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THE GHOSTS OF OUR MOTHERS: FROM ORAL TRADITION TO WRITTEN WORDS— A HISTORY AND CRITIQUE OF JEWISH WOMEN WRITERS OF IRANIAN HERITAGE*

Farideh Dayanim Goldin

Throughout the 2,000 years of Iranian Jewish history, women usually were either illiterate or silenced. Iranian Jewish women in exile have been making up for their foremothers by creating prose literature at a fast pace in the last two decades. Through their poetry, novels and memoirs, they validate the claim that with financial security, access to education, and freedom of speech—rarely accessible to Iranian women until the twentieth century—they can shine. This article explores the history and background of Jewish women writers of Iranian heritage.

Introduction: The Background to This Research

I entered my first accessible library in the fall of 1971, during my orientation at Pahlavi University (renamed Shiraz University in post-revolutionary Iran). Namoos (Chastity), the all-women high school I attended, did have a library, a showplace for dignitaries and visitors. It did not allow me to smell the glue that bound the pages of unknown stories, to feel the outer surface of those mysterious books, or to drown myself in someone else's imagination. Once in a while, my face stuck to its glass doors, hands cupped on both sides, I tried to catch a glimpse of the books that were so close, yet so absolutely unreachable. When, under family pressure, my father burned my books to stop my obsessive reading of western novels (see below), I donated those I had managed to hide to that forbidden library. Let them be safe.

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That glorious autumn in Shiraz, I entered the library on the Arts and Letters campus of Pahlavi University, and, in awe, I promised myself that I would read every single book of literature in that vast room, a promise I fulfilled before leaving Iran for the United States four years later, on July 4, 1975. For four years, I read those books methodically, alphabetically—what sweet revenge! I read Dostoyevsky and Homer and Hugo and Kafka and Stowe and Twain and whatever else was translated into Persian.

Decades later, as a graduate student at Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Virginia, I studied women writers and Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*. I wanted to become a writer then, but I didn't know how. Woolf emphasized female role models for women writers. Where were mine? I wondered if there had been any Iranian women writers on those shelves, as I devoured so very many books, books that took me away to fantastic worlds, books that I loved but didn't connect with. Those western stories were alien to me. Where was my story? I wondered if there had been—maybe—possibly—a book by an Iranian Jewish woman writer that I had somehow missed. I had to know, and so I started to research the lives of Iranian Jewish women who had come before me. I wanted to find their words to use as the foundation for my own.

Methodology

How does one initiate research on a topic about which no one has written? I interviewed Iranian intellectuals, older Iranian women, and even Iranian bookstore owners in the United Sates, mostly in southern California. I called Iran to speak with professors of literature at Tehran University. I contacted Homa Sarshar, head of the Center for Iranian Jewish Oral History, who led me to others. I read anything written about Iran: travel logs, memoirs, historical books and works of fiction. I studied rare Persian books at the Library of Congress, and I reached into my own memories and into the stories told to me by my grandmothers, my mother, and all the other women whose paths I had crossed. A new world opened to me. I learned about the history and background of Iranian women writers—but where were the Jewish women? There were no books, no stories, I was told again and again. How could that be?

I resisted the idea of a complete vacuum of literary tradition for Iranian Jewish women, in a country that boasted of an ancient literary tradition, mostly

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in poetry. I didn't know yet of any Jewish women poets, and I didn't know that Jewish women of Iranian background were starting to create their first works of fiction. Then, out of desperation, I decided to start from the beginning, to first research the factors that had prevented Iranian Jewish women from writing, much less becoming writers. Understanding their long silence, I believed, would lead me to their words.

This paper comprises three parts. First, I probe into conditions that constrained Iranian Jewish women's literary ambitions in the past, and those that hold them back even now. Second, I attempt to discuss their oral tradition, a well, a spring that eventually nourished future generations' literary creativity. Last, I will survey writings by Jewish women of Iranian heritage from the beginning until now.

History and Background

Virginia Woolf declared that for a woman to write, she needs financial independence, solitude (a room of her own), access to education and freedom of movement to gain experience, all conditions that did not exist for Iranian Jewish women until the second part of the twentieth century. In previous centuries, poverty, oppression, lack of education, restriction of mobility, early marriage and the absence of a women's literary tradition kept most Iranian Jewish women silent and invisible. Although a majority of Iranians shared these conditions of destitution and illiteracy, Jewish women suffered the most, because they had the lowest social standing. Bernard Lewis, who has studied the condition of the Jews under Islam, explained: "the rank of a full member of society was restricted to free male Muslims,"[1] to the exclusion of slaves, women and nonbelievers. He added:

> A major difference between the three is the element of choice. A woman cannot choose to become a man. A slave can be freed, but by the choice of his master, not his own. Both the woman and the slave are thus in a position of involuntary—for the women also immutable—inferiority.[2]

Iranian Jewish women, therefore, were doubly oppressed by sexism and anti-Jewish sentiment in their predominately Muslim society.

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To make matters worse, Jewish women suffered the fate of other severely oppressed groups, in that the Jewish community itself deemed their lives to be of lesser value and pushed them further down the social ladder. Amnon Netzer records a report by an "emissary from the Land of Israel," Yehuda Kopeliovitz, of his meeting in Tehran with Rabbi Haim Moreh, a local scholar fluent in Hebrew:

> A young woman of about fourteen finished nursing a child and approached the old man . . . and washed his feet. . . . He told me that he has three married daughters and this was the youngest of them; on the Sabbath eve she punctually comes to dine with him and helps him to wash. She has been married for two years and has a six-month-old daughter. I asked him why he had married her off so young; he answered me: This is the custom and it is for the best.[3]

It was common for Iranian Jews before the early twentieth century to follow the customs of the land—in this case, Iran's Sharia laws—by marrying girls off before the onset of puberty. Rabbi Moreh, a highly accomplished person, clearly did not think his daughters "deserved" the education he himself could have bestowed upon them. Instead, he gave them away in early marriages.

Indeed, young girls were perishable commodities, who, unless married at an early age, became spoiled and not of marriageable quality. In the 1940s, with the Iranian economy in ruins, most Jews, not unlike the Muslims, lived in poverty and, additionally, suffered from famine.[4] Such "devalued" women often weighed heavily on their families as extra mouths to feed. During World War II, Rabbi Yitzhak Meir Levy entered Iran on his way to Siberia to help Jewish prisoners flee to Israel through Iran. He witnessed with a "violent shock" the unbearable lives of Iranian Jews, "where girls of nine or ten years of age were permitted to marry."[5] My paternal grandmother, Tavoos, was a good example of women's lives in this era. She told me the story of her first marriage:

> I was only nine years old. Your great-grandmother, Bibi, would take my hand and lead me through the streets of the *mahaleh* [the Jewish quarter] to my fiancé's house. There, his mother told me to sit on a low stool by a big pile of vegetables and herbs and to clean them for dinner. That was my test to see if I could be a good worker, an obedient girl; if I was not *zaban deraz* [a big mouth, a talkative or assertive girl].

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> When my fiancé, a man in his twenties, came home for lunch, he would put me on his lap and play games with me, making everyone laugh. But as soon as they were busy and I had a minute alone, I ran home to my mother. Every time I escaped, Bibi screamed, beat her chest in exasperation and cried, "You are ruining your reputation!" Finally, the family returned me, saying I was not suitable for their son. I had to wait until I was 15 since no one asked for my hand. I was married to your grandfather, who had lost his wife in childbirth. He had three children from his previous marriage, whom I raised. Your grandfather was a *tzadik*, a righteous man, a respected rabbi. He was a good man.

While my grandfather was a *ḥakham*, a *dayan,* a learned man who could read Hebrew texts, my grandmother, wise in many ways, never learned to read or write even her own name.

Such women became what Adrea Dworkin called "farming models," meant to be "plow[ed] for the purpose of growing crops [of children]."[6] Lacking any birth control methods, they bore numerous children without benefit of medical care, and many lost their lives in the process. Both my grandmothers, Tavoos and Tooran, were considered too old at age 15 to marry men close to their own age. They were married off to older men who had lost their first wives in childbirth, and perhaps they survived their numerous pregnancies because they married later than their contemporaries.

Before the mid-twentieth century, most Iranian Jewish women nurtured babies while they themselves were still children and in need of attention. They raised their children in stark poverty in the hovels of the *mahaleh*, worrying about food and illnesses. Kopeliovitz observed how young Jewish women "age[d] early" in the dark ghettos, their energies focused purely on survival.[7] With the slave-like labor to which they were condemned, many of them perhaps developed a slave mentality as well: a loss of desire for power, for improving their lives and for control over their own destinies. Mental and physical exhaustion and lack of writing skills would have minimized any chances of literary creativity.

