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# Overcoming Gender: The Impact of the Persian Language on Iranian Women's Confessional Literature

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## CHAPTER TWO



# Overcoming Gender

## The Impact of the Persian Language on Iranian Women's Confessional Literature

Farideh Dayanim Goldin

The idea that language embodies patriarchal thought processes, severing women writers from the written language and from their own words, was first elaborated by the French feminist theorists Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous. Irigaray argues, for example, that language generally denies women a distinct subjectivity, with the result that the voice of women has largely been excluded from mainstream cultural discourse (Donovan). In this chapter, I juxtapose this theory to the obstacles faced by Iranian women writers of life narratives. Is it possible that Persian could have impeded Iranian women's literary aspirations, especially in the genre of life narratives? Conscious of the limitations of examining Iranian culture through a Western cultural gaze, I do not depend on Western theorists alone. Instead, I analyze the roots of the language as much as possible.

Many feminist critics argue that language is structured according to patriarchal thought processes, resulting in the silencing of women and the locking away of their inner thoughts. In *Beyond God the Father*, Mary Daly blames men for stealing

the language and urges women to reclaim its power (8–11). Irigaray and Cixous consider language to be phallogentric, excluding and repressing women (see Tong 217–33). Cixous writes:

I shall speak about women's writing: about *what it will do*. Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies—for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into text—as into the world and into history—by her own movement. (875)

The hypothesis that language affects thoughts and social behaviour is reflected in numerous feminist novels that attempt to overcome the phallogentric bias of language. In *Woman on the Edge of Time*, Marge Piercy replaces the pronouns *he* and *she* with *per* (124). In *Native Tongue*, Suzette Haden Elgin creates a woman-centred language, Laadan, to convey the female experience (242–63). Similarly, Doris Lessing uses Dari, a dialect of Persian, in *The Marriage Between Zones Three, Four and Five*, a novel that envisions a parallel dimension in which women initiate the creation of a utopian world. Indeed, one might think that Persian would be an ideal feminist language. In contrast to most other Indo-European languages, as well as to Arabic, a Semitic language from which it has borrowed extensively, Persian is grammatically gender-neutral. There is no generic *he* in Persian: the pronoun *u* is gender-neutral, referring to both *he* and *she*. However, the gender-neutral grammar of Persian does not mean that the language is devoid of gender bias.

#### GENDER BIAS IN PERSIAN

The principle of linguistic relativity, more commonly known as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, proposes that “the structure of the language one habitually uses influences the manner in which one thinks and behaves” (Kramsch 11).<sup>1</sup> If we accept this hypothesis, then gendered terminology that encodes derogatory assumptions about women actively reinforces patriarchal attitudes and power structures. On this basis, one might argue that, in the wake of the Muslim conquest of Persian in the mid-seventh century, the absorption into Persian of gender-specific features of Arabic served to encourage a bias against women in Persian culture.

According to Farideh Tehrani, in the years following the conquest, the mulahs (Muslim religious leaders) supported the change of script from Persian to Arabic in hopes that it would facilitate the learning of Arabic and hence the study

of the Quran (20). With this change of script, Arabic words and word-formation processes entered Persian, with the usual consequences: some Persian vocabulary was lost, and new words entered the language via Arabic. Especially in tandem with conversion to Islam, these linguistic changes may have influenced Iranians to alter their thought processes to resemble those of their Arab conquerors, including ideas concerning women.

In “Arabic Influences on Persian Literature,” de Bruijn writes, “Classical Persian literature was born in an environment dominated by Arabic culture” (369) and proposes the term *literary bilingualism* to describe the relationship of Arabic and Persian (384). In other words, it is sometimes possible to express a single idea through two different words, one Persian, the other Arabic, with each word tied to its own linguistic roots and connotations. Writing in 1946, William Haas estimated that “about 50 percent of the Persian language consists of Arabic words” (186). According to John Perry, roughly 25 percent of Persian vocabulary—half of these borrowed words—have only a feminine form (270), a good example being *bakereh*, female virgin. Although the masculine version (*baker*) exists in Arabic, it has not entered the Persian vocabulary. It is also significant that, in their feminine form, many borrowed Arabic words have negative connotations. *Za’ifeh* has been an especially damaging word for Iranian women. In its masculine form, the Arabic word *za’if* means “weak,” as in being weak from an illness. Although the word has been adopted in both forms in Persian, the masculine form does not have a strong negative connotation. In fact, to be used as a negative word, *za’if* needs the help of another adjective: for example, “he is *za’if* and *bi-erاده*” means that he is weak and lacks willpower. However, when the Arabic suffix *-eh* is added, thereby creating the feminine form, the meaning of the word changes drastically. *Za’ifeh* (the weaker one) means a female slave or wife in Arabic. In Persian, the word is often used to demean one’s wife and to emphasize her lower status in society.

While such words arguably imported a negative view of women to Iran, other Arabic words convey religious morality. Numerous borrowed Arabic words carry moral assumptions and are associated with women: for example, *esmat* (purity) and *effat* (chastity) are often used as female names. With the negating prefix *bi-*, as in *bi-esmat* and *bi-effat* (impure and unchaste), these words develop into linguistic tools that work to enforce moral codes. A relatively new loanword that has been added to this collection is *hejab*, meaning a woman’s head covering. Wearing the *hejab* became mandatory when the Islamic government gained power in Iran in 1979. The word has come to connote more than a piece of clothing, however:

it symbolizes women's chastity and moral purity. Again, word *bi-hejab* does not simply represent a woman without a head covering; rather, it signifies a woman who lacks moral values, since she has dared to display her hair. When used in reference to men, the same concept is considered an insult. A traveller to Shiraz during the Iran-Iraq war reported seeing a banner hung by the gates of the city on which were the words *Be shahr-e lachak be-sar-ha khosh amadid* ("Welcome to the city whose people cover their hair"), meaning a city whose inhabitants are all women, that is, a city of cowards (Dayanim 1980). This deliberate insult was used to provoke the Shirazi men into action, since they had not volunteered in great numbers for the war with Iraq.

