about women's situation in the Middle East, and was given an honorary doctorate from Alma College in Chicago.

Here, I linger on Mahmoody's book and subsequent film because I witnessed first hand how it contributed to the transformation of Iranian masculinity. Looking back at the situation twenty years later, I cannot help but see how it Orientalized my father. My father, who was once a beloved friend to the Tobas, suddenly became

hypervisible as a type, and invisible as an individual. His identity became synonymous with a kind of primitive masculinity, the kind of Orientalist generalizations that the film and the book constructed of Iranian men. But the impression that *Not Without My Daughter* left on Mrs. Toba, and her subsequent treatment of my father, was far from unique. In his essay 'Displaced Masculinities,' Shahram Khosravi blames this book for the way Iranian men have been perceived in the last twenty years. As he writes, 'the construction of Iranian men's "primitive masculinity" started in the late 1980s. The most conspicuous and influential mediawork operation has undoubtedly been *Not Without My Daughter* [...] [which] has created a widespread stereotype of the Iranian man' (2009, p. 599). But this portrayal of Iranian masculinity dates further back in history to early encounters of the West with the Middle East. In fact, Iranian men in the West, both historically as subjects of the Western imagination and more recently as members of the Western populus have been subjected to ambivalent representations. For years, however, we had witnessed this ambivalence in Western representations where, whether in films or books, the Middle Eastern man was either the main antagonist or a simplified one-dimensional character constructed to fulfill an expected role.

However, research for this thesis, brought with it the realization that the ambivalence of Iranian masculinity was not only constructed by Western representations. Rather, many of the books by Iranian women writers in English, replicated a similar kind of stereotypical Orientalist depiction of Iranian men as in *Not Without My Daughter*. In many books, Iranian men were depicted hypervisibly, as negative, violent fanatics, sexually deviant, or worst still, rendered almost invisible.

Moreover, in light with this ambivalence in Iranian women's writing, this research highlighted the near invisibility of Iranian men's voices within the larger framework of diasporic Iranian writing in English and the recent scholarship that surrounds it. For example, this research revealed that Dr. Mahmoody, Betty Mahmoody's husband who had been so blatantly demonized by Betty, had tried to defend himself in the form of a memoir entitled *Lost Without My Daughter*. But the memoir, which was to be published in 2010, was not listed anywhere except on the site for Andrew Lownie Literary Agency who was representing Dr. Mahmoody. When enquiries were put forth about the book, there was a short reply, 'Not yet published.' But



before the book could be published, Dr. Mahmoody passed away in Tehran in August 2009 at the age of 70 due to a kidney problem. But while Dr. Mahmoody's silence is due to the fact that his account was never published, those who have been published also suffer an equally silent presence. While Iranian women's fiction and memoirs have received significant attention from publishers, readers and reviewers, Iranian's men's narratives have been pushed into the background. Indeed, so low profile have been Iranian men's publications in English that one would think that there have been hardly any books published by Iranian men in the last several decades. However, it is surprising to realize that post-revolution to date Iranian men have published over sixty-five memoirs and books of fiction in English. Yet, unlike books by Iranian women, many of which have become part of the popular English literarily discourse, very few of the men's accounts have become part of the body of popular English literature. Furthermore, while Iranian women's narratives have attracted much scholarly attention, only a small number of reviews and essays engage with works written by Iranian men.

Given this background, and the fact that scant scholarly or public attention has been paid to diasporic Iranian men's narratives or to the theme of Iranian masculinity, the final chapter of this thesis is devoted to this topic. As one of the first studies to do so, this chapter sets out to examine and situate the representation of Iranian masculinities and Iranian men's writing in English within the broader context of diasporic Iranian writing in English. However, since, until recently, most of our perception about Iranian men and masculinity have primarily been constructed through the stream of narratives by diasporic Iranian women writers, this chapter first considers how Iranian masculinity has been represented within this framework in relation to feminist discourses. What this chapter argues is that it has been Iranian women's narratives, usually filtered through a critique of patriarchy and/or Orientalist feminist discourses, coupled with Iranian women's tendency of self-Orientalization in their literature, that have contributed to Iranian men's hypervisibility/invisibility in diasporic Iranian literature in English. Then, this study sets out to examine the increasing popularity of diasporic Iranian men's narratives and argues that their popularity stems out of a desire to respond to and reconstruct Iranian masculinity. Drawing on Oliver's theories of subjectivity, and situating these books within a new socio-political setting, particularly after the 2009

elections, it examines the various strategies that male diasporic Iranian writers have been employing to reconstruct Iranian masculinity and their own individuality.

### **Iranian Men's Hypervisibility/Invisibility and Iranian Women's Self-Orientalization**

The current hypervisibility/invisibility of Iranian men can be traced back to the legacy of the Orientalist discourse that historically describes Middle Eastern Muslim men as autocrats who lock up women, 'oversexed degenerates,' as Said puts it in *Orientalism*, 'capable of cleverly devious intrigues, but essentially sadistic, treacherous [and] low' (1978, p. 287). In light of these representations, discourses around Middle Eastern masculinity have hardly touched upon other attributes. Instead, representations of the Middle Eastern man have become synonymous with fundamentalism, and associated with terror, rage, and savagery. In Iran the onset of modernization, which produced 'civilized' Western educated men who encouraged the public presence of women in society in the earlier decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century enabled this stereotypical image to shift slightly. However, following the Islamic revolution and US Embassy hostage crisis, the negative connotations have once again been renewed and reconfirmed for the Western gaze. As the Western world watched, in horror, 'wild-eyed' Iranians (Scott 2000, p. 178) shook their fists in the air and sent death messages to America as they took the representatives of their country hostage, Iranian men regained their position as 'devilish savages of Islam' (p. 178). As Khosravi argues, this primitive image of Iranian masculinity was based on fundamental Islam and promoted through various media outlets (2009, p. 599).<sup>1</sup> It was this image, heightened by the later events of 9/11 and the ensuing 'war on terror', that has perpetuated the hypervisibility of Iranian masculinity in the West.

But what makes the position of Iranian men even more complicated is that, until recently, much of the understanding of Iranian masculinity in the West, has been

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<sup>1</sup> In *Islamophobia* Peter Gottschalk and Gabriel Greenberg demonstrate how the image of the Iranian man was portrayed right after the Iranian revolution and the hostage crisis through cartoons in popular America newspapers that depicted Imam Khomeini 'and the Islamic revolutionaries of Iran as crazy, backward, and violent' (2008, p. 124).

constructed through a feminist perspective. As Lahoucine Ouzgane observes, ‘in the last three or four decades, scholarly attention to gender issues in the Middle East and North Africa has been focused almost exclusively on a quest to understand femininity: what is it and how it is made and regulated’ (2006, p. 1). Steeped in an Orientalist vision of the Middle East, which rendered Muslim women as ‘victims of religious dogma’ (Bahramitash 2006, p. 223), oppressed by dominant patriarchal discourses, Middle Eastern women have become subjects of study and recognition in the West. This is why Middle Eastern women’s narratives, particularly after 9/11 in the wake of new conflicts between the Middle East and the West, have been greatly welcomed by readers. Consequently the publishing industry has realized the marketability of these books, and that is why over the last decade, hundreds of titles have been published by and about Middle Eastern women in the West with a significant proportion of these by and about Iranian women.

The socio-political interest in these books, at a time of political unrest between Iran and the West, has also brought with it particular modes of reading. In *Rethinking Global Sisterhood*, Nima Naghibi outlines the intent of her book as an analysis of ‘how particular kinds of (often contradictory) representations of the Persian woman as abject, as repressed, and, paradoxically, as licentious [has] become consolidated as unquestioned “truths” in dominant Western and Iranian feminist discourses’ (2007, p. x). A seminal text that critiques and outlines the relationship between Western white feminism and the ‘third world,’ in this case Iranian, women Naghibi provides an explanation of how the idea of ‘global sisterhood’ has functioned in the past and present to benefit Western women at the expense of the Other. Naghibi explores this relationship through an analysis of various texts by Western women about Iranian women, and further comments on how these representations have also influenced Iranian feminism and Iranian women’s representation of themselves. She positions her argument around the current political situation, and concludes that these texts have great influence on the recent Western declaration of war on the Middle East in the name of liberating its women.

The relationship Naghibi outlines has been influential in the way Iranian women were represented and represent themselves. However, what has been missing in current analysis of Iranian masculinities is that the relationship between Western feminism and Iranian women has also influenced much of the recent representation

of Iranian men both in Iran and abroad. This section, therefore, extends Naghibi's premise, that 'particular kinds of (often contradictory) representations of the Persian woman as abject, as repressed, and, paradoxically, as licentious become consolidated as unquestioned "truths" in dominant Western and Iranian feminist discourses' (p. x), and examines how these representations have in turn led to the construction of certain myths about Iranian masculinities.

Although many of the concerns of this thesis have become visible in the last several decades, particularly more clearly in the works of diasporic Iranian women writers, the origins of these representations date back to the introduction of concepts of Western modernity, including feminism, to Iran. This may only be understood by understanding the history that has led to its evolution. In his insightful book about Iranian history, *Refashioning Iran: Orientalism, Occidentalism and Historiography*, Mohammad Tavakoli-Targhi, proposes that much of what forms the modern narrative of Iranian history, is influenced by Western and Eurocentric notions of modernity and concepts of 'occidental rationality.' He believes that,

The universalist claims of European enlightenment has blackmailed non-European modernity and debilitated its historiography by engendering a tradition of historical writing that used a dehistoricized and decontextualized "European rationality" as its scale and referent. Iranian historians and ideologues, like their Indian and Ottoman counterparts, developed a fractured conception of historical time that viewed their contemporary societies ahead of their own time. This conception of historical time parallels the time-distancing devices of European anthropologists who denied *coevalness* to their contemporary non-Western societies. Such a *schizochronic* conception of history informs the nationalist historiography of Iranian modernity, a historiography that assumes the non-contemporaneity of the contemporaneous Iranian and European societies. (2001, p. 4)

In this discourse 'whereas Europeans reconstituted the modern self in relation to their non-Western Others, Asians and Africans [and Middle Easterners] began to redefine their self in relation to Europe, their new significant Other' (p. 4). At the heart of this definition was a sort of 'binary opposition' influenced heavily by colonial and Orientalist language that defined what constituted as modern – Western – and what was not. Although there were a few markers of socio-political differences that clearly distinguished Iranian society from the modernized West, one of the most prominent signs of difference was the condition of Iranian women,

particularly their position, status and visibility in society. This difference was clearly marked in how Iranian women dressed, which immediately became a sign of Iran's backwardness not only in the eyes of the West but also from the perspective of certain groups of western educated Iranian modernists. As Tavakoli-Targhi states: 'for Iranian modernists, viewing European women as educated and cultured, the veil became a symbol of backwardness. Its removal, in their view, was essential to the advancement of Iran and its dissociation from Arab-Islamic culture' (p. 54). Although these ideas were not entirely welcomed by traditionalist Iranians, they were influential enough to construct a specific class within Iranian society in which women were given new forms of freedom. With new models of modernization Iranian women had the opportunity of being educated and, though in small numbers and for the first time, they became part of the public sphere. This not only exposed women to alternative concepts of gender relationships, particularly those driven by the newly imported concepts of Western feminism, but also gave Iranian women the ability to actively comment and challenge masculine and patriarchal social norms. Even as early as the 1920s, Iranian women began publishing their opinions and views on different aspects of Iranian society, including on concepts of veiling and unveiling.<sup>2</sup>