In *Zannane Sokhanvar*, an anthology of Iranian women writers, Ali Akbar Moshir Salimi mentioned royal Muslim women who wrote poetry during the Qajar dynasty, in the latter part of the nineteenth century.[8] The women of royal harems were often more educated than those in the rest of the country. Although hidden behind the *hejab*, some had the opportunity to travel abroad,

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to see foreign dignitaries (albeit from a distance), and to hear poetry recited in Persian courts. They were affluent. Their cooks, maids and nannies gave them much free time inside the walls of the *andaroon* (the women's quarters) to ponder life. Music, song and poetry were familiar to the many princesses, and some even ventured into writing poems. Princess Taj Al-Saltana recorded her life-narrative in 1914, a first by an Iranian woman.[9]

Quoting Iranian writer Tareekh Ezdee, Amnon Netzer asserted that Fath Ali Shah of the Qajar dynasty married a Jewish woman, Maryam Khanom. Their daughter, Shah Bagom, known as Ziaa Al-Saltanah, would have been recognized as Jewish by Jewish law, since she was born of a Jewish mother.[10] She was a poet and calligrapher, and she wrote most of the shah's confidential letters.[11] The shah did not allow anyone to marry her while he was alive, and so she married only later, at the age of 37.[12] Shah Bagom was, of course, a rarity, a testament to the power of education and of literature made accessible, which were denied almost all other Jewish women of her time.

In the nineteenth century, a few Muslim women began to express their literary creativity, albeit under many political and religious restrictions. Jewish women, busy with the drudgeries of life, missed the era completely. Moreover, like most of the Jews in Iran, they were cut off from other Jewish communities around the country and were unaware of the lives of Jewish women around the world as potential role models. In isolation, it is doubtful that they could have become authors, even if they had knowledge of written words.

The Oral Tradition: The First Step to Literary Creation

Superstitious Tales and Literature

What sustained Iranian Jewish women through these years of desolation and isolation? How were they connected from one generation to another? Their hardships were often lessened by the cherished custom of *dard-e del*, talking of the "aching heart." Until the latter part of the twentieth century, many Iranian Jews lived in multi-family homes. Sons typically expanded the family by bringing their brides to their parents' homes, rather than seeking independent lives. Multigenerational families lived together, sharing jobs and responsibilities. Women of the family gathered in the kitchen and the courtyard, around the *tanoor* (a clay oven) or the washtub, helping one another. The younger women exchanged gossip and worries. Grandmothers told their life stories

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to their granddaughters. While visiting the synagogue on Shabbat and holidays, dropping the *khaleh bibi* (as the Sabbath stew was known in the Shirazi dialect) by the community Shabbat *tanoor*, or collecting water from public water spouts in the *mahaleh*, women sought advice, shared new stories and embellished old ones.

Growing up in Shiraz, a southern city in Iran, I often witnessed these day-to-day gatherings of women. My grandfather and his fathers before him had been rabbis and *dayanim* for the Shirazi community. They tried to resolve most conflicts within the community, so as to avoid the Islamic courts. By extension, their wives were much respected among the Jewish women of the *mahaleh*. On many afternoons, the older matriarchs held court. The children spread a *kilim* (a flat weave carpet) on the clay floor by the front door. The matriarch made herself comfortable with many pillows against the wall. The younger women of the family served her tea, cherry or mint *sharbat* (a sweet drink made from fruit nectars or flower or herb essences), limeade, and *qalyan* (waterpipe). After cleaning up from the big afternoon meal, women stopped by a few at a time, to sit for an hour and chit-chat and to share their problems. A child was sick and her fever was not breaking. Rub the root of the . . . tree on her twice a day, someone would advise. A mother's milk had dried up, and the baby was too little for solids. The wife of a neighbor had just had a baby, and she produced plenty; she would be a good wet nurse, another suggested. The stories passed around, of recent engagements, weddings, births of sons, of fortunes and misfortunes. Older women reached into their collective memories to suggest solutions. In the Iranian tradition of tale telling, they often mixed *zarbolmasal* (fables) with reality.

Thus, *dard-e del* in the small gatherings of women served many functions. It worked as a healing tool, as a source of empowerment, as psychotherapy, and as a Middle Eastern version of a "support group." This custom also created a reservoir of stories that circulated among women before they were cognizant of the power of written words. Generations later, Iranian Jewish women would reach back to this collection of oral history to record their mothers' stories, to go beyond talking themselves free to writing themselves free.

These gatherings of women created yet another source of storytelling, by promoting and spreading various superstitions. They circulated horror stories of women dying in childbirth, of stillborn or deformed infants (worse if they were sons) and of family members killed by sudden sickness. Frightened by their own creations, the obvious sign of their helplessness and insecurity, these

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women had to find ways to control fate and the invisible powers that pounced upon their lives without mercy or reason.

Although spirituality was an important part of Jewish life in Iran, most women could not rely on religion alone for comfort or protection, since they rarely possessed knowledge of Hebrew or Jewish texts. Even today, one can observe the oldest Iranian women in synagogues in California or New York hugging the Torah as it is brought to them by men, opening their hands to receive it, reaching their hands to the open scroll in a circular motion to bring the *shekhinah*, the spirit of God, toward themselves, then touching their eyes with their hands and kissing them—all beautiful spiritual acts. However, the oldest often know only how to recite the first line of the *Shema* and the blessing over the Shabbat candles. It is not surprising that, in earlier years, their prayers were mixed with superstition.

Not unlike many other Iranians, Jewish women relied on magic and witchcraft to control their environment. In a 1950s survey of the Iranian Jewish community, Siegfried Landshut observed that a "common occupation, mostly undertaken by women, is the selling of charms and amulets against illness, danger of one sort or another, and to ward off the Evil Eye."[13] I witnessed Jewish women of Shiraz using *esfand* (wild rue), salt crystals and amulets in the shape of an eye to avert *chashm-e bad* (the evil eye) from a new baby, a pregnant woman or a sick family member. Visiting the Shirazi Jewish community in 1967, Laurence Loeb noted powerful rituals against the evil eye. He wrote: "A whole raw egg is passed over the hands, feet and the back of the head of the subject," accompanied by the following formula:

> For the bestower of the evil eye who knows of it
> For the bestower of the evil eye who does not know
> For the wicked bestower of the evil eye
> For the bestower of the evil eye who leaves town
> For the bestower of the evil eye who has just arrived . . .[14]

The egg was thrown at the eastern wall outside of the house or donated to the poor. Although wrapped in superstition, the simple incantation of these words comforted the hearers.[15]

Such superstitions, deeply enmeshed in their lives, became another source for Jewish women's oral tradition and could be considered poetry in the raw, the beginning and foundation of a literary tradition. Some of the early literature by

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Jewish women of Iranian heritage contained traces of this distinctive mythology. For example, babies were not to be left alone because Jins, or *azuna*, the harmful spirits, could take their souls. As Loeb observed, the women believed that *azuna* could be embodied in a cat.[16] My paternal grandmother Tavoos always warned that warts were the result of splashing water on cats. This dread of cats appears in the contemporary novel *Persian Brides* by Dorit Rabinyan, an Israeli writer of Iranian heritage:

> When she was a young girl, it was her second nature to persecute cats. . . . "*Avoundareh* [it's a sin], poor things," the villagers threatened her, shaking their hands in the air. "The god of the cats will take terrible revenge on you, *avoundareh*, bad girl."
>
> But Miriam Hanoum did not heed their warnings, and when at last she married and bore her first child on a hot night, her arms were scored with scratches left by the claws of dead cats. . . . A hate-filled embittered alley cat stretched his lithe body, climbed in through the open window, padded up to the baby, and crouched on top of it, covering its nose and mouth. When the baby stopped breathing, the cat rose quietly and slunk back out through the window.[17]

Rabinyan adapted many of the folktales told by her Persian grandmothers. The women in her novel take precautions not to irritate the Jins underground, saying "*Parheez . . . parheez . . . parheez*" (be careful, keep away) to warn the little creatures of their movements.[18] Loeb observed a similar custom while visiting southern Iran. People he interviewed told him of spirits they had witnessed in "deserted places":

> When Junjun was a little girl, her mother sent her to the often deserted bath in Zire Takht to see if there was hot water. Once, she entered the bath and saw a woman with white skin and soft breasts washing her baby, who was also pale white. Their faces and trunks were human, but their hands and legs were those of a chicken. Junjun shrieked and ran out. The bath keeper soon returned with her, but the creatures were gone. Junjun believes that spirits often come to bathe when the bath house is empty.[19]

Rabinyan used this myth, too, in *Persian Brides*:

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> Wednesdays, as well as the early hours of every morning, were the regular bathing times of the demons and spirits who lived in the village. The *hammam* was left empty for them. Anyone who wandered accidentally underground during the demons' bath time reported that he heard them blowing bubbles in the water like children, and a chant of "blub-blub-blub" rose from the baths. (p. 92)

Rabinyan's fiction shows how superstitions that formed a part of Iranian Jewish women's oral history supplied future generations with stories to enrich their literary creativity.

The Oral Tradition: The Lost Poetry

Iranian Jewish women might have contributed to literary works that disappeared or were forgotten or wrongly credited. A number of compilations on Iranian Jewish history and literature have appeared in the last few decades; rarely have they mentioned any contribution by women to Iranian Jewish literature.[20] According to Amnon Netzer, Jewish poets wrote in Judeo-Persian (Persian written in Hebrew letters) as early as the twelfth century:

> The Jews of Iran gave expression to their spiritual world and conveyed their religious and social experience in the language of poetry. It seems that this form of artistic and aesthetic expression served as a source of emotional strength, ameliorating the physical and mental agony of the centuries of suffering and persecution.[21]

Jewish men worked as entertainers at weddings and other celebrations. In fact, since music was forbidden in the strict interpretation of Islam, Iranian Jewish men were credited with keeping Iranian music alive. They wrote poetry and music, sometimes original and sometimes in imitation of great Persian poets. There were also Jewish women entertainers, often singers or dancers, with the reputation of being *harjaee* (whores) for daring to step into the public arena. Might there have been Jewish women who created poetry that they did not call their own, to avoid slander? Hiding behind a cultural veil, might they have passed their poetry and songs to a male member of the family, a father, son or husband, who took credit for its creation?