Considered within the context of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, the above examples might suggest that the insertion of Arabic words into Persian led to a change of linguistic patterns, which, in turn, encouraged patriarchal values. However, other theorists disagree with the theory that Islamic culture was responsible for the introduction of a bias against women into Persian culture. Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi asserts that many scholars have wrongly promoted pre-Islamic Iran as "a lost Utopia," in part by arguing that "the veiling of women and polygamy were non-Iranian customs promulgated by the Arabs after the conquest of Iran." As he goes on to say, "These 'historical facts' were used rhetorically . . . in order to project Iran's 'decadence' on to Arabs and Islam and introject the desirable attributes of Europeans on the pre-Islamic Self" (175). Referring to the last Iranian empire before the rise of Islam, Mary Boyce lends support to this criticism, noting that "[d]espite Zoroastrian teachings about spiritual equality, in Sasanian law women were indeed held to belong to their nearest male relatives—father, husband, brother or son" (130).

Moreover, as Herbert Clark and Eve Clark observe, "when people lack a word for a useful concept, they soon find one" (265). Therefore, it is also possible that Iranians simply adopted foreign words in ways that accorded with existing attitudes. Such beliefs are evident in the word *arusi* (wedding), a derivative of the Arabic word *arus* (bride): the implication here is that marriage is an Iranian woman's *raison d'être*. More telling of the traditional patriarchal attitude toward Iranian women is the word *arusak*. The addition of the diminutive suffix *-ak* at the end of *arus* changes the meaning from "a bride" to "a small bride," an inanimate object, a doll, something to play with. Traditionally, Iranian men preferred their brides as young as nine years old, malleable children who would easily conform to life in their in-laws' homes. In fact, one of the first amendments to the legal system after the Islamic Revolution

reinstated the marriage age for women at nine. This preference for young girls often brought female family members together before weddings for the custom of *band-andazi*: removing the bride's body hair, including the pubic hair, which signifies a woman's maturity. The custom of early marriages was so common that satirists like 'Ali Akbar Saber (1862–1911) criticized “chauvinist men,” whom he held “responsible for the degraded state in which women find themselves,” as Hasan Javadi notes (211). The custom of child marriage is illustrated in a sketch titled “The Young Bride,” in which a groom carries his bride home in his arms as if she were his child, as well as in “The Young Girl and Her Old Husband,” which depicts a child-bride, decorated and bejewelled, shrieking at the sight of her much older husband and attempting to hide in her aunt's arms (see figs. 2.1 and 2.2).



Figure 2.1. “The Young Bride” (from the journal *Mulla Nasr al-Din*, reprinted in Javadi 223)

Additionally, Persian (unborrowed) titles and words addressing women reflect the importance of marital status for women and their dependence on men. For example, the words *zan* (a woman) and *khanom* (lady) also mean “wife.” The equivalent of the title “Miss,” *dushizeh*, also denotes virginity, dictating the moral code of a woman's sexual life before marriage. In other words, the acceptable status of a woman is that of eternal dependence: as a girl, on her father, and as a wife and mother, on her husband and male children. In contrast, the parallel words

for men—*mard* (man), *aqā* (gentleman, Mr.), and *shohar* (husband)—are separate words, indicating men’s independence and sovereignty. This dichotomy in the importance of marriage for women but not for men is also evident in Persian proverbs (*zarb-ol-masal*) that Iranians use often in their everyday speech. *Zan nadari gham nadari*, “No wife no strife,” says one proverb (Haim 250). Yet another suggests the longevity of a man’s sexual life: *Mard-e chel saleh tazeh aval-e chelchel-esheh*, “At the age of forty, a man only has just begun his fling” (652). In contrast, another proverb deplores the unmarried status of a young woman: *Zan keh rasid be bist be hal-esh bayad gerist*, “When a woman reaches the age of twenty, one must cry for her” (249).



Figure 2.2. “The Young Girl and Her Old Husband,” from Saber, *Hop Hop Nama* (reprinted in Javadi 222)

This preoccupation with women’s youth is also evident in the words used to describe old women. At best these words are neutral, as in *pir-e-zan* or *zal*. Other terms for aged females, such as *ajuzeh* (old hag, crone) and *pacheh-var-malideh* (old pest) have negative connotations. An old Persian proverb says: *Pir zan namord ta ruze barani*, “The old woman would not die, and when she did, it was on a rainy day, an inconvenient day” (148). In contrast, aging and old age have positive connotations for men. For example, *pir-e-mard* (an old man) is also *rish sefid* (white-bearded), connoting a leader whose advanced age is synonymous with experience

and wisdom. In fact, the word *rish* (beard) is the root of many words that suggest dignity, credit, experience, and wisdom. *Rish sefid* (white-bearded) can also mean “a wise man, an “elder”; *rish nadashtan* (not to have beard), “to lack dignity”; *rish dar asiab sefeed kardan* (to have one’s beard made white in a flour mill), “to lack experience”; and the list goes on. In comparison, the only word that refers to a woman’s body hair is *gis-borideh*, meaning “the one whose hair is cut off, a shameless woman.”

There are yet other words in Persian that imply a difference in status between men and women. For example, whereas the word *zan* (woman) is, at best, neutral, the word *mard* (man) connotes many positive qualities. To be a *mard* is to be strong, generous, humane, and capable; *na-mard* (not to be a man) is therefore to be inhuman or a coward. Moreover, the word *mard* has been used to compensate for the lack of a gender-specific pronoun. Ferdowsi, the famous Iranian epic poet of the tenth century, employs the term in a generic sense in a famous poem often used by Iranians as a proverb:

*Zeniru bovad mard ra rasti      ze sosti dorugh ayad o kasti*  
Strength brings man truthfulness, while falsehood creates weakness.  
(Haim 250)

The choice of the word *mard* betrays patriarchal habits of thought: women are denied the attributes of strength and truthfulness. It seems ironic that Ferdowsi would use a masculine word in this way, given that in composing his great Persian national epic, *Shahnameh*, he strove to cleanse the language of Arabic words.