As Nasrin Rahimieh argues in her essay 'Overcoming the Orientalist Legacy in Iranian Modernity,' 'this conceptualization [...] has informed [much of] Iran's understanding of its own history' (2003, p. 148), and one can argue this is what also informs much of diasporic Iranian women's contemporary writing, especially their views of Iranian gender relations and Iranian masculinity. A glimpse at some diasporic women who have been published over the last three decades reveals a list of names that could be traced to new modern Iranian elite families. Just to name a few, Azar Nafisi, the author of *Reading Lolita in Tehran* is the daughter of one of Tehran's mayors during the Shah's regime; her mother was one of the first women representatives of the parliament during the Shah's regime. Nafisi always finds pride in her mother's role, as well as in the fact that her grandmother attended university when other women barely left their homes. Sattareh Farman-Farmaian,

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<sup>2</sup> In her book, *Women with Moustaches and Men Without Beards*, Afsaneh Najmabadi outlines some of the most significant and earliest contributions that Iranian women have made to the feminist discourse in Iran (2005, p. 137).

the narrator of *Daughter of Persia*, is a Qajar Princess with a father who insisted on her daughter's education, even letting her go to America as one of the first women to travel outside Iran by herself in the early 1900s, at a time when her friends were being plucked out of middle school to get married. Lily Monadjemi, who wrote *Blood and Carnations* (1993), and more recently, *A Matter of Survival* (2010), is the descendent of Nasser-Al-Din Shah, one of the Iranian Shahs responsible for Iranian's encounter with modernity. Marjan-Satrap, creator of the *Persepolis* comic series is a descendent of a Qajar monarch. Davar Ardalan, the author of *My Name is Iran* (2008), is the daughter of Laleh Bakhtiar, one of the most prominent Iranian/American women scholars, and one of the only women who has translated the Koran from a feminist perspective. She traces her family tree back to Fath-Ali-Shah Qajar. Similarly, Shusha Guppy, the author of many books including *The Blindfold Horse* (1988), also a songwriter, singer and filmmaker, was the daughter of a famous Iranian theologian who sent her to Paris in 1952 to study 'oriental languages and philosophy,' when she was only seventeen.

Although the above list is not inclusive of all writers with similar background, and excludes women of equal calibre in other areas, such as in sciences, politics, humanitarian work, and so forth, as contributors to Western (and Iranian) society, it is inclusive enough to demonstrate that most of what is being written about Iran outside Iran presently is informed by a specific class of Iranian society. This is not to deny or ignore the fact that women of non-aristocratic background, like Marina Nemat, Firoozeh Dumas, Gina Nahai, and Susan Pari, are also contributing to this discourse. However, they too, though not carrying royal blood, by the virtue of living outside Iran and writing in English could be considered within this privileged class of Iranian society and in this chapter their contribution will be considered in the same category.

Here, this class difference is highlighted because the social situation, personal experiences, and education of many of these women who are now cultural leaders and representatives of Iranian experiences in diaspora, are very much Westernised or influenced by the Western concept of modernity that was introduced to Iran in the twentieth century and formed a great part of Iranian history. This influence, however, as Nasrin Rahimieh and Tavakoli-Targhi both argue, is very much steeped in Orientalist notions and dichotomies that were carried across with Western notions

of modernity. As Rahimieh argues ‘these Orientalist discourses [...] underwrite the history of modern Iran’ (2003, p. 148). However, the Islamic revolution which re-emphasized the East/West and gender dichotomies, created unresolved contradictions, not only between Iran/West but also between Iranians themselves. As Said tells us, ‘if all told there is an intellectual acquiescence in the images and doctrines of Orientalism, there is also a very powerful reinforcement of this in economic, political, and social exchange: the modern Orient, in short, participates in its own Orientalizing’ (Said 1978, p. 325). This means that Iranians themselves, whether, as pro-governments from Iran emphasizing the difference between Iran/West, or as educated diasporic writers writing about the perils of life for Iranians under the Islamic regime, or even defending women’s rights, are involved in the politics of what Rahimieh calls ‘self-Orientalization.’

On this basis, therefore, it may be argued that diasporic writers, particularly women writers, are involved in this process of self-Orientalization. More subtle, however, is the impact of this on the representation of Iranian men and forms of masculinity produced by their work. As Naghibi puts it, ‘in representing Persian women, [many] draw on what Foucault has called the “already-said,” or rather the repressed “never-said” of manifest discourse. The truth of Iranian women’s representation as abject, veiled subjects is thus further entrenched by the self-referentiality of the already-said of colonial discourse’ (2007, p. xvii). Many Iranian women writers, coming from that privileged and educated class of Iranian society, to some degree, identify with this discourse. As Naghibi reminds us,

the Western woman, modeled on an Enlightenment figure of autonomous subjecthood, contrasts herself in each instance to the Persian woman, represented as the devalued Other against which Western woman consolidates herself. Privileged Iranian women in the nineteenth centuries also participated in the discursive subjugation of their working-class Persian counterparts. By positioning the Persian woman as the embodiment of oppressed womanhood, Western and elite Iranian women represented themselves as epitomical of modernity and progress. (p. xvii)

I believe that this approach operates even to date, particularly among those diasporic Western educated women and this self-Orientalizing tendency among diasporic Iranian women has a direct influence on how Iranian masculinity is perceived and represented in the West. A survey of both memoirs and fictions by diasporic Iranian women writers, reveals that in most cases women are depicted as



oppressed and lacking freedom, mostly at the hands of various male members of their society or by patriarchal society at large. Women's dystopia, it seems, has been created by the men in their lives. In these books hardly ever do we come across likeable and rounded male characters or even a loving male/female relationship. More often than not when men are present they are representative of a specific type of masculinity: patriarchs, abusive, sexually deviant, or religiously fundamental.

For instance, the controlling patriarchal father figure who can get abusive if pushed to the limit and against whose word no other member of the family dares to speak, keeps reappearing across a range of books. In Nahid Rachlin's memoir *Persian Girls* (2006), for example, Rachlin's father is represented as the all-controlling patriarch who always has the last word. Although Nahid, with her brothers' persuasion, manages to leave for America to study, it is her father's decision that leads to her sister, Pari's unsuccessful marriage to an abusive man and subsequent divorce. It is also his insistence that leads to Pari's second marriage to a mentally unstable man who puts her in mental institutions because he feels she is the one who is sick. This marriage finally leads her into depression and an eventual mysterious death. Similarly, in Zoe Ghahramani's *Sky of Red Poppies* (2010), Roya's father, a powerful landowner but a secret opium addict, is a fearsome figure who makes sure his children, especially his girls, do as they are told. When Roya's sister disobeys his orders and becomes involved in politics he quickly ships her off to America without giving her much choice. In Mani Shirazi's *Javady Ally* (1984), too, we are taken into the lives of Homa, and her mother, who live under the constant fear of a verbally and sometime physically abusive father who demands his every need be met instantly.

In Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2004) similar figures keep appearing in different forms in the lives of the seven girls in the book club. All seven girls seem to be living in some sort of fear of their domineering brothers, fathers, or other male family members. Nafisi, in fact, introduces each girl in relation to the difficulties she has had with her male family members to get herself to the very first session of the book club. For instance, Sanaz is seen running into Nafisi's house for the first session of the book club looking 'harassed, as if she had been running from a stalker or a thief,' after her younger brother 'the darling of their parents,' who had 'taken to

proving his masculinity by spying on her, listening to her phone conversations, driving her car around and monitoring her actions' (p. 14), had dropped her off with disapproval. Another girl, Nassrin, reveals in a conversation with Nafisi how she could finally make it to the book club: 'I mentioned the idea [of attending this book club] very casually to my father, just to test his reaction, and he vehemently disapproved. How did you convince him to let you come? I asked. I lied, she said. You lied? What else can one do with a person who's so dictatorial who won't let his daughter at *this age*, go to an all-female literature class?' (p. 17)

Other typical male figures who appear across various books are religious fanatics, sexually deviant or a combination of both. For instance, one of the only male students that Nafisi introduces is a devout religious man, named Mr. Bahri. In describing him, however, Nafisi paints a very childlike and one-dimensional picture,

Mr. Bahri, who was at first reluctant to talk in class, began after our meeting to make insightful remarks. He spoke slowly, as if forming his ideas in the process of expressing them, pausing between words and sentences. Sometimes he seemed to me like a child just beginning to walk, testing the ground and discovering unknown potentials within himself. He was also becoming increasingly immersed in politics. He became an active member of the student group supported by the government—the Muslim Students' Association—and more and more often I would find him in the hallways immersed in arguments. (p. 356)

Other religious men who make their appearance in *Reading Lolita in Tehran* are sexually abusive. Nassrin, for instance, reveals how 'her youngest uncle, a devout and pious man, had sexually abused her when she was barely eleven. She recounts,

how he used to say that the he wanted to keep himself chaste and pure for his future wife and refused friendships with women on that count [...]. He used to tutor Nassrin [...] three times a week for over a year. He helped her with Arabic and sometimes with mathematics. During those sessions as they sat side by side at her desk, his hands had wandered over her legs, her whole body, as she repeated the Arabic tenses. (p. 49)

Similarly in *Javady Ally* young Homa is abused on the shoulders of a trusted clergyman who volunteers to carry her through crowded demonstrations. As they walk through the crowd, he fondles her through her skirt, pretending to keep her steady on his shoulders.