Jewish women in Shiraz sang *vasoonak* (wedding songs) to the bride in various ceremonies connected with weddings. Most Iranian Jewish communities

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had their own versions of these songs. Sarah Soroudi, a scholar of Iranian folklore, has claimed that these songs were actually *hatani*, written for the groom.[22] My personal experience of Shirazi Jews differed. While many of the songs were indeed written for the groom, most probably by male musicians, there were also many that addressed the bride, an indication that Jewish women might have imitated or created their own version of *vasoonak*. For example, the following stanza was to be sung at the *hammam*, the public baths:

> ay hammoomi, ay hammoomi, abe hammoom tazeh kon
> khanom aroos miad hammoom, sharbatesh amadeh kon
>
> Bath keeper, bath keeper, refresh the water at the *hammam*.
> The bride is coming to the *hammam*, prepare for her a refreshing drink.

The bride was often taken to the *hammam* before and after the wedding. Beyond the spiritual purification effected by use of the *mikvah* (the ritual bath), and the obvious use of the baths for bathing, the *hammam* gave women a day of relaxation and a chance to share their happiness with each other. Would a man have written these words?

Vasoonak was sung during the most intimate ceremonies: at the *banandazi* (removal of body hair, including the pubic hair), while examining the bride's virginity, during the wedding festivities, and at the *hajleh* (the matrimonial bed):

> shab gozasht o nime shab gozasht o chashme doomad entezar
> kheir bebini naneye aroos in gol az khoonat dar ar
>
> Night has passed and midnight has approached, but the groom still awaits.
> We wish you the best, mother of the bride; allow this flower to leave your home.
>
> ki be hajleh? shazdeh doomad ba zaneshk
> ki begardeh dor-e hajleh? doshmanaye dor o baresh
>
> Who is at the *hajleh*? The bride and the groom.
> Who is orbiting the *hajleh*? The enemy around them.

"Being orbited by the enemies" placed the bride and groom at the center of the world, similarly to the *kapara* ritual performed before Yom Kippur.[23] Another

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stanza expressed the bride's anxiety about her new home, by blaming her mother for her exile:

> man namiraftam be qorbat to ferestadi mana
> gar bemiram man be qorbat khoone man girad tora
>
> I would not have ventured to unknown places as you have sent me.
> If I happen to die there, my blood will be a stain on you [the mother].

The mother of the bride answered with a prayer:

> che konam chia konam keh roode joniam mibaren
> ey khoda nazret konam keh rahe doorash nabaren
>
> What should I do, what can I do, they are taking my beloved [my daughter].
> Please God, I pray that they [the groom's family] will not take her far away.

Yet another stanza, sung by the women of the groom's family, tried to comfort the bride and her mother:

> oomadeem aqdesh koneem o nayamadeem sakhtesh koneem
> rokhsat az babash begereem farda shab aqdesh koneem
>
> We have come to betroth her and not to harden her life.
> We have come to ask her father his permission to betroth her tomorrow night.

To support my theory that *vasoonak* was the first surviving poetry written by Iranian Jewish women of southern Iran, I interviewed family members, friends and other Shirazi Jewish women, both in the U.S. (mostly the Los Angles area) and in Israel (mostly in Tel Aviv suburbs with a large Shirazi population) over the last ten years. I eventually had to put pen, paper and recording devices away while interviewing them, since the act of documentation unsettled these women. I made the conversations as casual as possible, as if we were just reminiscing about our past lives in Iran. While a more scientific method of research, with tables, names and recorded data, might have been preferable, I felt the urgency of beginning to create a foundation for similar endeavors. Most

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Shirazi women who remembered the singing of these songs in Shiraz were over sixty years old, and the most reliable sources were over eighty. I included myself, since I witnessed these songs being recited firsthand, thereby adding another dimension of subjectivity to my study.

In the almost complete version of Shirazi *vasoonak* in the second volume of *The History of Contemporary Iranian Jews*, they are described as Shirazi Jewish folk wedding songs.[24] During the 22 years that I lived in Shiraz, and even in wedding ceremonies held by Shirazi Jews in the USA, I rarely heard them recited by anyone but women. Some were sung by *motrebs* (Jewish entertainers) in Iran. In my opinion, much of the collection was created over time by women; certainly it served to include women in a ceremony that was otherwise not theirs. Men signed the wedding contract and argued over its legal and financial terms; men performed the religious parts of the ceremony and said the blessings; men wrote wedding songs to praise the groom. But women found their own words and customs, created traditions to feature themselves in these crucial life events, and graced them with songs and poetry.

Jewish Women's Education: The Long Road to Literary Creativity

Reading and writing were eventually introduced to the Iranian Jewish masses via foreign institutions.[25] Three different movements were responsible for advancing education for Iranian Jews. First, Christian mission schools reached out to the poverty-stricken Jewish community in Iran in the hope of converting them to Christianity through acts of kindness. Second, major advances out of poverty and ignorance were made possible by the French Alliance Israélite Universelle. Homa Nateq, a scholar of Jewish education in Iran, explained that the efforts of this organization, which started under the Qajar dynasty in 1872, did not bear fruit until the 1890s, because the government feared being labeled as "Jew loving" by political enemies who might lead the masses against them.[26] The French-based Jewish organization was led by Joseph Cazès, who hired female teachers from France and would later observe that the school helped not only to improve the girls' condition in the family but also to keep them out of the mission schools.[27] Third, Otzar HaTorah schools were established in Iran in 1947 with the help of the Joint Distribution Committee, American Sephardic Jews and the philanthropist Yitzhak Shalom.[28] Led by Rabbi Yitzhak Meir Levy, the main purpose of these schools was Jewish religious teaching.

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However, the most important changes came under the Pahlavi regime, which granted relative security, financial wellbeing, and equal access to modern education to Iranian Jews. Beginning in 1925, Reza Shah deposed the clergy from power in the Iranian government, removed legal barriers to religious equality, and relaxed social restrictions upon women.[29] When Tehran University, Iran's first modern institute of higher education, was established in 1935, it admitted women. Still, few Jewish women were able to acquire education. Azizeh Bral, who attended Tehran University in 1939, remembered: "I was the only Jewish girl, and I was distraught that so many capable high school friends could not find their way to college."[30]

During the reign of the second Pahlavi king, Mohammed Reza Shah (1941–1979), Jews started to leave the Jewish quarters in larger numbers. Schooling was possible and even encouraged for Jewish women, many of whom were allowed to postpone marriage in favor of higher education. Other universities were established, such as Pahlavi (Shiraz) University (1946) and Isfahan University (1974), enabling women, especially Jewish women, whose mobility was restricted, to attend local universities. The White Revolution of the 1960s led to a rise in the literacy rate among Iranian women in general; among other reforms, the laws were changed to allow women to vote. By the mid-1970s, the overall literacy rate among Iranian women was 36%.[31] Jewish women, too, hastened their pace, yet few of them became pioneers in higher education.

Tribulations persisted in the academic institutions. Teachers disapproved of critical thinking, the foundation of literary studies and creativity. Like religious studies, secular education in Iran stressed rote memorization rather than comprehension. In the provinces, especially, geography was taught without a map and history without class discussions. During exam months, young men paced the quietest streets, trying to commit every word to memory. Young women did the same in their yards at home, since they were not allowed to be out at night. Art, if taught, meant directly copying another artist's work. World literature and philosophy were systematically kept out of the curriculum.

Learning Persian literature was problematic for Iranian Jewish women. High school students majored in *tabiee* (earth science, biology and chemistry), *riazi* (mathematics and physics) or *adabiat* (Persian language and literature). English was the second language taught to biology and math students, while *adabiat* majors learned Arabic. Studying non-western Arabic and Persian literature, most Jews believed, would not facilitate their advancement in life, and they also feared a more severe anti-Semitism from the Arabic language and Persian

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literature teachers. Of my own university education in Iran in the 1990s, I wrote, "I would have loved to study literature, but my literature teachers were the most anti-Semitic teachers I had." Looking back over the lost years, I questioned, "Will I ever write?"[32]

Those who studied math and sciences often did not have writing classes, and rarely did they have instruction in *ensha* (essay writing). The subject matter under all majors usually was tightly controlled to muffle any sign of individuality or critical thinking. One stubborn woman in Namoos, my high school in Shiraz, was sent to the principal's office for writing about her religion, Baha'ism. She was reprimanded and threatened with expulsion. In the face of religious discrimination, Jewish women tried to be invisible and silent.

English literature was taught in the institutes of higher education, and universities like Pahlavi, where most of the teachers were American, British or western-trained, encouraged critical thinking. However, the few Jewish women who enrolled did not have a chance to pursue writing. They were encouraged to choose a path of knowledge that would provide them with financial security, mostly as translators or journalists. By the mid-twentieth century, many Jewish women had the educational tools for creating literature. Nevertheless, while they produced a few poems, no short stories or novels are known to have been published by Jewish women in Iran until decades later.