Borrowings from Arabic also reflect the expectation that women belong within domestic (rather than public) space and that they should be silent and submissive. For example, a woman who is *khyaban-gard* (who roams the streets) or *harjaii* (who has known many places) is a prostitute. Women are not to speak too much: a noisy and chaotic room is compared to *hamam-e zananeh*, a communal bath for women, a place where women traditionally socialized and gossiped. A *zan-e zaban deraz*, a woman with a long tongue, is a woman who cannot stop talking and is therefore to be avoided. When a woman answers back, rather than remaining quiet and docile, she is a *patiareh*, a shrew, an argumentative woman. A woman who dares to observe, who does not look down, is a *chashm darideh*, a woman with “torn eyes,” the result of her habit of opening them too often or too wide. In addition, women need to be kept under control. A Persian proverb says, *Zan-e saliteh sag-e b-qalladeh*

ast, “A woman who is a bitch is a dog uncontrolled by a collar,” while another proverb reminds men, *Zan-e saliteh shohar-e mard ast*, “A woman who is a bitch rules her husband—she is the husband” (Haim 249). In *Shahnameh*, Ferdowsi enumerates the necessary qualifications for the ideal woman:

Three qualities make a woman  
Fit for the throne of superiority

The first is her *sharm* and her wealth  
With which to adorn her husband’s house

The second is her procreation of auspicious sons  
Who will increase her husband’s delight

The third is her face and her figure  
Coupled with her covered hair. (535; qtd. in Milani, *Veils and Words* 52)

On the basis of the evidence that has come down to us, it is not possible to draw definitive conclusions about the origin of patriarchal attitudes in Persian culture. Although it may be that contact with Arabic enabled and encouraged the expression of such attitudes, it is also quite likely that these attitudes were present in the culture, at least to some degree, prior to the Arab conquest. One way or another, though, despite its gender-neutral grammar, Persian is today replete with words, phrases, and proverbial sayings that reflect and reinforce patriarchal values. Whether borrowed or constructed as compound words and phrases, these features of Persian serve either to discriminate against women or simply to exclude them. As part of the foundation of a culture and its thought processes, patriarchal language has the power to kill women’s creative thoughts and words.

#### FORBIDDEN FEELINGS: IRANIAN WOMEN AND POETRY

Michel Foucault writes that “in every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organised and redistributed according to a certain number of procedures” (216)—rules that serve the purposes of exclusion. As he explains, “We know perfectly well that we are not free to say just anything, that we cannot simply speak of anything, when we like or where we like; not just anyone, finally, may

speak of just anything” (216). Language, in other words, gives privileged or exclusive rights to selected members of the society to speak and to exercise control over discourse. Iranian women autobiographers have had a dual obstacle to overcome: the existence, in Persian, of language that demeans women and inherited cultural taboos against sharing personal stories.

Given that Arabic is linguistically unrelated to Persian, it is often very difficult for Iranians to pronounce Arabic words. As a result, formal Persian, which is used in literature and in writing generally, contains a great many more Arabic words than does the spoken language. Moreover, as David Crystal points out, “One of the most important functions of language variations is to enable individuals to identify with a social group or to separate themselves from it” (42). As Iranian writers came under pressure to include Arabic words as a mark of literary sophistication and to accept Islamic values as standard codes of morality, not only did literary Persian diverge from the spoken language, but men came to rule the realm of literature, while women remained silent behind culturally imposed walls.

In addition, under the autocratic dynasties that ruled many generations of Iranians, wrong words could destroy lives. Even in more prosperous times—during the reign of Mohammed Reza Shah Pahlavi (1941–79), for example—the members of the secret service, SAVAK, penetrated every corner of Iranian lives, forcing parents to teach their children from a very young age not to trust even their closest friends. Words were dangerous tools. Iranians, therefore, learned to be discreet. “[S]erious writers,” Rivanne Sandler notes, “made use of allegory and symbolism and allusion, even vague writing that could be taken in a hundred different ways, to say what they had to say.” She adds, “Their readers, after all, had had a long apprenticeship in deciphering evasive and symbolic language” (249). The language became so indirect that the speaker could deny its content as needed. Circuitous expression became a part of the culture to the point where even parents and children had to speak indirectly and tentatively. Consequently, candidness, the core of autobiographical writing, came to be considered unacceptable and rude, and even became dangerous.

In her autobiography *Daughter of Persia*, Sattareh Farman Farmaian writes of her meeting with a minister of education concerning the expansion of a social services school of which she was a founder. Political and social stagnation in Iran forbade them to talk directly of business matters. Instead, the government official spoke through “allegories and examples from history” (274). Articulate Iranians adopted this style of ambiguity in order to guard the private realm. In fact, in

contrast to English, a well-spoken Iranian has traditionally been not one who communicates directly, using the fewest words possible, but rather one who can hide the message in a web of poetry (*zarb-ol masal*), stories, and allegories. It is up to the listener to decipher and disambiguate the message from the long, indirect speech.

This pressure to use indirect language separated women further from involvement in society. Unable to voice discontent, they suppressed their thoughts. Farman Farmaian, for example, remembers her mother demanding that good girls control their tongues. “For this reason,” she writes, “I learned not to reveal my heart in my speech.” She goes on to say: “By the time I was ten [. . .] I had become accustomed to shutting my feelings” (19). Recollecting her childhood, Farman Farmaian expresses the same sentiment that so many Western feminists have articulated: there were no acceptable words in her native tongue to express her sense of frustration and her thoughts, even to her own mother. Similarly, in her novel *Zendegi bayad kard (One Must Live)*, Mansoureh Etehad quotes a grandmother’s words of advice to her crying teenaged granddaughter, Zari: “A respected woman would never allow her feelings to surface!” (24). At the same time, the grandmother is proud of Zari’s *khuy-e aram va sar be zir*, her timidity and shyness, which contrasts with her outspoken mother’s unacceptable air of independence and openness (20). The indirectness and formality of Persian suppressed Iranians, in general, and women, in particular, from self-expression in both life and literature.