The repression that many of these women face from male family members extends to society at large and into the public domain, particularly after the revolution. In *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, for example, Iranian society is depicted as highly oppressive. It is controlled by fanatically religious men and allows women to have little freedom of movement or expression. As Nafisi puts it, ‘a stern Ayatollah, a self-proclaimed philosopher-king, had come to rule our land,’ and under his rule ‘[women] were never free of the regime’s definition of them as Muslim women’ (p. 28). Although this is constantly a theme of discussion during the book club, in one particular situation, Nafisi portrays this condition of Iranian women in public by drawing on one of the girls’ typical walks from her book club back home. She appeals to readers to imagine one of her student as she leaves the privacy of the book club and heads home:

Let’s imagine one of the girls, say Sanaz, leaving my house [...] She puts on her black robe and scarf over her orange shirt and jeans [...] We follow Sanaz down the stairs, out the door and into the street. You might notice that her gait and her gestures have changed. It is in her best interest not to be seen, not to be hard to noticed. She doesn’t walk upright, but bends her head towards the ground and doesn’t look at passersby. She walks quickly and with a sense of determination. The streets of Tehran and other Iranian cities are patrolled by militia, who ride in white Toyota patrols, four gun-carrying men and women [...] They patrol the streets to make sure that women like Sanaz wear their veils properly, do not wear make up, do not walk in public with men who are not their fathers, brothers or husbands [...] If she gets on a bus, the seating is segregated. She must enter through the rear door and sit in the back seats, allocated to women. Yet in taxis, which accept as many as five passengers, men and women are squeezed together, like sardines [...] where so many of my students complain of being harassed by bearded and God-fearing men [...]. (p. 27-28)

Although there is no denying that some of these descriptions may be representative of experiences of some women in Iran, it is these representations of the oppressed Iranian women, narrated from a position of privilege by Western-educated women, that signal a hypervisible stereotype of Iranian men and masculinity. But while these representations often stem from personal experiences and reflect upon Iranian society and our understanding of Iranian masculinity at large, they can also operate and be read on a symbolic level with connotations that can reach beyond Iranian borders. This is best demonstrated in a statement that Nafisi makes about the reappearing Mr. Bahri. After Mr. Bahri’s description cited above, she writes, ‘I was not unfond of Mr. Bahri, and yet I developed a habit of blaming him and holding

him responsible for everything that went wrong' (p. 103-104). Read symbolically this sentence carries far more blame than simply on Mr. Bahri. Iran's nationalistic discourse, ever since its introduction, has been clearly gendered. According to Najmabadi, the concept of nationalism in Iran was described through masculine terms such as 'a territory with clear borders, within which the collectivity of national brothers (*baradaran-i vatani*) resided.' In describing and defending this territory, 'the boundedness of this geobody was [...] envisaged as the outlines of a female body: one to love and be devoted to, to possess and protect, to kill and die for.' (1997, p. 92)

However, for many Iranians who were affected by the events leading up to and after the revolution, which led to the exile and imprisonment of many, the Iranian band of brothers who were supposed to protect, kill and die for this female geobody had turned against what they were meant to protect. Thus, many, particularly those of influential background, like Nafisi, whose family had contributed greatly to the progress of the nation, felt betrayed by the outcome of events. In this context, the typical pro-government Iranian man, like Mr. Bahri, could be seen a representative of that collective band of brotherhood who failed to protect its own people and who is to be blamed for everything that they feel went wrong with the revolution.

This type of hypervisible representation, especially when it does not allow for men to speak for themselves as individuals can be seen to be oppressive. As Kelly Oliver reminds us both hypervisibility and invisibility are 'bad visibility' that do not allow for those represented to be seen or recognized as individuals. This is an oppressive force, according to Oliver since 'the seeing/being-seen dichotomy mirrors the subject/object dualism that is symptomatic of oppression. The seer is the active subject while the seen is the passive object' (2001, p. 149). As she argues,

oppression makes people into faceless objects or lesser subjects. The lack of visage in objects renders them invisible in any ethical or political sense. In turn, subjectivity becomes the domain of domination. Subjectivity is conferred by those in power and empowered on those they deem powerless and disempowered. (p. 149)

By representing Iranian men, in general terms, and without giving them the opportunity to express themselves, these writers are replicating this kind of oppressive force that many are writing to escape. In doing so, they are rendering Iranian men, and alternative aspects of Iranian masculinity, invisible.

Furthermore, considering that the majority of such texts are circulated within a Western context where there is already ‘anti-Iranian attitudes [...] and anti-Iranian propaganda that began during the hostage crisis’ (Mobasher 2006, p. 101), coupled with an ‘ignorance and refusal to distinguish pro- and anti-Khomeini Iranians living [outside Iran]’ (p. 101) these books can be seen as further emphasizing the hypervisibility of a highly limited version of Iranian masculinity. These operate in the same way that Derek Stanovsky believes representations of postcolonial masculinity often operate where the ‘essentializing and homogenizing of masculinity serves to obscure the actual diversity and plurality of lived masculinities’ (2007, p. 495).

On a larger scale, however, such representations of Iranian men and masculinity could be seen as feeding into the post 9/11 discourse of War on Terror. As Gargi Bhattacharyya reminds us in *Dangerous Brown Men*, one of the elements leading to the Western declaration of War on Terror, has been to liberate women from the oppressive forces of their patriarchal societies. As she tells us, in the last ten years especially, ‘the abuse of women and the denial of their public rights has been used as a marker of barbarism and as indication of societal sickness, a sickness requiring intervention’ (2008, p. 19). When Nafisi, for instance, constantly emphasizes the lives of Iranian women as ‘doomed’, claiming that ‘the [Western] novels were an escape from the reality in the sense that we could marvel at their beauty and perfection, and leave aside our stories about the deans and the morality squads on the streets’ (p. 38), her words could be read as feeding into the discourse that appeals to what Spivak famously describes as ‘white men saving brown women from brown men.’ These assumptions consequently can be read as advocating the war on terror and attack on the Middle East on the basis of liberating Muslim women from religiously fanatic Iranian men. It is in response to this hypervisible oversimplification of Iranian men and masculinity that diasporic Iranian male writers have begun to respond.

### **Iranian Men Writing Iranian Men**

In ‘Displaced Masculinities,’ Khosravi sums up the two significant elements that have affected the diasporic Iranian men’s representation and sense of identity. As he

puts it, 'Iranian man's masculine identity has been challenged and renegotiated on the one hand by the Iranian women's struggle for emancipation and on the other hand by the [western] mediaworks' (2009, p. 591). In response to this, it is only recently that Iranian men have begun making themselves publically visible in various ways, including through literature. Over the years diasporic Iranian men have been aware of their hypervisible/invisible position, and have lived everyday trying to negotiate their identity in the West. As Siamack Baniamერი begins his humorous 2005 anecdotal book *Iranican Dream*, about an average Iranian-American man trying to raise his two teenagers by himself, with a chapter entitled 'It Sucks Being Me': 'being a Middle Eastern-American man nowadays is as hard as a stash of beef jerky sitting on top of a pick up truck's dashboard in the Arizona summer heat. You sure grow thick skin' (p. 3). However, despite the awareness of this position, until very recently, two factors had made it almost impossible for Iranian men to be recognized beyond stereotypes through a body of literary work.

The first and most important factor has been, as already mentioned, the high interest in Middle Eastern women's narratives, which have flooded the market and media, leaving little room or interest for other accounts. This does not mean that Iranian men were not writing or participating in the literary scene in English. In fact, Iranian men have been writing in English ever since the 1960s, with Fereyduن Esfandiari, living in the United States, as one of the pioneers who published several novels in the 1960s including *The Day of Sacrifice*, *Identity Card*, and *Beggar*. In each decade since then a few male Iranian writers mostly writing from America have published works in English. The 1970s saw Masud Farzan's *Airplane Ticket* (1970) and Donne Raffat's *Caspian Circle* (1979), while the 1980s and 1990s, with increased interest in Iran after the hostage crisis and the revolution, saw several books by Iranian men including *The Feet of a Snake* (1984) by Barry Chubin, *Mantle of the Prophet* (1982) by Roy Mottahedeh, *The Night's Journey* (1984) and *Dead Reckoning* (1992) by Bahman Sholevar. During this time Majid Amini also authored several books in English including *Dreams of a Native Son* (1987), *The Howling Leopard* (1989) and *The Sunset Drifters* (1995). Similarly Manoucher Parvin has been writing for over three decades, with his first book *Cry for My Revolution* (1987) followed by *Avecina and I* (1996) and two more novels *Dardel* (2003) and *Alethophobia* (2007). The 2000s saw a slight surge in publications by

Iranian men, with the two works of Parvin, Simack Baniameri's *Iranican Dream* (2005), Morteza Baharloo's *Quince Seed Potion* (2004), Massoud Alemi's *Interruptions* (2008) Salar Abdohs *The Poem Game* (2004) and Farsheed Ferdowsi's *Mushroom in the Sand* (2009) as well as Mahbod Seraji's *Rooftops of Tehran* (2010), and Said Sayrafiezadeh's *When Skateboards Will Be Free* (2010). Additionally, recently, following the controversial 2009 presidential elections in Iran, a number of narratives have emerged by Iranian men, including Houshang Assadi's *Letters to My Torturer* (2010), Reza Kahlili's *A Time to Betray* (2010) and Arash Hejazi's *Gaze of the Gazelle* (2011).

Despite the handful of books published by Iranian men over the last few decades, however, they have not received nearly as much interest or exposure as Iranian women writers. As we know, in the publishing business, youth, talent, and potential for further literary endeavours attracts publishers to invest in an author. This leads us to the second issue that has hampered Iranian men's acknowledged presence in the literary scene: the practicality of their social position. Considering that the majority of Iranian migrants needed to establish themselves, it has usually been the men who were burdened by this responsibility. Consequently, this had left very little time for creative self-expression. Indeed a glimpse at the profiles of some male authors reveals an entirely different demographic than women writers. While Iranian women writers range in age and profession, many purely dedicated to writing and cultural work, male authors, with the exception of a few, are mostly older with primary professions entirely different from their literary endeavours. In fact many have become writers only after becoming successful at their primary professions and securing themselves and their families. Mahbod Seraji, for instance, the author of *Rooftops of Tehran*, one of the most successful recent books by an Iranian man, who migrated to America as a poor student in the early 70s had to work over twenty hours a week on campus while studying full time just to afford his college tuition fees. After graduation, he worked twenty years at Motorola as a senior manager until he was let go in 2000 during job cuts. It was only then that he started working on *Rooftops of Tehran*, an idea he claims in interviews he had had ever since the hostage crisis. Siamack Baniameri, too, the author of *The Iranican Dream* is a middle-aged established computer engineer who writes part time. Similarly, Morteza Baharloo, who wrote *The Quince Seed Potion*, confesses on his



website that his primary interests in study, like Seraji's, were arts and literature. But his parents refused to send him money to study arts when he was a young man in the United States. It would be years before he could fulfil his dream of writing. As he writes on his website, 'After Mort finished pharmacy training, he determined that a sound financial base was a necessary precursor to pursuing his literary and artistic passions.' Since then it took him fifteen years and a company of 600 employees later, before he could publish his debut novel. Farsheed Ferdowsi, the author of *Mushroom in the Sand* is an equally successful businessman and engineer turned writer. Manoucher Parvin, the author of four novels, including *Alethophobia*, is an academic turned novelist. Out of a handful of Iranian men who have written fictional books, the only devoted and self-declared full time writer, the author of *Poet Game* and *Opium* who studied and teaches creative writing at USC, is Salar Abdoh, the brother of Reza Abdoh, a budding theatre director and a bravely self-confessed homosexual who died of AIDS at the age of 32 in America in 1992. Out of those mentioned above, Abdoh is also the youngest, and has received the most public attention by appearing in numerous events and publishing across genres.