Writing, a Trivial or Dangerous Endeavor

Even in the latter part of the twentieth century, Jewish women faced the barriers that confronted all Iranian women. There were political ramifications for writers—men and women, Jews and non-Jews alike. Even during the Pahlavi reign, words could be dangerous. Expressions of free thinking, diversity or dissatisfaction led to prison sentences. As Rivanne Sandler put it, "freedom of expression meant the freedom to depict society as it was," and so "Writing about certain aspects of Iranian life . . . became a political act in itself."[33] Having recently left the *mahalehs*, Jews feared government reprisal more than the hostility of Muslim fanatics. They also felt indebted to the Pahlavi regime and had no desire to forfeit their newfound comforts by being critical.

In these circumstances, the most motivated women often chose sciences over literature in college. Gina Nahai, now a prominent Iranian-American

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writer, was expected to take a course of study that would give her financial independence. Her father told me:

> The situation was never ideal for Iranian Jews. I sent Gina to a Swiss boarding school so that she would learn to be independent, knowing that someday she would live in a different country. I never thought she could reach her potential as a Jewish woman in Iran.[34]

Nahai studied political science and was awaiting her acceptance to law school when she started recording the life stories the women in her family exchanged as they gathered in the kitchen to cook. These became the impetus for her first novel, *Cry of the Peacock*. By the time her admissions papers arrived, she had decided on a career change and instead studied creative writing, a choice that was made easy by her family's decision to leave Iran for the United States. The Iranian-American poet Michelle Koukhab had a similar story. Her parents had assumed that she would study medicine like her father; fearing their disappointment, Michelle did not at first share her poetry with them.

Shirindokht Daqiqian, a graduate of the Alliance school Etehad, is a well-known translator and literary critic still living in Iran. In an interview, she noted that although she had wanted to study literature at Meli University in Tehran, her brother pushed her to study chemistry instead. She said, "Science gives you a different angle in life and expands your mind." When I asked her if she still wrote creatively, she insisted that her real work was in research. "I am not a poet," Daqiqian told me. "I write poetry for myself."[35] Daqiqian was only one of many women I interviewed who wrote just for "themselves," shying away from being called poets or writers and never considering publication of their work. Might an early education in literature have given her the confidence to focus on creative writing?

Silencing Women: Modesty and a Good Name

Modesty and reticence were and remain women's prized possessions, even among contemporary Iranians; not unlike my grandmothers, women are still praised for their silences. The cultural standard militating against exposure of one's feelings and thoughts has been one of the most difficult hurdles to overcome, for Iranian women in general and Iranian Jewish women in particular.

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Even the Persian (Farsi) language, although gender-neutral, discriminated against women, labeled them *zaifeh* (the weak ones). Jewish women were expected to keep their opinions to themselves. As Parvaneh Saraf wrote, "It was not long ago that women were not called by their own names. They were someone's mother or wife." For years, she added, the only response they received to their questions was "khasve shalom" (God forbid), which kept many women demure.[36] In the 1960s, for example, an outspoken Shirazi woman, Ashraf Cohen, dared to ask the men congregating at the Kanisaye Cohanim synagogue on Rosh Hashanah to approach the authorities and request Jewish holiday leaves for young men in the army. She was booed and jeered by the male worshippers, who told her to get up to the balcony with the other women. "Do you see the other women voicing an opinion?" a worshipper screamed. "Go sit with them, where you belong!" Ruhi Sabbar, who was sitting in the balcony, remembered feeling small and humiliated.[37] Her husband's recollection of the same scene was of an immodest woman, a *zaban deraz*, stupidly talking of matters of which she had no knowledge. Such silencing of women's everyday voices obviously discouraged impulses toward literary creativity.

Even in this period, many women were still coerced into marrying young, no longer at 9 or 12, but 16-year-olds were candidates for marriage. Those who aspired to write had to delay or forgo it. Mahin Amid, a poet now living in Los Angeles, remembers writing poetry in high school and hoping to continue in college in the 1960s, but, at her parents' insistence, she was married at age 18. Her training in poetry consisted of a few private lessons.

Yet another Iranian Jewish woman writer, Homa Sarshar, was married after high school. "Parents were afraid that their daughters would not get married if they were too educated," she related. "Get married first," her parents told her; "you can always have higher education later in life."[38] Sarshar was lucky; her husband encouraged her education, which led to a successful career in journalism.

Revolution: Impetus for Creativity

The majority of educated Jewish women fled Iran during and after the 1979 Islamic Revolution, and the careers so cherished by their parents were lost to them. Homa Sarshar, a translator and journalist, worked for the Iranian newspaper *Keyhan* for 17 years. In the United States, she taped the events of 1979,

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remembering the slow process of being first humiliated and then purged by her colleagues:

> I had worked with Mr. N.A. for 17 years. We had mutual respect for one another. During Khomeini's stay in France, I was told that there were no faxes to translate. I questioned Mr. N.A. about this absence of news. "Khomeini is there," I told him. "The country is a center of relevant news for us. Something is not right." He looked at me with disdain and said: "Girl, what makes you think that a Jew, a woman for that matter, would be allowed to translate news relating to Ayatollah Khomeini?"[39]

Sarshar left her job that day, numb with the change that had come to her life so suddenly. After immigrating to the United States, she worked as a journalist for an Iranian radio station in Los Angeles and edited four books on the history of the Jews in Iran. She also compiled two volumes of her essays, *Dar kooche paskoochehaye qorbat* (In the back alleys of exile), which included her editorials for the Jewish monthly magazine *Shofar*. These were later broadcast by the American Jewish radio station in Persian, Omid-E-Iran. In her preface, Sarshar wrote:

> These writings are daily memos and thoughts in view of all that took place around me, and are the reactions of an unwanted immigrant facing everyday life in a new land called America. . . . [T]his collection represents the perspectives of an Iranian woman, a journalist caught between the two cultures of East and West. Lost and disoriented and caught in the grip of anxiety and nostalgia, she is obliged to rediscover herself through trial and error.[40]

Sarshar viewed the Iranian revolution as a catastrophe that paralyzed her pen and silenced her tongue. However, it stirred a different kind of creativity in her. Between her essays, Sarshar interspersed her poetry, reflecting her deep sorrow at leaving her homeland. "These writings reveal my natural passage through the five recognized stages associated with loss: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance," she wrote. "I started to search for a new identity, and even began to compose poetry with a boldness which surprises me today. . . ."[41]

Sarshar wrote the first play by an Iranian Jewish woman, "From Esther to Esther," dramatizing the life of a modern-day Esther in exile, struggling with

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her new American identity.[42] Juxtaposing this Esther's struggles with the Persian queen's heroism, Sarshar strove to define Esther's strengths and weaknesses. Was she manipulated as just a "beautiful body," or was she the mind behind the courageous act that saved the Jews? Some Iranian Jews shunned the play when it was staged in Los Angeles. "The Jewish community reacted very strange[ly]," Sarshar told me. "Some took it as an insult to our Jewish queen and said that Sarshar portrays Esther as a whore." Further criticized for choosing Shohreh Aghdashlou,[43] a non-Jew, to play the role, she remarked: "I think this play was too early for our community." Its message regarding the role of Iranian Jewish women in keeping families together in exile was lost on many.

Sadly, partly because of this criticism and partly because she became comfortable with her new identity as an Iranian-American Jewish woman, Sarshar ceased to write creatively. In my interview with her, she emphasized that she was a journalist, not a poet or a playwright. This kind of silencing, both voluntary and forced, suffocated the literary talents of many Iranian Jewish women. However, others were empowered by their newfound freedoms in exile.

Literary Creativity: A Beginning

Poetry being the essence of Persian literature, the first literary faces of Iranian Jewish women belonged to the poets. Mahin Amid published her poetry in various journals in Iran under the pen name Negah (the Gaze). In pre-Revolutionary Iran, one of her poems celebrating women's expanded role in the society won the "most outstanding poem" award and was displayed at the tomb of Reza Shah in Tehran. After the Revolution, she was approached by the government to write a poem in praise of Khomeini, but she declined: "I told them I don't write poems for kings or government leaders. I write poetry as an expression of my feelings."[44] Consequently, Amid's house was ransacked, and her jewelry and money were confiscated by government agents. She soon left Iran for the United States. The Iranian government pronounced her *mamnoo-ol-qalam*, the one with the forbidden pen.

Amid felt a great sense of belonging and religious freedom among the Jews in the United States. In exile, her poetry matured. Her earlier poems, in the style of classical Persian poetry, often spoke of love and its miseries. Her later poems combined such themes with social issues, the plight of Iranians under

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a fanatical government, and their predicament in exile. She wrote the following stanzas out of anger at the government, she told me, and to show her disappointment with those who blindly followed its dictates:

> At the end, chains on my feet I danced
> though informed, feigning ignorance I danced.
> With their rhythm I danced not
> but in punishment, chains on my feet I danced.
> Though everyone watched my dance of death,
> they did not see, for invisible I danced. (my translation—FDG)

A book of Amid's poetry in Persian was compiled and published by her friends in 1987.[45] The rest of her poetry remained scattered in various journals or unpublished.