However, the same system of ambiguous and indirect communication may have ultimately helped Iranian women. They disguised their literary creativity as a simple means of communication. Kate Millet’s book *Going to Iran* contains a picture of an Iranian woman demonstrator at the beginning of Khomeini’s reign holding a placard that reads (210):

*Dar tolu-e azadi*  
*Jaye to zan khali*

“In the sunrise of freedom,” the rhymed couplet declares, “a woman’s place is forgotten.” These simple lines, undoubtedly created at the last minute for the freedom march, illustrate how Iranians often turn to poetry to communicate a strong message that, if stated directly, would be less effective, and possibly even offensive, to Iranian ears. Poetry thus allowed for the expression of self in a way that would have been impossible for women in direct, simple words.

One of the earliest female poets in Iran was Aqabaji, the wife of the Iranian king Fatali-shah Qajar. In Moshir-Salimi's *Zanan-e sokhanvar*, she is portrayed as a beautiful woman who had many suitors (1: 349–53). She was married off to the king, who had a harem of 150 wives. On the wedding night, the king visited her in the bridal chamber, the *hejleh*, but left after a few minutes without consummating the marriage, for unknown reasons. Terribly hurt, Aqabaji decided to leave for her father's house. This made the king angry: he ordered her not to leave the *andarun*, the inner quarters. Being afraid to speak directly to her husband, Aqabaji instead composed a poem for him:

*Yaram shab amad, shab mand o shab ham raft*  
*Hich namidanam omram cheguneh amad o cheguneh raft*

My beloved came to me at night, but also left at night  
I don't know what became of my life, how I found and how I lost it. (1: 350)

The poem softened the king's heart. She was allowed to go back to her family, and she remained a virgin the rest of her life.

Another early female poet, Tuni, also complained to her husband through her poetry. She was born in Shiraz but her birth and death dates are unknown. Her story, as it appears in Moshir-Salimi's *Zanan-e sokhanvar* (2: 148), portrays a woman of extraordinary humour and command of words. When she discovered her husband's infidelity and homosexual relationship with a lover, she wrote a poem about her deep emotional wounds and left it on her husband's pillow. He was embarrassed and returned to her, realizing that his wife's chastity had not allowed her to talk of such subjects directly. In this way, the restriction on women's freedom of expression led to the emergence of Iranian women poets.

Classical Persian poetry reflected this social appreciation for indirectness. The love poetry often spoke to an ideal figure, genderless and distant. Hillmann points out that in classical poetry, "poetic speakers are male, of course. But, for the most part, so are the beloveds addressed and described" (*Iranian Culture* 146). About the construction of Iranian "lyric poetry," or *ghazal*, Heshmat Moayyad writes:

The tacit acceptance of amorous feelings toward male companions, combined with the inferior social status and seclusion of women in Islamic Iran, discouraged men from expressing positive feelings for women, naming their names,

publicly associating with them, or treating them as equals. Under such circumstances, how could a poet talk about his love for a woman . . . ? (137)

In essence, women were barred not only from writing poetry but also from becoming poetic subjects. However, this style of love poetry with its gender confusion eventually enabled the development of women's poetry.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, women, like Parvin E'tesami, had composed many poems covering subjects such as motherly love, friendship, and the traits of a chaste wife. Women composed poetry to show the importance of education for girls and young women—quite a revolutionary message. Women composed poetry to reveal their suffering and to plead for consideration from men. They avoided, however, writing about their personal feelings and concentrated instead on didactic and moral issues. In a place where the pen was often viewed as a weapon of corruption, it is amazing that Iranian women managed to write at all. The writings of these courageous women resulted in a literary tradition that paved the way for the most talented poets of twentieth-century Iran.

It was not until the middle of the twentieth century, however, that the classical mould of women's poetry was broken. Forugh Farrokhzad crossed the boundaries of both the language and the culture, writing in a simple, colloquial style, rather than in the classical language of poetry, and giving voice to her outrage against the restrictions imposed on women in Iranian society. In her autobiographical poetry, she wrote openly about sexual desire and physical love, or what Farzaneh Milani calls "feminine lust" (145), transforming women into active participants in erotic encounters. In the opening stanza of "Mashuq-e man" ("My Beloved"), for example, the man's body is described through the eyes of the woman, rather than the other way around:

My lover  
with naked, shameless body  
on his strong legs  
stood like death. (Ranjbaran 50)

The inversion of culturally sanctioned gender roles is evident even in the title of this famous poem, "Mashuq-e man." In classical Persian poetry, male poets used *mashuqeh*, the feminine form of the Arabic loanword *mashuq*, to refer to the female beloved. As the "beloved," the *mashuqeh*, women were depicted as the passive objects of the poet's sexual desires. Women were absent as active lovers, their desires

unknown, unthinkable. In “My Beloved,” Farrokhzad brazenly claims possession of her male partner, her *mashuq*, making him the object of her own sexual passion.

Elsewhere, like Ferdowsi, Farrokhzad used the words *zan* (woman) and *maid* (man) to mark the gender in her poetry. In “Nagshe penhan” (“The Hidden Plan”), for example, she again suggests that the traditionally submissive female—the “crazy” victim of male desire—is herself alive with sexuality:

<i>ah, ey mardī keh labha-ye mara</i>	Oh, you man who my lips
<i>az sharar-e buseha suzandeh-I</i>	You have set on fire with your kisses
<i>gofteand an zan zani divaneh ast</i>	They say that that woman is crazy
<i>kaz labanash buseh asan midahad</i>	Because kisses are easily taken.
<i>ari, ama buseh az labhaye to</i>	Yes, but kisses from your lips,
<i>bar labane morde-am jan midahad</i>	Give life to my lifeless lips.

(Farrokhzad 115–16)

Appalled by Farrokhzad’s daring, open poetry that exhibited her unbridled sexuality, Qaem Maqami, like many other critics, criticized Farrokhzad for “shamelessly” displaying her sexuality (149), suggesting that she had wasted her talent on “lewd” poetry when she could have tried to improve society as E’tesami had (150). But Farrokhzad continued her writing despite such criticism. In “The Sin,” Farrokhzad openly admits to committing adultery:

<i>gonah kardam gonahi por ze lezat</i>	I sinned a sin full of pleasure,
<i>kenare peykari larzan o madhush</i>	Next to a shaking, stupefied form.
<i>khodavanda che midanam che kardam</i>	O God, who knows what I did
<i>dar an khalvatqah-e tarik o khamush</i>	in that dark and quiet seclusion.