This position of Iranian diasporic men, which usually carried with it the weight of financial responsibility, coupled by current socio-political interests in the West which favours women's narratives, has made it difficult for diasporic Iranian men to be recognized by publishers as contributors to the literary scene. A glimpse at publishers and the availability of these books today is a telling indictment of the status of this body of work. The majority of these books, with the exception of few, have been published with small press publishers and in small numbers or self-published online. This means that without prestigious publishers and their professional marketing strategies diasporic Iranian male writers are not getting the attention they deserve. Additionally, in contrast to the majority of books by Iranian women, many of which are reprinted, most books by Iranian men are out of print and hard to obtain, even from major booksellers and libraries. Thus, many remain obscure or are sometimes lost and forgotten. For instance, while most books by Iranian women surface through a simple search on amazon.com, the majority of which are carried by libraries and major bookshops across the world, this author's search for books by Iranian men was a journey through numerous articles and obscure websites. Obtaining copies of these books, which were either out of print,

not in any major library, or sold at random by no name online site, was even a greater task than proving their presence. Without a conscious and time consuming search like the one undertaken in this thesis, it would be impossible to identify a body of literary work by Iranian men worth further analysis.

In what follows, as one of the first studies to address the body of work of post-revolutionary diasporic Iranian men in English, the aim is to highlight, address and analyse some of the books, recurring themes and issues raised by Iranian men in diaspora, situating them against the backdrop of the socio-political and historical context out of which they are emerging. In particular, this chapter argues that often times these books could be read as responses to the hypervisibility of Iranian men and masculinity as constructed by historical Orientalist narratives and Iranian women's Self-Orientalization in their literature. Taking this as the point of departure, this study examines their operation as a medium to reconstruct Iranian men's sense of individual identity against the limiting hypervisibility that had constructed their identities in stereotypical fashion. In doing so, it argues that these books, many of which counter the negative stereotypes that had made Iranian men invisible, could be read as postcolonial responses to the marginalizing and oppressive forces that had limited the representation of Iranian masculinity. Here, it considers their responses to two specific elements which had greatly contributed to the hypervisibility of Iranian masculinity: the stereotypical representation of Iranian men as religiously violent fanatics and terrorists, and sexually deviant. This approach in particular examines the strategies that many of these writers are employing to challenge stereotypes, and considers how these challenges are creating a kind of recognition of similarities between Iranian men and their Western readers. Finally, it argues that this recognition can reconstruct Iranian masculinity from hypervisibility/invisibility to that of visibility of individuality based on similarity within a Western context.

### *Terrorism and the Hostage Crisis*

For many diasporic Iranian men, the hostage crisis and more recently the events of 9/11 have greatly affected their social position and sense of identity. These events have created tension both in the way Iranian masculinity is perceived and in how

Iranian men see themselves. Out of the two events, while 9/11 affected the general Middle Eastern population in the West, it was the hostage crisis, a ‘miniwar,’ as Mobasher calls it (2006, p. 107), between Iran and America, that has directly influenced representations of Iranian men and masculinity in the West. As Mobasher argues the hostage crisis operated on the legacy of Orientalist discourses and constructed a new kind of binary opposition between Iran and America. As he puts it, ‘the hostage crisis created the first xenophobic anti-Iranian and anti-Islamic reaction with new images of Iran, Islam, and Iranian and other Muslim immigrants as barbaric, uncivilized terrorists—a reaction that continues today’ (p.112). Consequently many diasporic Iranians, particularly men, were exposed to open discrimination of various kinds and lived with the stigma and shame of being Iranian (p.111) For many, particularly for those who wanted to excel in their new environment, discrimination led to a kind of stigma of being Iranian and ‘motivated [them] to cover up their Iranian national origin’ (p. 101). As Ali Behdad an Iranian-American professor of Comparative Literature confesses,

For so long I did not have a sense of national identity. You know that the Iranians of my generation who came to the United States have a particular kind of shame[...]to be Iranian was marked for people of my generation in this country by the hostage crisis, the way we were ashamed of our Iranian-ness. I did not cook anything Iranian until about four or five years ago. I didn’t have any Iranian things as I now do in my apartment...Those were elements of culture that were being repressed. When I wanted to go out and socialize with people during the hostage crisis I would say I was Afghani, I was Italian—anything so not say I was Iranian, I was ashamed of my own Iranian-ness.’ (Behdad, qtd. in Sullivan 2001, p. 249)

Othered and pushed into the margins, like colonized subjects, as a survival mechanism, as Behdad also acknowledges, it has only been recently that Iranian men have decided to openly deal with the trauma of the hostage crisis and the label of terrorist associated with Middle Eastern men. Among the many strategies that Iranian men have employed to recontextualize this image, one of the most popular approaches has been through humour and comedy. In fact, in the last decade, humour has become one of the key modes through which Middle Eastern men have obtained international recognition. When pioneering stand up comedian, Iranian-American Maz Jobrani, teamed up with Egyptians Ahmed Ahmed and Aron Kader, and Palestinian Dean Obeidallah and Korean-Jordanian Won Ho Chung, in 2005, they formed the ‘Axis of Evil Comedy Tour.’ Touring internationally at booked out

events, the comedians pick up on stereotypes of Middle Eastern characteristics, and have joked themselves to world fame. Although there are a number of Iranian stand up comedians the majority of whose acts revolve around stereotypes of Middle Easterners, comedy has also seeped into literature, and is one of the most effective methods of subverting socio-historical patterns that have established society's central and marginal power dynamics. In *On Humour: Its Nature and Its Place in Modern Society* Michael Mulkay contextualizes the importance of humour in addressing a serious social matter. He writes, 'humour can be used effectively to perform serious work within reasonably well defined social contexts. [...] Humour can be used to challenge existing patterns [...] but only when it is given meaning in a relation to criticism and confrontation that is already under way within a serious realm' (1988, p. 177). In a postcolonial context, or in any situation where there is a serious imbalance of power between margin and centre, as Mark Stein and Susanne Reichel argue, 'laughter and humour can release some of the tension and relieve some of the potential aggression' (2005, p. 9). More importantly, humour can be an apparatus for destabilizing power relationships between centre and margin by 'challenging and subverting the established orthodoxies, authorities and hierarchies' (Pfister in Stein & Reichel 2005, p. 9).

For Iranian men, who have been marginally present in the West, invisible as individuals in the shadow of the concept of terrorism and the hostage crisis, humour can be a means through which they can reconstruct their sense of identity and inject humanity into the literary representations of Iranian men. Both as comedians and as writers, many Iranian men have used humour to address issues of terrorism, and through it, they have attempted to reconstruct Iranian masculinity and subvert the established authorities and hierarchies that have marginalised them. Among them, Siamack Baniaméri's *Iranican Dream* is one of the most memorably humorous books by an Iranian man. An anecdotal book that delves into the mind of an unconventional Iranian-American man, as the back cover tells us, it

is a humorous account of a paranoid Iranian-American man in post-9/11 America who is raising two rambunctious teenagers by himself while dealing with a hormonally imbalanced ex-wife, a conspiracy buff father, a ninety-year-old sexually zealous grandfather, outrageously traditional Middle Eastern relatives, and a transsexual best friend who goes to the heart of a war zone for his sex change operation.

Although at times ‘outlandish’ and bizarre, nonetheless, the smile that each episode brings to the reader reframes certain stereotypical characteristics of Iranian men and masculinity from a fresh perspective.

Sculpting a human and witty character out of the stereotypes that surround diasporic Iranian men, terrorism is one of the many issues that Baniamერი deals with in *Iranican Dream*. In one of the episodes, the narrator’s cousin has asked him to pick up his five tiered wedding cake, made of exotic spices and ingredients and worth seven thousand dollars, from the cake maker’s house. Arriving at the house, the narrator waits as the cake maker disassembles the cake and puts it in boxes, ready for him to transfer to the wedding reception, when suddenly ‘the door to the apartment blew to pieces, and a group of armed men in commando outfits stormed the apartments’ (p. 74), With their guns ready to shoot, the commandos fill the house with tear gas push him down on the floor, put a bag over his head and transfer him elsewhere. Once the police commandos take off the bag from his head, he is terrified:

“What the hell is going on here?” I screamed.

“Shut up, you goddamn terrorist.”

“What?”

“Who are your contacts? Where were you taking the bomb?” the agent said.

“The bomb? What bomb?” I asked.

“Don’t play games. We know everything. Where were you taking it?”

“Taking what?”

“The bomb.”

“What bomb?” I asked.

“Listen you asshole, I’ll have you shipped to Guantanamo before you know it. I’ll have your ass in there till you turn seventy.”

“I want my lawyer.”

“Lawyer? You don’t get no freakin’ lawyer. Al-Quaida gets no lawyers, you scumbag.”

“Al-Quaida? What the hell are you talking about?” I asked.

“You know what I am talking about. You were supposed to pick up the bomb and deliver it to your Al-Quaida contacts. Who are they? I want names.”

“What bomb? I was picking up a cake.” I said.

“There were dirty bombs in those boxes. Where were you takin’ ‘em?”

“It’s a cake. I was picking up a cake for my cousin’s wedding.”

“Shut up. We know it’s a dirty bomb; we know everything about you. Who are your contacts? What were you going to blow up? Where is Osama?”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“Give me some names and make things easier for yourself. Who are your Al-Quaida buddies? Where are your safe houses?”

“It was a cake. I swear. It was a wedding cake. I was sent by my cousin to pick up his wedding cake,” I said.

“So your cousin is an operative. Who is he? Did he meet with Osama before coming here?”

“My cousin can’t even tie his own shoes. Are you people crazy?”

“Well, we sent the boxes to the crime lab. We’ll have the results back in a few minutes, and when they tell me it’s a bomb, your ass is mine.”

“It’s a cake,” I said.

“Shut up.”

“Wait, I know, my ex-wife put you up to this. This is a joke, right?”

“It’s as real as it can get, you stupid towel-head.”

“What are you gonna do to me?” I asked.

The agent gave me the universal symbol for “I’ll-slash-your-throat” and smiled. I couldn’t believe this was happening to me. (p.75)

Suddenly, the narrator’s tone changes as he continues:

Like millions of Middle Eastern-American folks, my life was turned upside down on September 11<sup>th</sup>. I couldn’t comprehend how a group of Middle Eastern men could commit such horrendous crimes. Why would you want to kill innocent people like that? It just didn’t make any sense to me.

I’ve lived most of my life in the United States and I love this country. And like the majority of the Middle Eastern folks in the U.S., I believe in what this country stands for. I believe in freedom, democracy and human rights. I love America because unlike where I came from, I press forward in life based on what I know, not who I know. I love America because no body tells me and my children what to do, what to wear, how to look, how to think, what to eat, what music to listen to, what book to read, what politics to believe in and what religion to practice. I love America because I’m not above the law and neither is the chap sitting next to me. And most of all, I love America because she lets me be. It’s true that the system is not perfect, but it’s better than what I’m used to.

I like to form my own opinion about subject matter, and I don’t give a crap what Osama or the ayatollah says about America; I know what I know and I don’t allow others to think for me. It doesn’t matter who you are. The

moment you entitle yourself to present your stupid ideology on my behalf, you automatically appear on my shit list.

[....]

Having said that, I couldn't believe I was being accused of being a terrorist. What happened to my rights? How can this happen in America? (p.76)

After a while the matter is resolved when the officers come back into the room and sheepishly confess that the cake was indeed a cake, and that they had raided the wrong apartment, and after finding out that the bomb was a cake, had eaten it all because it was so good.