Two Jewish-Iranian magazines, *Shofar* and *Chashm Andaz*, have published poetry and short stories by Iranian Jewish women, including Amid, and Shab-e-she'er, a literary circle of Iranian Jews in the Los Angeles area, has encouraged women to write. Even so, most poets and writers I interviewed in the 1990s seemed astonished that anyone would be interested in their poetry.

However, young Iranian-American Jewish women are slowly emerging from this literary timidity. Poet Michelle Koukhab told me that, for her, "poetry has been an outlet to create a new language where I can understand all my cultural parts."[46] That language enables her to blend her life in America, as a woman with many opportunities, and her Iranian world, known only through her parents' stories and the tastes and smells of Persian food at home. Of her borrowed memories, she wrote:

> Persia
>
> I ask for stories of purple onion domes
> and auditoriums with red velvet chairs.
> Men in mustaches and women without faces.
>
> My mother tells me about community bathrooms:
> shriveled bodies standing close,
> stained flesh, puddles

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of dead skin and water.
Chickens she raised in her back yard
run reckless, their heads still red.

I would have liked to go to market:
A woman vends seedless grapes;
a man sells *sabzi* for homemade dinners,
and the street's breath is of rotten meat, garbage.

Today in Iran, door closed
a Persian woman copies
television screens of Madonna.
Her thick black hair
hangs in her glittering eyes.
Silver blouse half-buttoned, naked
shoulders, one nipple.
Slinky legs parade over
Persian rugs. Her mouth
painted strawberry,
kisses a vacant air.

Michelle's interest in her Iranian heritage took her parents by surprise; as her mother told me: "Growing up in the United States, she avoided Iranian music and literature, trying to integrate into American life."[47] Michelle later combined her two diverse and sometimes opposite cultures to recreate herself.

Roya Hakakian composed two books of poetry in Persian after moving to America: *Bekhatere ab* (For the sake of water, 1993), and *Namee saravar-e niayesh* (A name to worship, 2002).[48] Esther Kanka-Shekalim, who lives in Israel and writes her poetry in Hebrew, speaks of her split east-west identity and her enemy homelands, Iran and Israel. In "Matkon legormeh sabzi mushlam" (A recipe for perfect *gormeh-sabzee*)[49] she writes of her mother laboring over the Iranian meat and herb stew. The poet, who loves the dish but lacks the time to cook it, comes home from work to a frozen package her mother has made for her. Warming it up, she dreams of her lost childhood home, the aroma of herbs being chopped, old stories, and the lilting cadences of Persian, which she never mastered and fears she might forget.

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In another poem, "Kalat da'at" (The bride of knowledge), she plays with the Hebrew word *kalah*, which, in different, homonymous spellings, could mean either *bride* or *simple*:[50]

> When I was five, I knew my mother's name, my father's name, and the name of our street. And whenever someone asked, "What do you want to be in life?" I answered, *mikham aroos besham* (I want to become a bride). And it comforted everyone and they slept in peace. I grew up. I grew up in knowledge and creativity (not becoming a *kalah*, a simple person). And the family wonders who would want me as a wife now?[51] (my translation—FDG)

Prose Literature

Prose literature is a relatively new genre in Persian. In 1946, explaining that the novel as a literary form did not exist in Iran, William S. Haas prophesied:

> For, of the two great subjects of the novel, the first (love between man and woman) could not, in view of woman's status, become the object of literary description and analysis—except in lyrics—while the second (the social problem) did not present itself at all. It would not be surprising if some women writers would appear on the scene, as they have done in Turkey and India, to contribute their part to the literary effort.[52]

Haas accurately predicted that education would be the catalyst for women writers' contribution to prose literature. The first books of prose by an Iranian women were written by Simin Daneshvar, who published a collection of short stories, *Atash-e hamush* (Fire quenched, 1947), and a novel, *Savushun* (1969). Since then, Iranian women have produced short stories and novels at a fast pace, even under the severe post-revolutionary restrictions.

As with poetry, Iranian Jewish women lagged behind. Nevertheless, in 1998, I was amazed to find a Jewish woman novelist in the truncated Jewish community of 25,000 left in Iran. Elham Yaqoubian has written three novels: *Daryaye Khamoush* (The silent sea, 1994), *Tondbade Sarnevesh*t (The strong wind of fate, 1996), and *Ashk-e sha-am* (The candle's tears). Of her first novella, written at age 16, she said, "It was a hobby. I did not think I would ever publish it."[53] She submitted the book for publication at age 20 at the insistence of family

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and friends. The publisher was hesitant. The author had three elements against her: youth, gender and religion. After its acceptance, the book was heavily edited without the author's permission, to pass the ethical, social and political requirements. The only copy of the original was kept by the publisher, who refused to return it.

In her next book, Yaqoubian manipulated language and theme to avoid censorship and ensure publication. The very first words in *Tondbade Sarnevesht*[54] are *bename khoda* (in God's name). Throughout the story, the author evokes God's name as the force behind life events. Fate determines the life of the main character, Shaqayeq Amini, and faith in God propels her toward a future that she is incapable of controlling. Instead, she faces natural and supernatural forces passively. As a single woman, she allows family and friends to make important decisions for her. Early in the story, she is informed of her mother's choice of her future husband:

> We had a guest today, a very nice and wise woman. I had heard about her before. She has a nice son with a good job who has seen you and has approved of you. I know you will like him. I have seen the son from a distance. (p. 64, my translation—FDG)

Dismissing her daughter's refusal, she adds indifferently: "Anyhow, I have given them a positive response and we have made all arrangements" (p. 65). Shaqayeq feels like a sacrifice, as if she has been robbed of everything dear to her—her education, her independence. However, when she meets her groom, Farhad, in a room full of chaperones, she realizes that he is handsome and that her mother has chosen wisely, and, she acknowledges her own lack of sound judgment (pp. 83–85).

In Yaqoubian's novels, time and events are never identified. The setting is Tehran and the northern cities along the Caspian Sea. When did the story happen? Was it before or after the Revolution? Only "the clock" and "the seasons" determine the time frame. The weddings and funerals are free of ceremonies, offering no religious clues. The characters' names are also devoid of any cultural or religious markers. Ironically, the only name with a religious connotation is on the cover of the book: Yaqoubian, "a descendent of Jacob."

Jewish women critics both in Iran and abroad dismissed Yaqoubian's novels as mediocre. Shirindokht Daqiqian commented, "How can one begin to

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compare her work to Toni Morrison's *Beloved* or Nadine Gordimer's *July's People*?"[55]—books Daqiqian translated into Persian. To my question as to whether it is possible for Iranian writers to be social critics without fearing reprisal from the government, she responded that courage is the distinguishing quality of a superb writer. She added that Yaqoubian's topics and style needed improvement if she was to set herself apart; she needed to read more of the masterpieces. I disagreed at the time, thinking that Yaqoubian could not have risked her family to free her pen. Following her immigration to the United States a few years later, I was hoping that she would now feel able to write and publish freely, but so far she has remained silent.

Writing in the Languages of Exile

Until her immigration to the United States, Yaqoubian remained the only female Iranian Jewish novelist writing in Persian in Iran. However, other Iranian Jewish women had already emerged on the literary scene, almost all writing in their languages of exile.

Gina Nahai, who published her first novel, *Cry of the Peacock*, in 1991, went on to write *Moonlight on the Avenue of Faith* (1999), *Sunday's Silence* (2001) and *Caspian Rain* (2007).[56] Born in Tehran, Nahai studied at a Swiss boarding school from age 13 and immigrated to the United States with her parents in 1977. She was the first novelist to write of Jewish women's experiences over the last two centuries in Iran. In her first two novels, she concentrated on women's lives in the Jewish *mahalehs*, their victimization by Muslims, their abuse by their male coreligionists and their unbroken will to survive.

Cry of the Peacock presents the journey of Peacock, symbolizing Iranian Jewish women, from the nineteenth century up to the Islamic Revolution. Nahai chose Isfahan, the birthplace of her maternal grandparents, as the setting for her compelling story, in which she explores the web of customs and traditions that suffocated young girls in marriage to older men:

> Joseph the Winemaker had never slept with a woman before. He came into the room that night to see his wife, and found a child crying in his bed. Behind the door, a dozen people had gathered to see the marriage consummated. They were the bride and groom's parents, the rabbi who had married them, the elders who commanded authority solely by their age and years of

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> suffering. They would wait there until Joseph had conquered his bride and proven his manhood and her chastity. (p. 79)

Through this and similar scenes, the author portrays Iranian Jewish women's lives at the beginning of the twentieth century, largely mired in poverty and ignorance.

The author's masterful use of myths and of the traditional style of exaggeration give her second novel its Persian flavor. Like Rabinyan, Nahai employs magical realism to tell stories that were foreign to her, even if they emanated from her Iranian heritage. Roxanna, the heroine of *Moonlight on the Ave of Faith*, grows wings at night and flies away from her intolerable life in her husband's home in the *mahaleh* of Tehran, leaving her daughter behind. Later, she finds her way to Los Angeles and is reunited with her daughter. However, her guilt has swelled within her, blowing her up to an enormous size. She confesses, "There is a sorrow within me so deep, I have not been able to give it a name" (p. 367).