(qtd. in Hillmann, A Lonely Woman, 77)

Rosemarie Tong suggests that one strategy for combatting patriarchy, proposed by Luce Irigaray, is “to mime the mimes men have imposed on women. If women exist only in men’s eyes, in images, women should take those images and reflect them back to men in magnified proportions” (228). In a similar fashion, Farrokhzad reversed the image of woman in Persian poetry, daring to manifest herself as a complete human being with a full range of desires. Farrokhzad was fortunate to live during the reign of Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, who granted an unprecedented

degree of freedom to Iranian women. Although she was criticized, she was not prosecuted, exiled, or forbidden to publish her poetry. She was allowed to have an impact and a voice. In her brief life—she died in a car accident in February 1967, at the age of thirty-two—she freed poetry to move in new directions, paving the way for autobiographical writing that reveals a woman's life and inner thoughts.

Commenting on Persian literature in 1975, the Iranian scholar Sa'id Nafisi wrote that “the artist has always preferred imagination to observation” (15–16), thus excluding the art of memoir, of self-revelation and observation of one's personal life, from the artistic realm. Similarly, a decade after the Revolution of 1979, other scholars of Iranian women writers lamented the rarity of autobiographies and even biographies by Iranians, and fewer still by Iranian women. In a 1990 essay, for example, Farzaneh Milani wrote, “Granted the part played by humility, self-censorship, discretion, and unfavorable living conditions, the fact remains that whereas male writers have produced a handful of life narratives, no woman literary figure has ever published an autobiography” (“Veiled Voices” 10). Two years later, she reaffirmed that statement: “Avoiding voluntary self-revelation and self-referentiality, most Iranian writers have turned their backs on autobiography” (*Veils and Words* 201). That same year, William Hanaway went even further to suggest that maybe autobiography was a culture-bound genre, “too Western-centered and culture-bound for Iranians to make use of it” (62) and that, as a literary genre, life narrative simply did not interest Iranians. These critics pointed to the continuing political oppression of freedom of speech and literary expression, the indirect style of writing in Persian, and the spiritual veiling of women as the factors responsible for this absence of literary memoirs.<sup>2</sup>

#### IRANIAN WOMEN'S LIFE NARRATIVES

One might expect that the reversal of women's legal rights and independence that accompanied the Revolution of 1979 would indeed work to silence women's literary voices. However, in the decades following the Revolution, women in Iran have published a large number of short stories and novels. Once a genre rarely attempted by women, prose literature now attracts numerous female writers. More significantly, although most female Iranian writers historically resorted to evasion and ambiguity, in the decades following the Revolution women have dared to write confessional narratives—perhaps the most self-revealing and direct form of literature. Since 1990, the year that the articles by Milani and Hanaway

appeared, the situation has thus changed quite dramatically, calling into question the argument that Iranian culture does not lend itself to life narratives.

Iranians often use the Persian word *khaterat* somewhat casually to refer to any autobiographical narrative. *Khaterat* can include Forugh Farrokhzad's books of poetry, or Homa Sarshar's *In the Back Alleys of Exile* (1993), a two-volume collection of essays and poetry, or Zohreh Sullivan's *Exiled Memories: Stories of Iranian Diaspora* (2001), a documentation of her interviews or "story gathering" (xiii)—all very valuable books, although not literary life narratives. Also categorized as *khaterat* are memoirs written mostly by members of the Qajar and Pahlavi royal families: for example, Ashraf Pahlavi's *Faces in a Mirror: Memoirs from Exile* (1980) and Farah Pahlavi's *An Enduring Love: My Life with the Shah* (2004), as well as Soraya Esfandiari's *Le palais des solitudes* (1991) and Satareh Farman Farmaian's *Daughter of Persia* (1992). These memoirs—some produced with the help of another author—quite obviously seek to present a particular version of history.<sup>3</sup> Supposedly written to correct misunderstandings, they interpret events in a way that flatters the author. In addition, *Khaterat-e Tajol Moluk* (*The Memoirs of Tajol Moluk*), allegedly the autobiography of Reza Shah Pahlavi's wife, and Farideh Diba's *My Daughter, Farah*, are actually forgeries, published to achieve the political aim of discrediting the Pahlavis. On her website, Farah Pahlavi—the wife of Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, the last shah of Iran—warns readers that *The Memories of Mrs. Farideh Diba*, a memoir supposedly written by her mother, is a "fabrication by malicious people" (Pahlavi). All the same, in a convoluted way, these works affirm that memoirs by Iranian women find an audience. In addition, some sixteen books have appeared that are actually literary memoirs, eight of which were published between 2003 and 2005. This surge of self-revelation is impressive. In the following pages, I examine the circumstances that enabled these women to write in a genre that has traditionally been the most forbidding in Iranian literature.

In the 1920s, a Qajar princess, Taj al-Saltana, wrote an account of her life, *Khaterat-e Taj al-Santana*. The volume was not published during her lifetime, as Golbarg Bashi notes ("Boom' in Prose" 8), and quite possibly the writer may never intended it for publication. Nonetheless, her memoir—subsequently translated into English under the title *Crowning Anguish*—stands not only as the first effort of an Iranian woman to record her autobiography but as one of the few originally written in Persian. For the most part, however, virtually all literary memoirs by Iranian women have been written not in Persian but in languages of exile. Although Marjane Satrapi, famous for using the medium of comics for her two

*Persepolis* volumes, and the lesser known Ladane Azernour and Nahal Tajadod write in French, the preferred literary language of these memoirists is English.

Why would any writer choose a language other than her own to tell the story of her people, her own story? There are, of course, commercial considerations: these memoirs reach wider audiences if written in English. Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, for example, a bestseller in the United States, could also have inspired other Iranian women to record and publish their life narratives in languages other than Persian. Moreover, even if it is not the spoken language, English is understood in many areas of the world, especially since it has become the language of computer technology and international business. Anita Desai, an Indian author, said that to her, English is "the key to a world literature" (Desai, Phillips, and Stavans 80). But perhaps the unprecedented number of life narratives created by Iranian women in exile also reflects their comfort with English and French as languages that are more suitable for carrying their voices, languages not delimited by Iranian cultural boundaries. At the same time, through writing memoirs, the new generation of hybrid Iranians, who often do not read Persian but are fluent in English, are able to connect with their parents' experiences of Iran.