In this episode, using 'humour as a form of rebellion against unbearable social conditions' (Stein & Reichel, p. 11), Baniaméri is subverting the serious stereotype of the Arab-looking man as terrorist. In *Rebellious Laughter* Joseph Boskin argues 'just as it has been utilized as a weapon of insult and persecution, so, too, has humour been implemented as a device of subversion and protest' (1997, p. 48). Drawing on Boskin's statement, this section argues that in Baniaméri's book, humour operates in the same manner by recontextualizing and inverting the relationship between Iranian men/terrorist and the non-Iranian, presumably white man/commandos.

By the time this episode takes place, as readers we have already entered into the life of our narrator and realized that, although very frank and unconventional, he is a typical Iranian man without any strong political and religious views living a normal life. Although this is a serious encounter, it appears funny because of the contextual circumstances: our ordinary man arrested on charges of being a terrorist while he is trying to transport a seven thousand dollar cake. But what makes it even funnier, however, is the absurdity of the encounter with the police, who have mistaken a cake for a bomb but who insist on their accusations. The police's insistence and their eventual apology, coupled with the fact that they end up eating the entire cake, turns the table, and releases the tension by creating a scene that challenges and undermines the authority and seriousness of such accusations. The joke, here, however, is on the ineptitude of the seemingly powerful police commandos who cannot distinguish between a cake and a bomb.



Added to this, the sudden change of tone in the narrator's account further undermines the police's sense of authority and reverses the power dynamics. Considering the ordeal he has just been through, there is a double meaning in his statement: 'It doesn't matter who you are. The moment you entitle yourself to present your stupid ideology on my behalf, you automatically appear on my shit list.' Although on the one hand, he could be referring to Muslim leaders who are pressing their ideas onto others, on the other hand, this is referring to all others, who by seeing all Middle Eastern men as a type, like the commandos, are reducing his identity to a terrorist. Moreover, the sudden shift of tone offers a realistic perspective of the lives of people affected by stereotypical images of Middle Easterners. The frankness of his statements, in contrast to the absurd interrogation, suddenly allows him to be seen as an individual. As readers, we feel a sense of sympathy with our Middle Eastern man, who along with many others, has come to America with the hope of trying to make a better life for himself but who has to live with these labels everyday.

Other writers, like Said Sayrafiezadeh in his memoir *When Skateboards Will Be Free*, appeal to a similar sense of human sympathy to make Iranian men recognizable as individuals through a more serious and emotional account. The memoir recounts Sayrafiezadeh's life, as the child of socialist parents, an Iranian father—who left to go to Iran to run for president on behalf the socialist party—and a Jewish-American mother. It recalls not only the difficulties of growing up with a mother who chose to live in self-inflicted poverty and who moved often from place to place, but also the pain of carrying an Iranian name as a middle school student during the hostage crisis. One of the most emotionally touching memories recalled by Sayrafiezadeh is when his mother finally decides to settle in one place. After they have settled, Sayrafiezadeh enters a predominantly black middle school with clear racial segregation, where white students, after a simple examination, were filtered into more advanced classes as 'scholars' while everyone else stayed with the school's normal curriculum. Soon Sayrafiezadeh finds himself in the scholar classes, where for the first time he befriends a few of his classmates, Daniel and Tab. Daniel is a confident, 'handsome' white boy, who soon takes an idealized shape in Sayrafiezadeh's mind, whose own physical appearance, with dark bushy eyebrows, clearly marks him as different from others in his class. As they become

close friends, Sayrafiezadeh, in seeing his own difference, dreams of looking like Daniel: 'I fantasized about being Daniel, literally, his body taking the place of mine. I was sure the girls liked him, or loved him' (p. 183). But Daniel 'had one flaw, only one, and that was his blatant and unconcealed racism' (p. 183). As their friendship grows, and the two boys become closer, the hostage crisis takes place. With Iran mentioned for the first time in school, and as the crisis escalates, Sayrafiezadeh finds himself caught between his unease with his friends' blatant comments about Iranians in Iran and his desire to hide his Iranian identity. However, having been brought up with an opinionated socialist mother, he makes an unruly comment that brings him to the spotlight. When one afternoon Daniel asks him 'what do you think about the hostage crisis, Said?' Unable to control himself he blurts out 'I believe the hostages are spies and should be tried for their crimes against the Iranian people. [...] They deserve what they get' (p. 193). This episode brings him to the attention of his classmates. It marks the end of his friendship with Daniel, and the beginning of a difficult school life where he is constantly beaten up, bullied, and eventually transferred from the scholar class to the class with the black students. Consequently, Sayrafiezadeh becomes hypervisible as a type of person associated with the hostage crisis. This hypervisibility leads to his invisibility as an individual in school. His friends, who once used to play with him, begin to run away from him. Gradually, he starts to suffer an internal struggle about how he sees himself, becoming invisible even to himself. As he writes,

Daniel continued to remain handsome in my eyes. In fact, he became more handsome, while I, in turn became more ugly. This was the unhappy side effect of having first perceived him as my flawless opposite. I grew skinnier, frailer, as he grew more strapping. My features became loud and prominent while his became refined and elegant. I was sure that he would be a movie star when he grew up. It was as if my face was cannibalising the flesh from my body, absorbing it into itself, so that my nose and eyes and eyebrows intensified with each day, growing darker, larger, hairier. It was a hideous face, I was sure, loudly calling attention to itself. Now I avoided mirrors at all costs. (p. 200)

This statement is telling of the psychological operations of hypervisibility/invisibility that has affected the Iranian sense of masculinity as the result of the hostage crisis. Theorists of subjectivity and identity, like Oliver, place great emphasis on the way our subjectivities are constructed intersubjectively,

particularly by the way others perceive us and we perceive ourselves. As she puts it, 'a positive sense of self is dependent on positive recognition from others, while a negative sense of self is the result of negative recognition or lack of recognition from others' (2001, p. 4). She goes on to argue that 'when others respect us as capable of judgment and action, only then can we respect ourselves as autonomous agents' (p. 5). According to Oliver this operates on a social level, where positive recognition from a dominant culture is an important part of the way we perceive ourselves. As she puts it, 'recognition from the dominant culture is necessary to develop a strong sense of one's own personal and group identity' (p. 23). Stereotypes and misrecognition based on differences construct an antagonistic relationship and create a kind of 'inferiority complex' which is the result of the 'internalization of stereotypes of inferiority' (p. 24). This inferiority complex, however, operates not only on a psychological level but can also affect the way we are perceived and perceive ourselves physically. As Oliver puts it,

values of dominant culture are not so much internalized psychologically but forced onto the bodies of the oppressed. The oppressed are chained to the body, represented as unable to think, to reason, to act properly. They are reduced to an egoless, passive body that is at the same time in need of control and discipline. (2001, p. 24)

What this means is that those who are oppressed also begin to see themselves physically inferior to the one who is domineering. Sayrafiezadeh's statement about the body bears witness to the way this kind of oppression leads to a kind of internalization of inferiority by the dominant culture. For Sayrafiezadeh, Daniel is the representative of the superiority and power of the dominant culture. When Sayrafiezadeh is bullied and his friends stop associating with him, he is objectified and oppressed. This lack of intersubjective relationship and recognition affects his sense of subjectivity and he begins to internalize this inferiority. This, in turn, influences how he sees himself physically. That in his eyes Daniel grows into a stunning man while he appears thinner and frail points to the internalization of this kind of inferiority on the physical level. When he stops looking in the mirror, he becomes invisible even to himself, losing all sense of identity and subjectivity. This consequently affects Sayrafiezadeh's entire life in America. Growing up he turns into a solitude and almost invisible adult with little self-confidence about his appearance with occasional self-confessed kleptomaniac tendencies, working some

low level job for Martha Stewart's company hoping everyday to be recognized by her for his genius.

This touching and emotionally disturbing account of Sayrafiezadeh's childhood, leading to a consequently unimpressive and difficult adult life as a man with Iranian heritage, brings to attention the evolution of the oppression of Iranian men in diaspora from an overexposed hypervisibility as a type, to a contrasting invisibility as an individual, both of which, as Oliver points out, are oppressive forces that turn people into 'faceless objects, or lesser subjects' (2001, p. 149). However, Sayrafiezadeh's narrative of this oppression operates on a level that breaks the oppressive cycle and offers him the ability to reconstruct and regain his sense of subjectivity by making his own reality. As Oliver reminds us, 'it is not merely being seen, or being recognized between spectacle and oblivion, that makes for an ethical or just relation. Rather [...] the oscillation between invisibility and hypervisibility [is] a matter not so much of being seen but of making one's world' (p. 150). At the end of the memoir, Sayrafiezadeh points to this possibility when he writes, 'It was up to each of us to bear our private miseries alone, until that glorious day in the future when it would all be resolved once and for all, and a perfect world would emerge' (p. 286). This statement, coupled by an earlier sentence 'the truth must not only be truth, it must also be told' (p. 286), points to the possibility and necessity for other Iranian men to construct their own world in their own image to bring themselves to visibility.

### *Sexuality and Romance*

One of the recurring elements in diasporic Iranian men's literature in the recent years has been the theme of sexuality. As explained earlier, Iranian masculinity in the West has been framed through a kind of uncontrollable, deviant and violent sexuality. This type of representation, which stems historically from Orientalist harem narratives and is confirmed by modern Iranian and Middle Eastern women's narratives that contribute to their continuation, has affected the way Iranian men are perceived in the West today. In demonstrating the significance of these types of portrayal and their consequence, Mahbod Seraji, the author of *Rooftops of Tehran*, recalls an episode in an article for a reading group showing the extent to which

Iranian and Middle Eastern men are affected by these representations. After a long separation, Seraji reunites with a friend, Hesam, in Dubai. Hesam is a family man with much care for his wife and children. Over dinner, Seraji reveals that he has recently published a book. As his friend's children show great interest in this book, his kind host suddenly becomes uneasy and changes the topic. Later, when the two men are walking by the ocean, Hesam brings up the subject again, abruptly:

"Is your story going to become an international bestseller by making the Middle Eastern men look wicked and evil, like so many others have?" Hesam asked me with a pleasant smile.

The confused look on my face made him chuckle. Then his tone turned soft. "My father, whom you met tonight," he said as he pointed toward the house behind us, "is almost eighty years old. My mother is seventy five, may they both live to be one hundred-twenty, Inshallah --- God willing. Did you know that he can't read or write, but that he has most of the Holy Koran memorized?"

"Wow," I whispered still anxious to know where the conversation was leading, suspecting a link to the delayed reaction to my book announcement.

"My grandparents lived in a tent," he continued. "So did my father, until he was ten years old. But you know, my father has never beaten my mother. I have never beaten my wife..."

I remained silent as we trudged our way forward through the sandy beach. "They portray us like animals," he complained. "Ugly, heartless, family hating, wife beating misogynists. Why do they do that? Why do they paint us all in one stroke? All in one color? Made of the same cloth? Why?"

I shook my head.

"Does every Middle Eastern man have to be a wife beater in their stories? Don't they know that there are men here who would give their lives for their families? In some ways I am glad that my father can't read. They have marred and tarnished the reputation of real men like him, like my decent in-laws, whose warmth and pleasant temperaments make them great proud fathers, compassionate considered brothers, lovable husbands and partners for life."