In *Sunday's Silence*, Nahai departed from the themes of her previous novels to write about a small sect of snake worshippers in the Appalachian Mountains. She told me that so many of her readers regarded Jewish life in Iran as primitive that she decided to show them how strange American life could be. *Dreams of a Caspian Rain*, her latest book, returns to Iran to tell the story of a Jewish girl slowly going deaf. As she told me, "It is also a story of dealing with loss and the way we deal with it—in the West—and the way we used to, at least, and still do to a large degree, in the East."[57] She is currently writing *The Pearl Moon*, a novel of murder and intrigue.

The 1990s started a magical era for Iranian Jewish women writers. Dorit Rabinyan wrote *Persian Brides* in Hebrew in1995.[58] Her portrayal of two brides from the small, fictional village of Oumerijan captured Jewish women's lives in small, forgotten corners of Iran.

> The bride was expected to display her skills at cleaning and chopping the *sabzi*, the seasoning herbs that Janjan sold in the bazaar. Nazie was nine years old and Flora thirteen when the joyous ululation, li-li-li, burst out around Homa, and the bride's kohl-painted eyes widened in alarm. The women of the family and the village formed a circle around her, pressing their breasts together and shaking them as they danced with widespread legs, laughing and beating on drums.

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> Nazie was tense as if it was she and not Homa who was going to marry the singer's son. She ignored the teasing and observed everything closely, learning and absorbing, so as not to fail the *sabzi* test when her time came. (p. 141)

Like Nahai, Rabinyan records numerous wedding rituals to highlight the old Iranian Jewish community's preference for child-brides. Nazie, an orphan girl who has not yet reached puberty, has been taught to value life only within the boundaries of marriage. As the *aroos*, the bride, with her dress many sizes too large and her shoes slipping off her little feet, she looks like an *aroosak*, a doll. When her mother-in-law, who had adopted her as a child, is about to leave her alone on the bed waiting for her groom, Nazie begs like the child that she is:

> "Please don't leave me now," Nazie clutched Miriam Hanoum's arm, because she desperately longed for her mother. . . .
>
> "Enough, Nazie! It is not nice what you're doing, you're not a little girl anymore—soon you'll be *kuchik madar* [little mother]—sit on the bed and wait for your husband to come in."
>
> Mousa came in and at once kissed Nazie's lips. His eyes were shut, and his lips tinkled on hers like a teaspoon stirring sugar in a glass of tea. Putting his hand to the front of her dress, he unbuttoned it slowly, until the damp feather breasts fell out with the strip of bed sheet and rolled on the floor. He tickled her with his fingers. Nazie giggled, and the stream of urine that flowed into her underpants spread pleasant warmth between her thighs. Mousa did not notice the odorous circle that spread slowly through her damp dress. He only opened his eyes and saw Nazie laughing in the dark when he heard his mother's jubilant voice shouting:
>
> "Well, you finished, Mousa, you finished there?" Miriam Hanoum thumped on the door enthusiastically. "You two finished now?" (p. 235)

The final words reiterate Rabinyan's preoccupation with our Persian matrilineage and the harsh ways of women's lives in Iran's patriarchal society.

Rabinyan's stories, drawn from her mother's and grandmothers' clutches of memories, mix real-life stories with superstitious tales to recreate the country she has never seen. Rabinyan employed Judeo-Persian words and phrases used only by the oldest generation of Iranian Jews to add yet another layer of meaning to her story, evoking buried memories in some of her readers:

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> Having left Iran 23 years ago and my grandmother being dead for almost 10 years, I never thought I would hear these words again. I definitely never expected to see them in print. I was told by my parents not to use the unsophisticated Jewish ghetto words. We had left the ghettos, trying to integrate ourselves in the more sophisticated world of educated Muslims. We would have liked to forget "words" that would identify us as ghetto Jews, or simply Jews. The feeling that these same words stir in me is difficult to explain: a combination of sadness, nostalgia and belonging. I feel that my background is important and that my grandmother's voice, although small, should be a valued part of me.[59]

Rabinyan's second novel, *Strand of a Thousand Pearls* (1999),[60] did not receive the same international acclaim as *Persian Brides*. Here, too, she depicts Persian weddings (as highlighted by the book's Hebrew title, *Haḥatunot shel-anu*, "Our weddings"), but in a setting more familiar to her: modern Israel. Her protagonist, Iran, falls asleep before allowing herself "the soundless tears of emigrants, in which were blended her regret for the place she had left with fears of the place she was heading for" (p. 63). Where *Persian Brides* portrayed a long-gone magical homeland, *Strand of a Thousand Pearls* pierces the reality of immigrants' lives, lonely and troubled even in the Holy Land. When I contacted Rabinyan in May 2009, she was putting the final touches on her third novel after a long period of silence.

Susanne Pari, the daughter of an Iranian Muslim father and an American Jewish mother, wrote *The Fortune Catcher* in 1999.[61] Pari's early life was divided between Iran, where she didn't have contact with Jews, and New York City, where the family home was in a predominantly Jewish neighborhood. She felt that her mother was alienated from both sides of the family. Pari's father once told her, "You understand that no one here [in Iran] knows that your mother is Jewish."[62]

Like Yaqoubian, Pari wrote about contemporary life in Iran, but she enjoyed freedom of speech in the United States. *The Fortune Catcher*'s Leyla and Dariush exhibit their love openly. During a sudden storm, they take shelter in a hut in northern Tehran, where they realize their love for each other:

> When he kisses her, he feels their bodies trembling. She tastes like cinnamon. He kisses her neck and she presses her hands against his back. He feels as if they have done this many times before, as if he does not have to

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> think what comes next, as if this has already happened before. He feels her nipples against his chest and pulls back to look at her. She is perfect, he thinks. They stand there staring—breathless, expectant. He puts his hand over her breast. She closes her eyes. (p. 70)

The contrast between the couples in Yaqoubian's and Pari's novels stems not just from the characters' cultural differences but also from the authors' cultural and political boundaries.

Both in the United States and in Israel, highly educated women of Iranian background—including Jewish women—have responded to the international demand for stories of Iran, sometimes with titillating stories of Persian stereotypes. Dora Levy Mossanen, born in Israel to Iranian parents, moved to Iran at age nine and escaped with her family to the United States at the onset of the Iranian Revolution. Her provocative tales of intrigue, *Harem* (2002) and *Courtesan* (2005), differ drastically from Yaqoubian's timid narratives. Asked to respond to the criticism that her books are pornographic, she characterized them as "sensual and lush," adding: "Sensuality was so organic to the story that I never stopped to think that I might be criticized."[63]

The newly inaugurated writer Dalia Sofer chooses a more realistic approach to Jewish life in Iran and in exile. In *The Septembers of Shiraz*,[64] Mr. Amin, proud of his Iranian heritage, disregards his Jewish lineage until he is arrested and tortured—allegedly for being an Israeli spy, but really for being a wealthy Jew. As his tormentors reproach him for his forgotten faith, he reverts back to prayers long abandoned: "Cause us to lie down, God, our God, in peace . . . Save us because of your mercy" (pp. 10–11). The story draws upon the imprisonment of Sofer's father after the revolution, but many of its subplots were inspired by her interviews with Iranian Jews living in the Unites States.[65] The alienation from religion is Sofer's own, as she wrote to me:

> Some people find that religious practice brings them closer to God, or to this sense of connectedness to the universe. I get the opposite feeling from religion. To me, it functions as a divider of people—people who are all essentially the same but who, often because of religion, claim to be different from (or better than) one another. Having lived under the theocratic regime of the Islamic Republic of Iran, I can only say that I see religion as a potentially dangerous tool.[66]

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However, as Mr. Amin's Judaism is beaten into him by the prison guards and interrogators, he wonders simultaneously whether "anyone will say kaddish for him" (p. 153) and why he must "bear the burden of his religion, he who had led a secular life" (p. 211). He has become an outsider in his beloved homeland, which he had resisted abandoning for *qorbat* (exile). Meanwhile, his son Parviz, sent to New York to study architecture, is also reminded of his religion when he rents an apartment from a hasidic family. Penniless, hungry and lonesome in a foreign country, he appreciates their care, but their ideas and strict observance feel alien to him.

Eventually, Mr. Amin escapes with his wife and daughter by donkey-back towards the Turkish border, for eventual emigration to America. Readers are forewarned that the parents may share their son's loneliness and isolation in the New World. They will encounter both the promise of freedom from persecution and the strains of adjustment to a life in exile. Iranian readers connected with the book. As Sofer told me:

> I think that older people—those who were directly affected by the revolution—read it like a eulogy, as something that reminds them of their past, honors it, and puts it to rest. Younger people seem to have read it with a certain kind of longing—as a testament to stories they no doubt hear in their own families but from which they feel excluded.[67]

Two more Israeli women writers of Iranian heritage are Edna Cohen Kadosh and Sara Aharoni. Cohen Kadosh, who was born in Tehran and immigrated to Israel in 1979, writes in *Hadiber haḥamishi* (The fifth commandment, 2002) of an Iranian immigrant married to a Holocaust survivor. Each must cope with a lost homeland, with trying to forget the past and adjust to their present circumstances. To add to their personal agonies, they have lost a grandchild in the war in Lebanon. The peace they sought eludes them in a new country constantly at war.