The Iranian Revolution of 1979 provided the foundation for almost all these memoirs, propelled as they were by the shock of displacement, the longing for a lost homeland, and the suffering of those left behind. Moreover, the nostalgia among Iranians in exile and the curiosity of Westerners about Iran reinforce this momentum. Away from their homeland and in the languages of their exile, Iranian women memoirists write of a world lost to them. My memoir *Wedding Song* was originally a collection of stories written for my daughters, who wanted to know about their mother's life in a country they have never visited. The cover page to Shusha Guppy's *The Blindfold Horse* describes the book as an "evocation of a way of life that has been destroyed forever." In *Snake's Marble*, Mehry Reid expresses the hope that her "memoirs will help keep those [Iranian] traditions alive in the minds and hearts of Persians wherever they might be" (cover page). Her first chapter, in fact, is named "Window to the Past." Reid writes, "For many years, I thought about writing the memoirs of my childhood, but when my daughter . . . told me that she was carrying my first grandchild, this was the catalyst that got me started. I wanted to leave for him and his descendants a family history of sorts and a feeling for the customs, traditions, and way of life of the country where half of his forebears were born" (ix). In their zeal to recapture the Iran they knew for their children, many Iranian women memoirists tend to record parts of their past, or rather Iran's

past, as if for an encyclopedia, reaching back to the Iran that is forbidden to many, trying to paint it with words. The popularity of women's memoirs in the West has enabled these Iranian women writers, who are often well read in Western literature, to treasure seemingly mundane details of life. The custom of cleaning sour grapes for Passover or visiting women's *hamam* in *Wedding Song*, the *sizdeh-bedar* picnic in Gelareh Asayesh's *Saffron Sky*, and "Sleeping on the rooftops under the desert sky," the recipe for Nowruz food of *sabzi-polo* and dried fish in Rouhi Shafii's *Scent of Saffron* are common scenes in Iranian women's memoirs. These women show the importance not just of historical events but also of everyday life, home details, and women's work. Women's memoirs celebrate women's worlds (Goldin, "Iranian Women" 32).

Throughout most of Iranian literary history, modesty and secrecy prevented Iranian women from recording their life narratives. Writing about self can also be frightening; it has consequences. Life narratives cannot possibly explain the author's life without involving other family members and friends. Even before I decided to write a book about my life, I received messages from family members threatening lawsuits if I spoke about family matters in my lectures. When Firoozeh Dumas told her father that she was writing a memoir, he responded, "Great! Just don't mention our name" (63). We have imported to the West the taboo against speaking and writing candidly from our Iranian past. However, although Iranian women traditionally shied away from writing, and especially from writing memoirs, telling of one's own or ancestral lives has always been a part of Iranian women's oral tradition. I remember vividly the winter nights when my mother, grandmother, and aunts gathered around a space heater, sharing life stories of women's past and present.

This tradition of storytelling has inspired many contemporary Iranian-American women fiction writers. For example, Gina Nahai started writing her first novel, *Cry of the Peacock*, after a summer she spent at home, often in the kitchen with her mother, grandmother, and aunt listening to them retell old stories of life in Iran, of events in the lives of family members and neighbours (Nahai). However, recording these stories in the form of nonfiction required time away from Iranian cultural sensibilities. Nahid Rachlin, an Iranian-American fiction writer, contemplated fictionalizing her life story (Rachlin). Undoubtedly, the publications of life narratives by other Iranian women encouraged Rachlin to write her own memoir, *Persian Girls*. As with many other women writers, she had to overcome the fear of baring her soul, of sharing her private life. In *When Memory Speaks*, Jill Ker Conway asserts, "For the

woman autobiographer the major question becomes how to see one's life whole when one has been taught to see it as expressed through family and bonds with others" (4). The amazing explosion of memoir writing by Iranian women in recent years could be a consequence of the fact that, in Jill Ker Conway's terminology, we are finally willing to take "agency" for our life stories (14). We realize that our stories do matter, that these *khaterat*, these memories, are worth the risk.

Another factor has been the West's curiosity about a country that was labelled an "axis of evil" by the Bush administration. In response to the West's increasing curiosity about Iran, it has become possible to write a life narrative that is not merely confessional but conveys a political message. Such autobiographies allow rare glimpses of life through a lens largely uncoloured by the stereotypes promoted in Western media. Describing the writing of Firoozeh Dumas, the author of *Funny in Farsi*, Congcong Zheng writes:

In the face of cultural differences, we have a choice. We can either choose to be cosmopolitan; accepting and welcoming the differences, or choose resistance, fear, and isolation from others. Ms. Dumas chooses the former, showing readers that our similarities far outweigh our differences. Her life experiences reflect that our similarities are what bind us together and that our differences can make us smile and sometimes laugh out loud. Diversity makes this world beautiful, amazing, and exciting, not scary. (12)

In a similar vein, in a review of Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*, Jumana Farouky comments, "From the start, Satrapi makes it clear that her mission is to dispel the Western notion of Iran as a land of fundamentalists and terrorists." Indeed, Satrapi takes pride in her Iranian heritage, imploring "all Iranians who say they love Iran to show it. I ask that those Iranians who are now hyphenated to always remember their heritage because everything we are today comes from our culture" (Ahkami and Ahkami 57). Speaking about *Persepolis* in an interview with the *Los Angeles Times*, Satrapi said, "I wrote this book to give the image of Iran that I knew." She added, "Anytime I was outside my country and saw pictures of Iran, it was pictures of women in chadors and guys with guns" (Saidi). In the book, Satrapi portrays her parents as Westernized intellectuals: her mother wears pants, not a chador, and her father shaves his beard despite the Islamic rules enforced in Iran.