He stopped momentarily. I could see under the moonlight that his face had turned red.

"I don't deny that such men exist in our culture but that's not how all of us are. Do you think people understand that?" (*Reading Group Guides* n.d)

This episode effectively demonstrates some of the concerns of diasporic Iranian men in the way they have been represented. One can see this concern reflected in their literature as they introduce alternative types of gender relationships, which

counter the dominant perception of Iranian masculine sexuality. One of the ways through which many writers have worked against dismantling this stereotype has been by introducing the missing element of romance and spiritual love in Iranian male-female relationships. Among the many novels that focus on this aspect, the most successful so far, has been Seraji's own *Rooftops of Tehran*. In fact, so successful has this novel been in breaking down stereotypes that when Seraji sends a copy of the book to his friend in Dubai, he receives a single line letter, saying, 'thank you.'

*Rooftops* is an emotional bildungsroman that follows Pasha, a seventeen year old boy who practically lives on the rooftop of their middle class family home in Tehran during the summer of 1973, as he falls in love with the girl next door, Zari. But Zari is engaged to another young man known as the Doctor. Set back by his sense of loyalty to Doctor who is a man of values and a good friend, Pasha tries to hide his love for Zari. However, Doctor, who is involved in anti-governmental activities, is taken by the Shah's secret police and eventually killed and Pasha is left behind to console Zari, who also has mutual feelings for Pasha. However, in an act of protest to what happened to her fiancé, Zari sets herself on fire in front of the Shah's entourage and is badly burned and suspected of being dead. But, Zari has not died. To protect Zari and those associated with her act from the government's wrath, her family acts as if she is dead, while all along she still lives with the family, wearing a full chador, even covering her face, posing as a distant cousin who has moved in with the family to console them after her death. Though living next to each other for months, the lovers never reunite. As the novel ends, Pasha eventually migrates to America to study while Zari's family moves away to a distant city.

Everything about this book, from the red rose on the cover, to Pasha and his friend's jokes and games, to the lovers' near kiss on the rooftop, and Pasha's temporary insanity at the thought of losing his love, counters the image of the Iranian man as sexually deviant and violent. By bringing into vision an Iranian man who shares emotions, actions, and feelings with everyone else in the world, it breaks the stereotypes and allows him to be recognized as an individual human being. As Oliver argues this sort of recognition can break the cycle of oppression and marginality because oppression and domination operate on difference and

invisibility while ‘recognition requires the assimilation of difference into something familiar’ (2001, p. 9). This means that ‘the subject recognizes the other only when he can see something familiar in that other, for example, when he can see that the other is a person too’ (p. 9).

*Rooftops* has been praised for breaking stereotypes and injecting a kind of familiar human quality into the Iranian male character, as it has gone on to win numerous awards and be listed as favourite reads on various websites. Almost every review and praise for the book picks up on its human appeal that many across cultural and social divides identify with. The author’s site (<http://www.rooftopsoftehran.com>) shares some of the reviews: Kirkus, for instance, reviews the book as, ‘Refreshingly filled with love rather than sex, this coming-of-age novel examines the human cost of political repression,’ while *The Milwaukee Sentinel* writes ‘Seraji's wonderfully appealing characters, living universal teenage emotional lives of dreams and minor worries, lose their innocence in the brutalities that foreshadow the Iranian revolution.’ Another review from *TruthOut* writes, “‘Rooftops of Tehran,” calls on America to open its eyes and ears to Iran: its people, its pain, its beauty, its love. Hopefully America will listen.’ Similarly, Reese Erlich, the author of *The Iran Agenda* writes, ‘You learn a lot about Iranian culture while coming to understand characters with universal appeal.’ William Kent Kruegar, the author of *Red Knife* also writes, ‘Thank God for authors like Seraji who show us that no matter how distant apart our worlds may be, in the humanness of our hearts we are all united.’

Individual readers, too, have picked up on the universal appeal of this book. *Rooftop’s* page on amazon.com is filled with reviews and comments that emphasize how they came to recognize the similarities between themselves and Iranians through this book. One effusive reviewer in particular demonstrates this point well when she writes:

“Rooftops of Tehran” is much more than a love story. It is an affirmation of shared human experiences. We all dream, love, laugh and cry. We have fears and want good things for our children. Mr. Seraji has given us a glimpse into the unknown and it is up to us to recognize that regardless of religion or culture we are more alike than some would like us to believe.

Such positive responses to this book, not only point towards its success in breaking down stereotypes that exist about Iranian men and masculinity, but it also goes to break down the national and political barriers that emphasize an us/them dichotomy.



In a diasporic setting this recognition of similarity of human experiences can assist faster integration and acceptance of diasporic Iranians in their new setting. On a global level, at a time of tension and possible war with Iran, these narratives can operate to diffuse the tension by emphasising the shared human experience.

In breaking down this barrier, however, Seraji is not alone. Another book, which also represents a more romantic notion of Iranian masculinity, is Manoucher Parvin's *Avicenna and I*. The book tells the story of Professor Pirooz, a diasporic Iranian academic who is caught between his home and host cultures and is disenchanted by the social ills of consumerism, random violence and conflict that surround him in New York. When he meets a neighbor Sitareh Poonia, an Indian woman well educated in spiritual philosophy, they instantly fall in love through a spiritual connection and their mutual love for the ninth century Iranian mathematician and physician, Avicenna. But soon Sitareh is murdered in the basement of their apartment block. Distraught by the death of his love, but guided in his dreams by Avicenna's spirit, Pirooz sets out on a soul searching journey to Iran, to the city of Hamedan where Avicenna is buried. At Avicenna's mausoleum, however, he meets Sitareh Bastan who has great resemblance to Sitareh Poonia. The two also bind over their love for Avicenna and begin a life together.

*Avicenna and I* operates on several levels to challenge the kind of normalized gender relations associated between Iranian men and women in the West. In her review of the book Marta Simidchieva argues that *Avicenna and I* is a reminiscent of a Persian 'court romance.' In particular, she argues the novel 'evokes a faint echo' of Nezami's *Haft Peykar* (Seven Beauties), a narrative poem from the twelfth century. In *Haft Peykar*, the Persian King Bahram Gur gains knowledge and spiritual awareness from his seven brides from far corners of the world. As she compares the two, Simidchieva writes, 'in Nezami's romance, as in Parvin's novel, the protagonist's journey of spiritual enlightenment starts in the abode of an Indian beauty and is brought to a close in his union with an Iranian one' (p. 408).

The book's resemblance to Persian court romance suggests the possibility of a reconstructed representation of Iranian gender relations. In traditional Persian court poetry, this kind of romantic gender relationship is common and is reflective of the romantic tradition in Iranian society. However, in the Western representation of

Iranian gender relations, this romantic aspect has been nearly completely invisible. *Avicenna and I* taps into that tradition and brings forth the romantic gender relationships so prevalent in Persian court poetry. Thus, it challenges normalized Western perceptions of Iranian masculinity. Here, Pirooz's spiritual romanticism, and his soft-spoken nature, offers alternative visions of Iranian masculinity, rewriting Orientalist perceptions of Iranian men as violent and sexually aggressive.

Furthermore, Pirooz's close spiritual relationship with both Sitarehs, who act as guides in his spiritual journey, reframes our understanding of gender hierarchy and agency, both in traditional Iranian literature, and in the way the West normally perceives Iranian gender relations. As Simidchieva argues, the novel brings into vision the notion of 'romantic love as a means of spiritual maturation of the male protagonist and the role of the woman as a guide on his journey' (1997, p. 408). But, if we consider traditional Persian poetry, even court poetry, although women played a significant role in guiding the male protagonists, they were often passive in their roles. Even Simidchieva observes this, as she writes, Parvin's narrative, 'the female characters [...] are more assertive than their medieval counterparts' (p. 408). In Parvin's account, women are not only powerful, active spiritual leaders who guide the male character, but they are also the ones who are sexually more assertive than their male partner. When it comes to initiating a relationship, it is Sitareh Poonia who invites Professor Pirooz to her house for dinner first and in Iran, it is Sitareh Bastan who after housing Professor Pirooz for a few days, suddenly appears in his bedroom in the middle of the night 'like a gentle flame [...] in a golden negligee' (p. 113), catching him by complete surprise, to initiate passionate, spiritual, and sensual lovemaking. However, Pirooz's reservation, politeness and his initial remoteness to a possible sexual relationship with Sitareh, reframes our understanding of expected sexual dominance and gender hierarchy. This reconstructs the image of Iranian men as sexually aggressive, while Sitareh's assertiveness reverses the expected sexual norms of the Iranian women as passive and sexually dominated.

## *Homosexuality*

In Iran homosexuality is officially taboo and often socially unacceptable. Rooted in history, as Afsaneh Najmabadi argues in her book *Women with Moustaches and Men with Beards*, 'in the nineteenth century, homoeroticism and same-sex practices came to mark Iran as backward; heteronormalization of eros and sex became a condition of "achieving modernity," a project that called for heterosocialization of public space and a reconfiguration of family life' (2005, p. 3). Additionally, viewed through an Islamic lens, drawn from a selected few verses in the Quran, homosexuality is deemed sinful and punishable by death. Ironically, more recently, homosexuality once a 'Persian vice' has come to be known as a 'Western disease' and as Brian Whitaker points out in *Unspeakable Love*,

although it is generally accepted in many parts of the world that sexual orientation is neither a conscious choice nor anything that can be changed voluntarily, this idea has not yet taken hold in Arab [and other Muslim] countries—with the result that homosexuality tends to be viewed either as wilfully perverse behaviour or a symptoms of mental illness and dealt with accordingly. (2006, p. 11).

In Iran, particularly after the Islamic revolution, despite the fact that transsexuals are legally accepted, homosexuals have been discriminated against and ignored. Various sources indicate that an estimated 4000 homosexuals have been prosecuted and executed in Iran since 1979. This discrimination was proven by President Ahmadinejad's speech at the UN in 2007 when he publicly denied the existence of homosexuals in Iran as he said, 'in Iran we don't have homosexuals like you do in your country. [...] In Iran we do not have this phenomenon, I don't know who has told you that we have it.'<sup>3</sup> As Whitaker observes, homosexuals in Arab countries and similarly in Iran 'are condemned to a life of secrecy, fearing exposure and sometimes blackmail; many are forced into unwanted marriages for the sake of their family's reputation' (p. 10). Needless to say, rendered invisible homosexuals in Iran have never had the chance to openly deal with their sexuality.