Sara Aharoni's book, *Ahavatah shel Saltanat* (Saltanat's love, 2008) is based upon her own mother's story of lost love, forced marriage and immigration to Israel. She told me that she began the story as nonfiction but started weaving in her own imagination, both to fill in the holes in her mother's memory and to give the book a stronger literary integrity.[68] *Saltanat's Love* is not only a stirring romance, but also a captivating family and historical saga, introducing readers to the lives and customs of Iranian Jews in the 1940s.

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Life Narratives

In *Moonlight on the Avenue of Faith*, one of Nahai's Iranian immigrants to the United States remarks: "This much I know about living in exile. . . . You can love the old country all you want. Sometimes, exile is the best thing that can happen to a people."[69] In the months following the 1979 revolution, many Iranian Jews believed that they would eventually return to their ancestral homeland, where some traced their roots back to the destruction of the First Temple. Decades later, with those hopes on ice as they become more at ease in their democratic adopted countries, they are shedding the fear of sharing their inner thoughts, a taboo strictly observed in the old culture. From outside Iran, they have been researching their history and background at a furious pace.

Still, modesty and secrecy at first prevented Iranian women, especially Jewish women, from recording our life narratives. Writing of self was frightening; it had consequences. An author cannot possibly explain her life alone, without involving family members and friends. Even before I decided to write my autobiography, I received messages from close relatives threatening lawsuits if I spoke about family matters in my lectures. From our Iranian past, we imported to America the taboo against speaking and writing candidly.

Traditionally, autobiography had been the most forbidding genre in Persian literature. Few literary figures wrote autobiographies before the twenty-first century. Michael Hillman offers some reasons for this:

> Iranian concerns about the reaction of family, friends, neighbors, and society at large play a not insignificant role in the attitude of writers when it comes to telling the story of a writer's life . . . [along with] the need to engage in self-censorship to avoid governmental censorship or worse. . . . In the authoritarian, patriarchal Iranian environment, biographies other than the approved lives of kings, their representatives, and other establishment father figures might not have a place. In addition, because detailed or in-depth biographies of literary figures have not been a traditional part of Persian literary expression, readers cannot be expected to seek out, encourage, or appreciate the literary form. This factor in turn may discourage writers from biographical writing.[70]

Used rarely by male Muslim writers, the genre didn't attract Iranian women.

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In her book, *Veils and Words*, Farzaneh Milani explained:

> 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.
>
> In a sexually segregated society where access to a woman's world and words is limited, . . . women's autobiographies, with their assertive self-attention and self-display, cannot easily flourish, and they have not.[71]

Amazingly, these very correct assertions, published in 1990 and 1992, were completely reversed a decade later. 2003 and 2004 set records for Iranian women's memoirs, two of which were written by Jewish women born in Iran: my own *Wedding Song*: *Memoirs of an Iranian Jewish Woman*, and Roya Hakakian's *The Journey from the Land of No*: *A Girlhood Caught in Revolutionary Iran*.[72]

Roya and I both feared the disapproval of family and friends and the emotional backlash to exposure that terrifies most memoir writers. Being Iranian Jewish women made sharing our private stories even more daunting. In striking passages in both narratives, words were set afire. When I was a teenager, family members complained that western novels might corrupt a young woman. As I described in the preface to *Wedding Song*, I walked into the kitchen early one morning to find my books burning in the wood-stove:

> Now curling at the edges, crumbling, the black of the words disappeared into the red of the flames and the gray of the ashes—exorcised worlds flew in tiny particles from the pyre and swirled in the air. Breathing them, I wondered where I could take my mind now that their magic had fled through the chimney. (p. 2)

Book-burning wasn't new to the family or to Iranian Jews. Relying on the mercy of whatever government was in power, we tried not to cross the ever-shifting political boundaries—not to make waves, culturally or politically. Years earlier, my father had burned his younger brother's papers and poetry during the coup of 1953, as the Shah's agents searched the neighborhood for revolutionaries:

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> Being his guardian, Baba feared for my uncle's safety and our family's as well. As the police neared our home, my father tore through my uncle's room, searched in the Passover dishes in the attic, and dug among the onions and spices in the pantry, looking for illegal documents. He found armloads of anti-Shah literature and tossed them in a bonfire. In his haste, he also burned my uncle's collection of poetry, short stories, and paintings. By the time the American-supported agents reached our home, the only traces of the passionate arguments against the king were deliciously spiced ashes flying in the wind. (p. 42)

In a similar episode, Hakakian's father burned her books before they fled Iran.

> Among the ashes, in the bonfire, my world was burning: my newspapers and magazines, my fifth-grade appreciation certificate from the shah's minister of education. (p. 226)

Hakakian felt that her father had burned her books "to punish me for what should never have been a crime." The cycle was complete. Words having been more dangerous than swords in Iran, under both the Pahlavis and the Islamic government, Iranian women shied away from writing—especially writing memoirs. However, life narratives were prominent in the Iranian Jewish women's oral tradition. During long winter nights, my mother, grandmother and aunts gathered around a space heater, mending stockings and sharing life stories of women past and present—a tradition that, as we have seen, inspired contemporary women writers. Why, then, didn't those writers record their stories as nonfiction? Baring the soul, telling the private scenes of one's life, felt too frightening.

The explosion of memoir writing by Iranian women in recent years could also be a result of our willingness, in Jill Ker Conway's terminology, finally to take *agency* for our lives.[73] Finally, we realized that our stories not only mattered, but that they might be received enthusiastically—that it was worth taking a risk for these *khaterat* (memories).

Undoubtedly, the 1979 revolution was the catalyst for almost all of the memoirs. Virginia Woolf wrote that for a woman to write she needed to be able to have life experiences, to travel, to see, to experience the world. These narratives were propelled by the shock of displacement and exile, even if experienced not

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by the writer herself but by her parents or extended family; by the inability to return to one's homeland easily, safely; and by awareness of the suffering of family, friends and those left behind. Hakakian portrays the shock of her involuntarily exile, the decision to leave everything behind, to venture into a world unknown and frightening, and the sorrow of dreams evaporated in a revolution gone wrong. The last chapter of *Wedding Song* records my family's escape from Iran to Israel. We scattered around the globe, trying to find homes. I, the eldest child, having gone before to the United States, could not communicate with my youngest sister for years. Living in Israel, she forgot her Persian and spoke only Hebrew, which I did not yet understand.

Nostalgia among the Iranians in exile and westerners' curiosity about Iran has reinforced this need, this momentum in recording Iranian Jewish stories. In their memoirs, Iranian women explain a world lost to the writer. I started writing my memoirs at my daughters' request. They wanted to know about a country they might never be able to visit. Later, I added stories that were not just mine, but were drawn from generations of women who had no lasting voices of their own. Realizing that I could speak for them, I found the courage to risk publication of my personal life-narratives. Otherwise, the stories of these women who had come before me, who had endured oppression and poverty, would have been lost. The details of our everyday lives, I thought, were worth sharing: our customs of cleaning unripe grapes (used to flavor stews) for Passover or visiting the women's public baths in the *mahaleh*, and so much more. Similarly, Hakakian told me: "Many English-speaking friends always wanted to hear the story of Iran and its revolution as I had seen it."[74]

In her talk at the May 2004 International Iranian Conference in Bethesda, Maryland, Hakakian recalled how originally she had been sympathetic to the cause of the revolution. She even called herself "an anti-Semitic Jew" who thought of herself as an Iranian first. Like many other Iranians, she had hoped that the revolution would bring equality and justice to the masses, never imagining that she would be forced to flee her country.

Conclusion

By obtaining education, financial comfort and freedom of speech, elements whose lack, up to the mid-twentieth century, had stunted their creativity, Iranian Jewish women writers emerged to tell their mothers' stories and recreate

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their lost culture. The recurrence of the child-bride theme in many of their novels shows the importance of that reconstruction. This custom, until it was abolished by Mohammed Reza Shah in the 1950s, blocked Jewish women's advancement. Neither education nor creative writing could have had a place in such devastated lives. With its abrogation, the progress of Jewish women resembled that of other Iranian women. In fact, for a small minority, they have written proportionally more books.

Many questions, however, remained unanswered. The surge of interest and of writing in both the United States and Israel will undoubtedly continue to generate works of fiction and nonfiction. Will the books written by Iranian Jewish women in the various languages of their exile be translated into Persian? Is there any hope for their publication in Iran?

Of course, the descendants of Iranian Jews will write. But will they write of Iran? Can the flavor of Iranian life be sustained by a book description of the unique flavor of *khoresh qormeh sabzi*, as Esther Kanka-Shekalim alluded in her poetry? Will the stories that are told now carry the memories through the minds of women writers who no longer speak the language and have never chopped the spices? As first-generation immigrants die out, as the memories of the second generation fade, will the younger generation care to linger over a lost world? For the second or third generations in exile, who, as Gina Nahai wrote of her children in the dedication to her book, have never seen "the Persian sky," will Iran matter?

Muslim women living in Iran will write their stories, but with the Jewish exodus from Iran, the well of Iranian stories might eventually run dry for Jewish women. Yet new writings will probably emerge to spotlight Iranian Jewish life outside Iran.