To alleviate the West's fear of the Islamic Republic of Iran, many writers look for metaphorical images to reveal the Western side of Iran, showing the familiar, friendlier aspects of the country and recognizing that Iranians are often victims

themselves. In *The Dance of the Rose and the Nightingale*, Nesta Ramazani uses “metaphors of movement,” images of ballet, to fuse Iranian and Western traditions. Marjane Satrapi’s comic-strip memoir displays many shared cultural emblems: a denim jacket with a Michael Jackson button, Nikes, and Western music—the BeeGees, Pink Floyd, and Stevie Wonder. Firoozeh Dumas, in *Funny in Farsi*, mingles her parents’ Iranian ways, like their arranged marriage when her mom was seventeen, with their learned and practiced American lifestyle: for example, Firoozeh’s adventures in babysitting or her father’s affinity for forbidden ham. Azar Nafisi also brings her readers closer to Iranian life through her books. The message is, “We are more like you than you think. We are the same people, also the victims of Islamic fundamentalism and theocracy.”

But can the language of the West, with its preconceived notions of Iranian culture and women—a language based on a Western patriarchal construct that views the East, including Iran, through distorted lenses—be used as the medium to define and defend Iranian culture and thoughts? About women’s autobiographies, Jill Ker Conway writes: “If the autobiographer gazes at himself in the mirror of culture, just as the portrait painter must when working on his self-portrait, how should a woman use a mirror derived from the male experience?” (4). For Iranian women autobiographers, this question is doubly treacherous. How can they possibly write of their Iranian experiences through the prism of Western culture? At the same time, contemporary Iranian women memoirists have earned international recognition and wide readership because they write in a language that is widely read, a language that is probably more comfortable for them. Most Iranian women memoirists received a Western-style education. Azar Nafisi spent her high school years in England and received her higher education from Oklahoma University; Marjane Satrapi left for Vienna at age fourteen and finished her education in France; Gelareh Asayesh emigrated to the United States at age fifteen, Firoozeh Dumas at age seven; and Nesta Ramazani was sent to a boarding school in England as a child and later went to an English-speaking Presbyterian school in Tehran. Three decades after the Revolution, and living in exile, these women are at ease with their adopted languages and cultures. Their children have been raised to speak English or French with little or no Iranian accent. In their writings, female Iranian memoirists embrace the languages of their adopted countries, languages that do not constrain them.

But can these memoirs really be considered Iranian? Can a writer be Iranian if she does not write—or even worse, cannot write—in Persian? At a conference

in 2004, the poet Simin Behbahani told her Iranian audience that they were not exactly Iranians any longer; that they had created a unique, hybrid culture of their own.<sup>4</sup> The question remains, however: have these hybrid writers turned their backs on their culture by forsaking their language? I asked Azar Nafisi if she had ever considered writing her memoir in Persian. She replied:

I wanted to write this story when I lived in Iran, but I could not. There were many reasons why this book could not be written in Iran, not all of it political. There were too many restraints, too many rules, imposed by the government and many of the readers. I don't know if I would have written the same story, in the same style; even the language you write in can decide the way your book is shaped, but I know I had the same urges when I was in Iran.

In the same interview, I asked her if she would like her memoirs to be translated into Persian. She replied that she did, “but I want to have control over the translation. It is translatable as far as any book is. It is so difficult to capture the nuances, the lights and shades of a book in another language.” Similarly, when asked about translating her book into Persian, Satrapi replied, “I will translate it myself” (Ahkami and Ahkami 55). However, that has yet to become reality. Of all these memoirs, only *Funny in Farsi* has been translated into Persian (albeit with slight censorship), perhaps because of its optimistic, positive view of Iranians. It is doubtful that most other memoirs, including and especially Nafisi's, would pass the strict cultural, political, and linguistic barriers to translation and publication in Iran. For now, memoirs by Iranian-American women writers survive and thrive in exile only. And so do their authors, who are making sure that their voices are heard and are thereby creating a literary canon of their own.

#### SILENCING IRANIAN WOMEN'S VOICES IN ENGLISH: AZAR NAFISI AND HER CRITICS

The attention given to memoirs written by women of Iranian heritage increased considerably with Azar Nafisi's bestseller, *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. Highly acclaimed by American critics, her voice is probably the loudest among all Iranian-American women memoirists. Her book, written in the language of exile, presents Western literature (mostly authored by “dead white men”) as a contrast to the Iranian mentality in post-revolutionary Iran, especially in describing women's lives. Iranian critics did not receive the book as enthusiastically as did American reviewers. Fatemeh

Keshavarz gained fame by including the name of Nafisi's bestselling book in the title of her own memoir, *Jasmine and Stars: Reading More Than Lolita in Tehran*. Keshavarz sharply criticizes Nafisi's adoration of Western books while neglecting Persian literature. After summarizing much of Shahrnush Parsipur's *Women Without Men*, Keshavarz states that *Reading Lolita in Tehran* "does not mention Parsipur even in passing" (106). She also disapproves of Nafisi's presumed negative portrayal of Iranian men: "*Reading Lolita in Tehran* . . . presents fathers, brothers, and uncles primarily as a menacing group of people" (61–62). Keshavarz claims to bring the reader "an in-depth critical understanding of this eyewitness literature, which I dub the New Orientalist narrative" (2). She further chastises Nafisi: "I am interested in the making and impact of the perspective that RLT [*Reading Lolita in Tehran*], and works of its kind, represent. As a teacher and scholar of literature, I feel we should take very seriously the distorting and *silencing power* that such texts exercise on our culture and society" (7; my emphasis). Although Nafisi has largely remained silent about Keshavarz's criticism, she seems to have answered back in her subsequent memoir, *Things I've Been Silent About*, in which she demonstrates her knowledge and enjoyment of Persian literature. Additionally, presumably to refute Keshavarz's claim about her negative view of Iranian men, she shows unconditional love and support for her father despite his numerous infidelities in his marriage to Nafisi's mother.