This is ironic in a country in which until the nineteenth-century with the introduction of modernization, the display of homoerotic love had been blatantly present and accepted. In fact there is no doubt among scholars of Iranian literature

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<sup>3</sup> Ahmadinejad's comments soon spread all over the media, to date being quoted in numerous outlets.

that the concept of the beloved and the loved in Persian Sufi poetry, which with the advent of nationalism was translated into a heterosexual allegory of the beloved as the mother and the loved as the band of brothers who are to protect her, originally connoted a male homoerotic relationship. A glimpse at classical Persian literature reveals homoerotic love as a reappearing theme in the poems of Attar (d. 1220), Rumi (d.1273), Sa'di (d.1291), Hafez (d. 1389), Jami (d. 1492), and even in those of twentieth century Iraj Mirza (d. 1926). As scholars, like Janet Afary, have acknowledged over the years, the works of these poets are 'replete with homoerotic allusions, as well as explicit references to beautiful young boys and to the practice of pederasty' (2005, p. 158). Indeed so manifest and explicit had been this theme that some scholars like Cyrus Shamista claim that, with more than ninety percent of references to love relationships in classical Persian literature being associated with homoeroticism, 'Persian literature is essentially a homosexual literature' (qtd. in Afary 2005, p. 158). But while over the years, with the advent of modernism and the appearance of homoeroticism as socially taboo, this allegory changed to form a heteroerotic male/female relationship, after the Islamic revolution there was more emphasis on the spiritual symbolism of man and the divine. The Islamic government censored and suppressed homoerotic readings of classical Persian literature, and more importantly it suppressed and marginalized all homosexual activity, to the point of punishment by death.

In diaspora, although facing more opportunities for expression of their neglected sexualities, many Iranian homosexuals still live with the stigma that their families and cultures have carried with them abroad. Consequently, many continue to live double lives. As far as this research indicates so far no Iranian homosexual man or woman has written a memoir confessing and openly dealing with this issue. However, in recent years, some Iranian men have brought the subject of homosexuality in Iran into public light through fiction, and recently poetry.

In his 2004 historical novel, *The Quince Seed Potion*, for instance, Morteza Baharloo recounts sixty years of recent Iranian history from 1921-1981, from the perspective of a devoted homosexual servant, Sarveali Jokar, who is deeply disturbed by his own sexual tendencies. Raped as a child by his uncle, Sarveali is sold as a servant to the Shirilu family dynasty. As he grows older he gradually but secretly falls in love with and is aroused by his master. But, living in a society in

which homosexuality is seen as a disease and abnormal, he hides his tendencies. When the mistress of the household, a woman interested in alternative and natural medicine announces that quince seed potion can cure all sorts of ailment, it becomes Sarveali's mission to ask her for some of the potion, hoping it will cure his disease. But he never works up the courage to ask for the potion, instead to preserve appearances, when the very same uncle who had raped him forces him to marry his promiscuous daughter, he accepts. But the marriage does not succeed because after repeated attempts he is unable to perform sexually. His wife, not feeling the slightest attraction to him either, instead turns elsewhere and ends up sleeping with their master. Sarveali, knowing his own incompetence, chooses to ignore this until he realizes his wife is with more men than their master. In a fitful and drunken rage, stemming from his own inability to perform and his wife's disloyalty, he hammers his wife to death. Consequently he is imprisoned, during which time he becomes highly addicted to opium. Although freed from prison with his master's influence, he continues to hide his sexual tendencies until the end of his life when, after everyone in the Shirly family that he had been devoted to either passes away or has gone abroad, he commits suicide by jumping into an abandoned well, never having expressed or explored his true sexuality during his sixty years of life.

As one of the first narratives to deal with a homosexual man's position in Iran, particularly from a servant's perspective, the novel operates on several levels. On one level, it foregrounds the neglected voice of a homosexual man in Iran who, conditioned by his society, feels uneasy about his sexuality. On another level, told from the perspective of a servant and his sincere devotion to his master, it also highlights the neglected voice of the servant in a master-servant relationship. Although throughout the novel Sarveali is constantly silent and silenced by his masters and his social position, the novel becomes his only source of voice, and it is through this that we come to see the many layers of patriarchy and hierarchy that exist in the Iranian social system. The ending of the novel, which has Sarveali commit suicide, points to the realities of life for this group of people: abandoned and used by everyone around him, there is no hope for a better future for him or others such as him.

Read on another level, the novel could be a critical reflection of Iranian society. Sarveali's relationship with the Shirly family is a reflection of the different classes in

Iranian society. The ruling elite, like the Shirhus, use, abuse, and even betray the working class by taking their wives and by using their services, but when it comes to accepting them for who they are, or providing them safety and security, they abandon them in times of need. Sarveali's death is not only the death of a servant who had worked fifty years for a family and at the end gone unnoticed and entirely neglected, but it is the ontological death of the working class who die everyday neglected under the patriarchal class systems that rule Iranian society. The fact that Sarveali commits suicide soon after the Islamic revolution indicates that while people such as him, sexually repressed and at the margins of society, might have had a chance during that era, there was no chance for them following the revolution.

While Baharloo's novel ends at the beginning of the revolution in 1981, Massud Alemi's *Interruptions*, picks up where Baharloo leaves off. Set in the summer of 1981, *Interruptions* tells the story of a young gay man, Farzin, a school teacher who on his way to rendezvous with his lover, Bijan, is accidentally caught up in a protest and is picked up by the newly established revolutionary guards and accused of being a ring leader for an anti-governmental group. Unable to confess to where he was headed, and caught in the middle of the protests, unable to deny his involvement in the activities, he is taken into Evin prison and interrogated. His interrogator who insists on getting a confession out of him one way or another, gives him a piece of paper and a pen and tells him to write down all that he can about himself. Having had no involvement in the activities, and hoping to linger until proven innocent without having to confess to where he was headed, Farzin begins to write down his family history. Starting with his great great grandfather's magical spiritual abilities and bravery, and working his way through his family's background, he feeds his interrogator gradually with this information. His interrogator waiting for the important information to be revealed, keeps sparing him day after day, until one day, just before Farzin had a chance to hand him the last report in which he confesses that he was headed to see his lover the day he was caught, he realizes that this man is truly innocent. He tries to convince his superior interrogator, not of Farzin's innocent but that he has converted his anti-governmental ways. To test this, the superior interrogator hands Farzin a gun and asks him to shoot a man who had just been tortured. Instead of shooting him,

however, Farzin puts the gun into his own mouth and pulls the trigger. But the gun had been empty of bullets and Farzin survives, after which he is let go.

Like Baharloo's *Quince Seed-Potion*, Alemi's *Interruptions*, too, tells of the hardship of being homosexual in Iran. But what makes his account different is that unlike Sarveali who did not have the means to express himself and went along passively and silently until there was no choice for him but death, Farzin actively participates in telling his story and in trying to avoid immanent death. While Sarveali belongs to the illiterate lower class caste of Iranian society with little ability to revolt against this position, Farzin is the representative of middle class Iranians who have the ability to free themselves from oppression to some degree. But while their class difference provides them with this ability, their sexual difference does not. Here, Farzin is like Scheherazade whose life, like hers, depends on his sexuality and storytelling abilities. But while for Scheherazade her narrative complements her sexuality and keeps the king interested to save her life, here Farzin has to narrate tales around his sexuality and weave fantastical historical tales to avoid getting to the point, which will ensure his death. Although he manages to successfully do that, the many levels of oppressions and hierarchy of Iranian society do not let him off easily. Being freed comes at the expense of being under the oppression of another force. If it is not his sexuality, then it is the government. There is no escape for him, like for Sarveali, but death. In being freed and let go, he knows that he is still not freed from the oppressive forces of the Iranian government who continue to rule people's lives.

These narratives that focus on male sexuality, however, do more than merely foreground the oppressed voices of Iranian homosexuals, or even offer us alternatives to the way Iranian masculinity is perceived. Rather, in a bold move, by focusing on homosexuality, they are tapping back into, resurfacing and rewriting the neglected and repressed tradition of homoerotic Persian poetry. Instead of sugar coating these narratives with allegories of male/female or divine love, these men in diaspora have found the courage to tell it as it is, to once again make the claim that in doing this they are making direct contribution to the field of homoerotic Persian literature. *Modern Gay Persian Poetry About Love*, for instance, by a poet who calls himself Dr. Ali, is one such book that directly confesses to following the traditions of the masters to express homoerotic sexuality openly. In its forward, Payam



Ghassemlou acknowledges this as he writes ‘one can find validation of gay love by reading love poems by Sadi, Hafiz, and Rumi,’ and Dr. Ali’s poems ‘reflect the homoerotic Eros that has always been part of Persian literature’ (2011, p. 1). He believes this new wave of poetry, ‘in this vein [...] is contributing to Persian poetry’ (p.1). Such contributions play an important role not only in keeping ‘same gender love out of the closet,’ as Ghassemlou puts it, but also in providing a space in which writers and poets can stay true and be reminded of the true values of Persian literature, which have been forcefully transformed through centuries.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has examined the representation of Iranian masculinity in diasporic Iranian literature, arguing that Iranian masculinity, in diaspora, is constructed in and through Orientalist discourses, and continued in Iranian women’s self-Orientalising narratives. Furthermore, these representations have constructed a limiting stereotypical understanding of Iranian masculinity, which have led to their hypervisibility as a type and invisibility as individuals. The discussion situates diasporic Iranian men’s narratives in response to this hypervisibility, and argues that their responses, through various themes and strategies, is a way to reconstruct and regain their sense of subjectivity and reframe Western understanding of gender relationships and hierarchies.

What needs to be added here is the fact that in the last several years, following the controversial 2009 elections, a shift has occurred in the kind of narratives that represent the Iranian experience. This in turn has constructed a new framework and mode of reading, offering alternative ways in which both Iranian men and women’s narratives are received. Although there is no space to completely address the shifts that accompany this wave in detail, the concluding section of this study will briefly highlight some of its characteristics and examine some of the way these new narratives are challenging and offering fresh perspectives in our understanding of Iranian identity, particularly in light of renewed Western interests in Iranian politics and the Iranian government’s relationship with its own people.

# Conclusion—Looking forward to the “Not-Yet” future of Iranian writing

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When I embarked on the study of diasporic Iranian literature in English in the early 2000s, I had no idea that this body of work was going to grow so quickly and expand to provide such a rich contribution to the already vast body of English literature and World Literatures in English. When I commenced this research there were only a handful books. Now, that number almost exceeds two hundred with new titles emerging everyday. As one of the first studies to cover such a large number of texts by diasporic Iranian writers, this thesis has revealed the existence of these works as a substantial category in English literature. More importantly it has examined the significance of various aspects of this literature for diasporic Iranian communities. Drawing on contemporary theories of utopianism, such as Ernst Bloch’s definition of it as a ‘Not-Yet’ space and postcolonial theories that argue that utopianism could be part of the postcolonial desire to reflect the future rooted in the past, this thesis has argued that this body of work, at times, operates as a kind of utopian space in and through which diasporic Iranian writers can maintain, negotiate and reconstruct their sense of identity.