Notes:

* Parts of this research were originally written for a lecture given at the second Hadassah-Brandeis Institute conference in 1998 at Brandeis University and were published with other scholarly papers in *Jewish Women 2000.* A copy of that paper can be found on my website: www.faridehgoldin.com.

1. Bernard Lewis, *The Jews of Islam* (NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 8.
2. *Ibid*., p. 9.
3. Amnon Netzer, "Rabbi Haim Moreh," in idem, *Padyavand: Judeo-Iranian and Jews Studies*, I (Los Angeles: Mazda, 1996), pp. 115–116.

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4. See Nikki R. Keddie, *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).
5. Ida Cowen, *Jews in Remote Corners of the World* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1971), p. 259.
6. Quoted in Rosemarie Tong, *Feminist Thought: A Comprehensive Introduction* (San Francisco: Westview Press, 1989) pp. 81–82.
7. Quoted in S. Landshut, *Jewish Communities in the Muslim Countries of the Middle East* (Westport, CT: Hyperion, 1950), p. 62.
8. Ali Akbar Moshir Salimi, *zanan-e sokhanvar: az yek-hezarsal pish taemrooz ke bezabane parsi sokhan goftan* (Tehran: Moasseseh Motoatie Ali Akkbar Alami, 1957).
9. Taj Al-Saltanah, *Crowning Anguish: Memoirs of a Persian Princess from the Harem to Modernit*y, ed. Abba Amanat (Washington, DC: Mage, 1993).
10. Amnon Netzer, "Yahoudian-e Tehran az ebteda ta enqelab-e mashrootiat" (The Jewish community in Tehran from its beginning until the Constitutional Revolution) in idem (ed.), *Padyavand*, III (Los Angeles: Mazda, 1999), p. 193. Islamic law considers children of a Muslim father to be born Muslims as well.
11. Habib Levy, *Comprehensive History of the Jews of Iran* (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda, 1999), p. 385.
12. *Ibid*.
13. Landshut, *Jewish Communities* (above, note 7), p. 64.
14. Laurence D. Loeb, *Outcast: Jewish Life in Southern Iran* (NY: Gordon & Breach, 1977), p. 214.
15. A story of my grandmother and her different methods of dealing with the evil eye appears in my book, *Wedding Song: Memoirs of an Iranian Jewish Woman* (Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, 2003), pp. 97–104.
16. Loeb, *Outcast* (above, note 14), p. 219.
17. Dorit Rabinyan, *Persian Brides* (English transl. by Yael Lotan; NY: George Braziler, 1998), pp. 32–33.
18. *Ibid*., pp. 86, 124, 151, 165.
19. Loeb, *Outcast* (above, note 14), p. 219.
20. Major collective volumes on Iranian Jews and their literary creativity include Houman Sarshar, Homa Sarshar and Debbie Adhami (eds.), *Terua: The History of Contemporary Iranian Jews*, I–IV (Hebrew and English; Beverly Hills, CA: Center for Iranian Jewish Oral History, 1996–2000); Houman Sarshar (ed.), *Esther's Children: A Portrait of Iranian Jews* (Beverly Hills, CA–Philadelphia: Center for Iranian Jewish Oral History–JPS, 2002); Amnon Netzer (ed.), *Padyavand*, I–III (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda, 1996–1999); and Shaul Shaked (ed.), *Irano-Judaica*, I–VI (Hebrew–English; Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute, 1982–2008).
21. Netzer, *Padyavand*, I (above, note 4), p. 7.

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22. Sarah Soroudi, "Shira-ye Hatani: A Judeo-Persian Wedding Song," in Shaked, *Irano-Judaica* (above, note 21), I, pp. 205–264.
23. Traditionally done before Yom Kippur, this ritual involved swinging a live chicken over and around the members of the family and then making sacrifices to keep away the evil eye
24. Homa and Houman Sarshar, *Terua* (above, note 21), II, pp. 238–251.
25. According to Avraham Cohen, most Jewish communities in Persia had *maktabs* (traditional religious schools) prior to the twentieth century, and thus many of the boys learned at least to read. These were largely replaced by the modern school frameworks in the twentieth century. A few girls did receive some kind of education in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, either in the *maktab* or by being tutored by educated women. In the twentieth century it became increasingly common for girls to be sent to the *maktab* in those communities that did not have modern schools. See Cohen, "Maktab: The Jewish 'Heder' in Persia," *Pe'amim*, 14 (1982), p. 63 (Hebrew).
26. Homa Nateq, *Karnamehe farhangie dar iran* (Paris: Khavaran, 1997), pp. 116–118.
27. *Ibid*., pp. 132–133.
28. *Ibid*., p. 28.
29. Keddie, *Modern Iran* (above, note 4), p. 92.
30. Azizeh Bral, in Homa and Houman Sarshar, *Terua* (above, note 21), II, pp. 263–265.
31. Keddie, *Modern Iran* (above, note 4), p. 286.
32. Farideh Goldin, "Will I Ever Be a Writer?" *Ourselves as Students: Multicultural Voices in the Classroom* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1966), p. 110.
33. Rivanne Sandler, "Literary Development in Iran in the 1960s and the 1970s prior to the 1978 Revolution," *World Literature Today*, 60 (Spring 1992), p. 247.
34. Francois Barkhordar, telephone interview, August 19, 1998.
35. Shirindokht Daqiqian, telephone interview, July 9, 1998.
36. Parvaneh Saraf, "zane irani va yahoudiat" (The Iranian woman and Judaism), in Homa Sarshar and Houman Sarshar, *Terua* (above, note 21), II, p. 28.
37. Ruhi Sabbar, interview, November 12, 1992.
38. Homa Sarshar, telephone interview, August 27, 1998.
39. *Ibid*. A slightly different version appears in her memoir, *dar kooche paskooche haye qorbat* (Van Nys: Ketab 1993) I, pp. 319–320.
40. Sarshar, *dar kooche* (above, note 39), English Preface, p. 358.
41. *Ibid*., p. 356.
42. Homa Sarshar, "From Esther to Esther," in Homa Sarshar and Houman Sarshar, *Terua* (above, note 21), I, pp. 5–28.
43. Aghashlou was nominated for an Oscar in 2004 for her role in *The House of Sand and Fog*.

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44. Mahin Amid, interview, August 19, 1998.
45. Mahid Amin, *Negahi be nehah* (London: Printhood, 1987).
46. Michelle Khoukhab, interview, June 20, 1998.
47. Telephone interview, July 3, 1998.
48. Further information is available on her website.
49. Esther Kanka-Shekalim, *Sharkiya* (Tel Aviv: Kinneret–Zmora-Bitan–Dvir, 2006) pp. 24–25.
50. The title plays on the well-known talmudic saying "nashim da'atan kalah"—"women are simple-minded" (or frivolous).
51. *Me'ah shanim, me'ah yotzrim* (A hundred years, a hundred artists; Tel Aviv: Kedem, 1999) p. 166.
52. William S. Haas, *Iran* (NY: Columbia University Press, 1946), p. 186.
53. Telephone interview, July 9, 1998.
54. Elham Yaqoubian, *Todbade Sarnevesht* (Tehran: Nashre Miad, 1996).
55. Telephone interview, June 6, 1998.
56. Gina Nahai, *Cry of the Peacock* (New York: Crown, 1991); *Moonlight on the Avenue of Faith* (New York: WSP, 2000); *Sunday's Silence* (Orlando: Harcourt Books, 2001); and *Caspian Rain* (San Francisco: MacAdam Cage, 2007).
57. E-mail interview, October 1, 2007.
58. Dorit Rabinyan. *Persian Brides* (Simtat hashekediot beOumrijan; English transl. by Yael Lotan; NY: George Brazillar, 1998).
59. Interview with F.D. Zamanian, a woman from Shiraz, July 10, 1998.
60. Dorit Rabinyan, *Strand of a Thousand Pearls* (Haḥatunot shelanu; English transl. by Yael Lotan; New York: Random House, 2001).
61. Susanne Pari, *The Fortune Catcher* (New York: Time Warner, 1997).
62. Telephone interview, August 6, 1998.
63. E-mail interview, August 7, 2005.
64. Dalia Sofer, *The Septembers of Shiraz* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007).
65. Nana Asfour, "In a Spate of Recent Novels, Iranian-American Women Peer Beneath the Veil to Examine Islamic Culture's Impact and Intimate Legacy," *Bookforum* (April/May 2008), p. 13.
66. Email interview, April 2, 2008.
67. *Ibid*.
68. Telephone interview, June 25, 2008.
69. Nahai, *Moonlight* (above, note 57), p. 359.
70. Michael Hillman. *Women's Autobiographies in Contemporary Iran*, ed. Afsaneh Najmabadi (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), pp. 34–35.
71. Farzaneh Milani, *Veils and Words: The Emerging Voices of Iranian Women Writers* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1992), p. 201.

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72. Roya Hakakian. *The Journey From the Land of No: A Girlhood Caught in Revolutionary Iran* (New York: Crown, 2004).
73. Jill Ker Conway. *Exploring the Art of Autobiography: When Memory Speaks* (New York: Vintage, 1998).
74. E-mail interview, August 3, 2005.

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