

It's All Relative: The words of women

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Women's words can be powerful when they describe times past and hopes for the future. They often place life's events into perspective, offering windows into cultures relatively unknown, while helping us understand our ancestors better.

Iranian-American author Gina Nahai, whose works focus on the Iranian Jewish community (*Cry of the Peacock*, *Moonlight on the Avenue of Faith*), has also written *Sunday's Silence*. A passage in this book connects the links of family history and family bonds.

The character Blue (whose Jewish mother is connected to the characters in Nahai's previous works), speaks: *"I might have told them my mother was a Jew and the Professor is too. I might have told them but they did not want to know, and so the truth remained unseen - untouched and unwanted and gathering weight, until it became a lie I had to hide.*

"My daughter, though, would have asked. I know this because that is the way daughters create a bond with their mothers - instinctively, by asking the most trivial questions, by wanted to know the most obscure facts. They ask all through their childhoods without knowing what they will do with this knowledge - without knowing that every word, every memory they take from their mothers will become a link in a bridge they have started to build unconsciously. Through years of separation and hardship, through adulthood and beyond, the bridge stands invisible, stretching longer the farther the child travels, until the day she stops, counts the years and realizes she, too, is a woman, and all she has to do to return to her mother is to cross the bridge of words and memories she built in childhood."

TWO such powerful books building on childhood, young adult memories and life experiences are Farideh Goldin's *Wedding Song* and Roya Hakakian's *Journey from the Land of No*, which present moving and different portraits of the Iranian Jewish community.

Goldin, born in 1953, in conservative Shiraz, immigrated to the US in 1975 after university study, a few years before the revolution, while Hakakian, born in 1967, in the modern sophisticated capitol of Teheran, is an adolescent as the revolution begins.

Together they span two generations of society, at home and as immigrants, detailing culture, traditions and family dynamics.

It is fine to learn history from historians, but the flavors and spice of everyday life and groundshaking events are not felt in dull, dry history books. In the hands of those who have personally navigated those days, such as these two women, readers gain an understanding of how life was really lived.

At times, these woman have faced criticism. Some thought the stories exposed family secrets that resulted in a loss of "face" (ab-e-ru in Farsi.) Some siblings and older relatives felt it was not dignified. Today, relatives have become resigned, if not comfortable, with the thought that strangers around the world now know about their families.

SOME reviewers have spoken of Goldin's book as a psychological account of her life, and while her triumph is central, I found her descriptions of her community and pre-revolutionary society on point. Although we lived in westernized Teheran (1970-78), we occasionally visited extended family in Shiraz. Her insider descriptions of that more traditional society brought back memories.

As I read Blue's thoughts on mothers and daughters, I imagined Goldin explaining her experiences to her three American daughters and how Hakakian will explain hers to her descendants. Over the years, I've explained our life in Teheran to our daughter, who firmly believed those events had taken place on Mars - until she attended a reunion of our old friends, who told her similar stories.

Goldin's dedication is to her daughters, "the first to pull the stories out of the family well, rich with tradition, life-giving, yet dark and hidden."

And I understand this, as I understood my husband's eldest aunt, Nane-jan, who sat with me for hours in Teheran recounting her childhood experiences, attending the Alliance school as the first female student in the city, of family stories and secrets. As the tiny, always-smiling white-haired woman told her stories, in French and Farsi, I absorbed the new culture which surrounded me. Nane-jan inspired my consuming interest in genealogy as she implored me to find lost family branches.

I had an immediate connection to Goldin's story. Her father warned her against reading after an aunt had said that her nonstop reading gave the whole family a bad name.

When we arrived in Teheran in 1970, a good portion of what we brought were my books, boxes and boxes of them. My late father-in-law, very enlightened in so many ways for his generation, just shook his head as they came out of the container. So many books, what for? What do women need books for, and so many? Why didn't I bring more refrigerators, household appliances, furniture? Why books?

Few homes had numerous books, and mine were prominently displayed in the living room. However, as an American, I could get away with the community aversion to book addiction. Today's modern readers might not understand why this is so, but it's a simple concept: A woman who reads all the time doesn't attend to the daily cooking, cleaning and family responsibilities. It's a good thing we didn't have personal computers in 1970!

GOLDIN explains that her experiences are like the traditional Shirazi art form, khatam, a woodcraft inlaying geometrically patterned slices of bundles of very thin rods of colored wood, ivory and metal, and used in picture frames, boxes and even large pieces of furniture at astronomical prices. Each tiny puzzle piece locks in the next, forming a whole.

Her stories - of immediate and extended family, of older generations, the Jewish community, life cycle events; the dynamics and traditions of the minority Persian Jewish society within the majority Islamic population - are all part of her quest for success. The total runs the gamut from tragedy to triumph.

A frequent lecturer in the US on Iranian Jews, she studied math and English literature at Shiraz's Pahlavi University. She holds a BA in English literature (Old Dominion University, Virginia), a graduate certificate in Women's Studies, and an MFA in creative writing.

BORN and raised to adolescence in Teheran, Roya Hakakian's elegant words provide intimate glimpses into a world few readers have known personally.

For me, again, it was a journey back in time, as my in-laws lived not far from the neighborhood where much of the book takes place.

This is the story of a 12-year-old girl experiencing major social and cultural changes. Her experiences help explain to the younger generation what happened.

A young Tel Aviv friend continually asks me what really happened in those days. We had returned to the US just a few months before the revolution began; my understanding came from media and those who lived the events. I didn't understand until I realized she hadn't been born until her family had moved to the US. Our young friend has no frame of reference and, in line with general Persian society, things considered sad, difficult or distressing are generally avoided in conversation, and thus in understanding.

Tens of thousands of Iranian Jews left familiar, comfortable lives for strange surroundings in several countries. Very close large extended families split into branches in different cities. They left home - for home was what Iran had been for a not-insignificant 3,000 years - experiencing fragmentation of culture and society.

Iran is a memory for older generations, and not even that for the younger generation, even if they live in Los Angeles, otherwise known as Irangeles, the highest concentration of Iranians of all backgrounds outside of Iran.

And, for those woman who lived through the early years of these political changes, moving from intellectual, personal, legal and educational freedom to a life under the new Islamic fundamentalism, their lives moved from a place of freedom to constriction. Although their grandmothers' generation had been freed from the veil in the 1920s, these young women are caught up in these and other restrictions.

This fascinating, intimate book written in Hakakian's elegant words will move readers with an interest in this time and place. It is also an essential read for the younger generation of Iranian Jews who want to know what really happened from someone who lived it.

A former associate producer at CBS's *60 Minutes*, Hakakian is a documentary filmmaker, and has written two volumes of Persian poetry.

It's All Relative invites readers' inquiries and comments. Email: schelly@allrelative.net

**Wedding Song, Farideh Goldin,
(Brandeis University Press, 2003)
Journey from the Land of No, Roya Hakakian,
(Crown Publishers, 2004)**



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