From this perspective, in Chapter One, this study situated diasporic Iranian literature in relation to the socio-political and historical context out of which it has emerged and the desires that it reflects for the future. It argued that this body of work has emerged out of a response to various historically oppressive forces and events, such as the revolution and its consequent exile that affected Iranians both in Iran and abroad. In doing so, it argued that diasporic Iranian writers use similar techniques to postcolonial writers, in order to draw on the past, foreground various untold histories, and to rewrite the grand narrative of Iranian History both in Iran and abroad, to reflect a new and desired future for themselves. It demonstrated how they have achieved this, in particular by drawing on elements of their Iranian cultural identity, and by coming to terms with their own past. It argued that through an engagement with the past they have managed to achieve what Stuart Hall calls ‘historicizing’ their sense of identity, consequently maintaining elements of their past that defined their Iranian sense of identity. Furthermore, this chapter

highlighted the fact that through historical engagement, these writers, like postcolonial writers, have, as Ashcroft puts it, ‘interpolated’ grand narratives of Iranian History both in Iran and abroad in order to reflect alternative and multiple histories that are reflective of the multiplicity of Iranian experiences. It examined how this has constructed a discursive space through which they maintain a connection to their past, while negotiating and reconstructing their own sense of identity within a diasporic setting. This study then built upon diasporic Iranian writers’ engagement with various aspects of history in subsequent chapters.

Chapter Two examined the significance of Sufi Persian literature and argued that much of the work by diasporic Iranian writers is in full or partial response to the historically rich Iranian Sufi poetry tradition. It highlighted the importance of Sufi poetry in defining Iranian cultural identity and argued that various aspects of this poetry, such as its structure or well-known verses, continue to inform the way diasporic Iranian writers define themselves even in their writing in English. Furthermore, it highlighted how by employing certain elements of this poetry, such as its highly nostalgic nature, and its various tropes such as the garden, these writers have managed to transform the spiritual nature of this poetry to reflect their own sense of diasporic nostalgia for their homeland. This chapter, then, viewed the transformation of aspects of Persian Sufi poetry as a challenge to its historically undisputed and undisturbed form. It argued that through this transformation, certain writers have constructed a new discursive space to express their own sentiments and also challenged traditional and dominant forms of expression to make them more reflective of their own era and diasporic experiences. This transformation, which is almost always in dialogue with the culture of their new home, consequently constructs new spaces of understanding within their host communities through which they could negotiate and reconstruct their own sense of identity.

Chapter Three began by proposing that despite the fact that Persian literature has formed a significant part of Iranian cultural identity, it has almost always been exclusively male constructed, consequently leaving little room for the presence of women’s voices, and the voices of those with marginal experiences. This chapter, considered the increasing popularity of diasporic Iranian women’s memoirs in the last few decades as a response to the lack of women’s voices in Iranian literary tradition, and the silences that has historically surrounded their experiences. It drew

on Kelly Oliver's psychological theory that silence and oppression undermines one's sense of identity and subjectivity and argued that, given the silence that has always shrouded Iranian women's existence and experiences, Iranian women's sense of subjectivity has been damaged. Following Oliver's belief that subjectivity can be regained by becoming a speaking subject, and Suzette Henek's proposal that narratives particularly in the form of a memoir can act as a form of therapy to heal a person's damaged sense of identity, this chapter argued that the memoir could be seen as a healing space for Iranian women's damaged subjectivity, a space for the reconstruction of their sense of identity. In particular, this chapter paid attention to how this space operates in dealing with the historical tradition of silence, the traumatic historical events of the revolution and its consequent exile, as well as the difficulties of settlement in a new environment. But this chapter also examined the situation of these narratives within the socio-historical context into which they are received. It argued that since interest in narratives from the Middle East, particularly women's accounts, have always been framed in relation a historical and social interests, they are also inevitably produced, marketed, and consumed within this context. Here, it paid special attention to particular frameworks and patterns that influence the way these books are produced and consumed. For instance it examined the influence of Orientalist discourses on the way Middle Eastern women are viewed, as well as the resonances of captivity narrative and the American hostage crisis in Iran, and the more recent events of 9/11 and the ensuing American 'War on Terror.' By drawing on Garard Genette's concept of paratexts, as liminal aspects that frame and surround a piece of literary work, it highlighted with specific examples, how these paratexts have framed these narratives, thereby, limiting and even silencing the true voices that lie inside these books. It reached the conclusion that the memoir form, though providing many writers with the ability to express themselves candidly, and which might even be a space through which writers could come to terms with their traumatic past, might not lead to a complete sense of transgression of these women's voices beyond the already historically imposed elements that had defined them to begin this.

Chapter Four drew on the previous chapter and argued that in the process of writing for diasporic Iranian writers, fiction might provide them with greater opportunity to break free from expected and predefined spaces of expression. To demonstrate this,

the chapter considered the mother-daughter and homeland theme in particular, as a recurring element in the works of diasporic Iranian writers, and examined the various ways that writers have drawn upon this theme fictionally to traverse the boundaries that had limited the identities of Iranian women as mothers and daughters. Here, in particular, it highlighted the historically constructed image of the Iranian mother as a symbol of the homeland, and the lack of the representation of the mother-daughter relationship in Iranian literary history and examined how some writers have managed to reconstruct the image of the mother, and nationalistic images associated to the symbol of the mother, beyond these historically limiting boundaries. It examined some of the various techniques diasporic Iranian writers are employing to transgress these boundaries, such as through a polyphonic narrative form, a formal break in the dominant univocal narrative forms that had formed the Iranian mother's image, and through the mother and daughter's departure on a journey within the texts beyond the physical boundaries of the spaces that had defined their sense of identity. But it argued that these transgressions could not have happened within the dominant realist modes of expression. Such transgressions need elements from other realms, such as magic and dreams. This chapter, thus, paid special attention to the way magic and dreams operate to free mothers and daughters from certain limitations. Furthermore, it argued that the reconstruction of the image of the mother, as well as the mother-daughter relationship, operates beyond an individual level. On a larger social level, these narratives that demythologise the image of the mother, and her symbolic association to the homeland, also reconstruct the concept of identity necessarily associated with a sense of nationalistic belonging to a homeland and point towards the construction of a new sort of diasporic nationalism.

In Chapter Five there was a shift in perspective from women's voices to narratives produced by diasporic Iranian male writers. This chapter argued that despite a significant number of books published by Iranian male writers, they have not received the acknowledgement they deserve because of the overwhelming attention that has been paid to Iranian women's narratives. It further argued that Iranian men and masculinity in the West has been represented stereotypically, where Iranian men are usually visible as a type, often as the aggressive, sexually deviant type, but invisible as fun loving individuals. This could be blamed, partially, on the Western

media and historical representations of Iranian men, as well as Iranian women's recent narratives in which Iranian women are involved in a kind of Self-Orientalization that further emphasizes the stereotypical traits of Iranian men and masculinity. The last part of this chapter paid special attention to texts produced by Iranian male writers as responses to these stereotypical representation and argued that their writing mounts a challenge to and attempts to reconstruct various aspects of Iranian masculinity by taking a humanist approach with a focus on individual personality and identity. It examined the various techniques employed by these writers to highlight their individual traits. For example, it analysed the use of humour as a technique to destabilize power relations, as well as the representation of alternate sexualities beyond stereotypical representations. This chapter concluded that books that break down stereotypes which had defined Iranian masculinity, are constructing a new space for the reconstruction and negotiation of newly understood kinds of Iranian masculinity.

This study has examined the issues above through two different waves of books. The first, and relatively small, wave emerged immediately after the Islamic revolution at the onset of Iranian mass migration after the 1979 revolution. These texts dealt with fresh issues of the Islamic revolution and the ensuing hostage crisis that concerned the world. The second wave emerged nearly two decades later in the wake of the events of 9/11 where interest in the Middle East was once again renewed at the dawn of America's declaration of war on terror, and when there was particular interest in women's issues in the Middle East. After 9/11 Iranian women's narrative, alongside other narratives by women from other countries in the Middle East, became extremely popular. These narratives became the source of knowledge of about the Middle East. Among these, however, Iranian women's narratives, written mostly by the diaspora who had not returned to Iran ever since migration, shed light on the situation of Iran. However, these were often delayed narratives that revisited the revolution and the consequent events that led to exile. Consequently, many of these narratives, though emerging recently, failed to be representative of the current Iranian society.

Recently, however, we are seeing the beginnings of a third wave of writing by Iranian writers in diaspora. Following the controversial 2009 elections a shift has occurred in the way Iran and Iranians were viewed in the West. While prior to 2009

Iranians were, generally viewed through a fanatic Muslim lens, still resonating the bitterness of the American hostage crisis, after the 2009 elections, the world began to distinguish Iranians from their Islamic government. With the rapid circulation of clips from protests, a different Iran came into view. Here, women were no longer silent passive and domestic. Rather, they could be seen and heard shouting and screaming alongside men in opposition to the government. As the world witnessed through these clips, women, like Neda Agha Soltan who was shot in the street and died on camera, alongside men, suffered the violation of their rights as humans at the hands of the Islamic government. Horrendous accounts spoke of mass murders, mass graves and severe punishments in prisons. Out of the ashes of these protests, a new interest was born in narratives emerging from Iran. The world was no longer interested in delayed stories by silenced and oppressed diasporic women. Rather, people wanted to hear stories about what was happening in contemporary Iran. There was interest in a generation of men and women who had lived silently under the Islamic regime for the last several decades. Soon after these events, books began appearing that dealt with current issues. For instance, someone with the pseudonym Afsaneh Moqadam, published a small book in early 2010, by the name *Death to the Dictator!: A Young Man Casts a Vote in Iran's 2009 Elections and Pays a Devastating Price*, which daringly takes us inside the events and tells of the horrors, the rapes, and the threats that followed young protestors. Similarly Saideh Pakravan wrote *Azadi: Protests in the Streets of Tehran* which follows the stories of several young people and their families as they become involved in the protests.

These books, being published even as this thesis nears completion, are telling of the gripping stories of a generation of people who suffered in silence in Iran. As Arash Hejazi, the man who filmed Neda Agha Soltan's death and circulated the video on the Internet and who soon after the events escaped the country, writes in his memoir, *The Gaze of the Gazelle: The Story of a Generation*:

We are part of a generation that was later called the Burnt Generation—the generation known in the US as 'Generation X'. We were between seven and 15 at the time of the Islamic Revolution. We were the generation that witnessed the murders of its uncles during the Revolution and the execution and imprisonment of its parents afterwards. A generation doomed to spend the best years of its life amid the horrors of the Iran-Iraq war, either on the front, running on landmines to open up a path for the troops, or at home, dreading the return of a friend from the front in a coffin



and then walking in the funeral procession that set out from the schoolyard. A generation that entered puberty while being trained how to use AK-47 assault rifles, a generation not permitted to have any contact with the opposite sex and not allowed to dance or make merry. A generation that was taught not to trust anyone. A generation that dreaded its own shadow and saw too much, far more than anyone should be forced to witness in a lifetime.

[...] We survived to bear witness to what we had endured for the next generation: Neda's generation.' (2011, p. xvii)

The accounts that are emerging as part of this new wave, are not only telling of the stories of a generation of Iranians who have, after many years, gained the opportunity to express themselves. Rather, this is the beginning of an exciting new body of work that will expand and broaden both the way Iran and Iranians are perceived in the world. It is also the beginning of a new discursive space with its own specific techniques that will contribute to this growing field, the study of which will have to remain for another time in the future.

## Appendix—Books published by Iranian writers in English as of August 2012

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