However, Keshavarz is not the only critic who calls Nafisi a "New Orientalist" (4). In his scathing criticism of Nafisi's book, Hamid Dabashi blasts the author for advancing the cause of the United States, "the virtual empire," which lacks "long-term memory" of its colonizing actions around the world:

A particularly powerful case of such selective memories is now fully evident in an increasing body of *mémoire* by people from an Islamic background that has over the last half a decade, ever since the commencement of its "War on Terrorism," flooded the US market. This body of literature, perhaps best represented by Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2003), ordinarily points to legitimate concerns about the plight of Muslim women in the Islamic world and yet put[s] that predicament squarely at the service of the US ideological psy-op, militarily stipulated in the US global warmongering. (2)

Dabashi adds that "*Reading Lolita in Tehran* promotes the cause of 'Western Classics' at a time when decades of struggle by postcolonial, black and Third World feminists, scholars and activists has finally succeeded to introduce a modicum of

attention to world literatures” (3). As legitimate as Dabashi’s arguments might be, they also question Nafisi’s right to write in her area of expertise, the literature of the West—yes, the literature of “dead white men.” Even as a feminist, especially as a feminist, one cannot deny Nafisi the right to her voice, the right to speak about her Iranian students’ enthusiasm to glean from her knowledge. She was, after all, a teacher of Western literature in Tehran. That was what she taught then; that is what she teaches now.

No memoir can include the entirety of a person’s life and thoughts. To make sense, to be effective, a life narrative has to focus on a few elements of the author’s life. Thus, Nafisi’s first book explains her teaching of Western literature in Tehran, and her second focuses on her family life as a child and a young woman. In a chapter titled “Policing Truth,” feminist theorist Leigh Gilmore writes: “When a writer is seen in relation to the dominant discourses of power s/he was simultaneously inscribing and resisting, the ‘innocence’ of autobiography as a naïve attempt to tell a universal truth is radically particularized by a specific culture’s notion of what truth is, who may tell it, and who is authorized to judge it” (107). Dabashi claims that Nafisi betrays the efforts of “feminists,” “scholars,” and “activists” in order to promote “Orientalist” viewpoints; she is an agent of the West. However, one might also consider the fact that the efforts referred to by Dabashi do not intend to obliterate those literatures but rather to expand them and to make room for analysis of all literatures. That defines, after all, freedom of speech, even when we disagree. Edward Said describes Orientalism as a “style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between ‘the Orient’ and (most of the time) ‘the occident’” (2). He further defines Orientalism as “a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (3). This is the argument Dabashi uses against Nafisi. A similar article by Mitra Rastegar, “Reading Nafisi in the West,” also criticizes Nafisi’s portrayal of women in Iran. Rastegar believes that Nafisi views “the ‘West’ as modern, rational, and dynamic and opposed to an ‘East’ that is static” (108). Similarly, inspired by Keshavarz, Laetitia Nanquette criticizes the autobiographical voices of two French-Iranian writers, Ladane Azernour and Chahdortt Djavann. Calling their books “new orientalist narratives,” she writes,

The end of the 1990s marks a change in Iranian cultural tradition, represented in the mass publication of memoirs by writers and intellectuals, a genre that was previously restricted to political figures. One can link this shift to the decline of the Iranian tradition of collectivism and the new direction toward individualism. It happened as a result of contact with the West, especially

among Iranians living abroad. The “nobodies” of the Iranian diaspora, a term used by Lorraine Adams, have thus awakened, mainly in North America, to publish their lives. (269)

She concludes, “I hope that this article raises an awareness of French new orientalist narratives’ flaws and dangers, as an attempt to *stop* them from flourishing in the French publishing market as they have flourished in the American one” (279; my emphasis). Although Rastegar, Dabashi, Keshavarz, and Nanquette make valid points, I wonder whether in exile, we have come to be overly protective of our *vatan*, the country we have left behind. In our Western enclaves that are second homes for now-hyphenated Iranian-Americans, we struggle with a “newly created culture outside Iran,” in the words of Simin Behbahani. Should we feel guilty for having abandoned those still in Iran? Does such “guilt” forbid the voice of discontent against anything Iranian? If so, women’s voices are silenced yet again.

#### IRANIAN WOMEN MEMOIRISTS: WILL THEY EVER WRITE IN PERSIAN?

Commenting on Persian literature in 1975, the Iranian scholar Sa’id Nafisi wrote that “the artist has always preferred imagination to observation” (15–16), thereby effectively excluding the art of memoir, of self-revelation and observation of one’s personal life, from the Persian artistic realm. In an interview in 2008 for *Pars Arts: Iranian Diaspora Life/Culture/Identity*, Sepideh Saremi asked Shahrnush Parsipur for her thoughts on the English-language memoirs written by Iranian woman in recent years and on what appears to be a gradual shift toward fiction. Parsipur responded,

Though I read many female authors, it’s mostly Persian work. I am aware that many women write memoirs, and I think this is because writing fiction is very scary. Writing fiction is like being a god. Getting to this point is a little difficult. Women are tiptoeing to this creativity by putting down their memories first. They write their memoirs, and when the fears go away, they can write stories.

Perhaps for her own reasons, Parsipur does not comment on the dearth of memoirs written in Persian by Iranian women. Her own recollection of her lengthy imprisonment, in *Khaterat-e زندان (Prison Memoirs)*, is banned in Iran. “Living in Los Angeles today, I think back,” she wrote in her memoir, recalling that, in Iran, “the laws were such that they turned a person into stone—silent and immobile” (*Khaterat-e زندان* 5). Parsipur’s memoir has not been translated into English, and

Parsipur does not list her life narrative among her publications on her website. In another interview, she said that many countries are hesitant to translate and publish her books for fear of retaliation by the Islamic government (Bashi, “Simply a Stunner”).

This may not apply to the United States, but it is true that, even during the height of popularity of memoirs written by Iranian women, her *Khaterat-e زندان* remains virtually unknown. Her own recollection of her lengthy imprisonment, in *Khaterat-e زندان (Prison Memoirs)*, is banned in Iran. “Living in Los Angeles today, I think back,” she wrote in her memoir; “the laws were such [in Iran] that they turned a person into stone—silent and immobile” (*Khaterat-e زندان* 5). Parsipur’s memoir has not been translated into English. In fact, Parsipur does not list her life narrative among her publications on her website. In an interview, she said that many countries are hesitant to translate and publish her books for fear of retaliation by the Islamic government (Bashi, “Simply a Stunner”). This obviously does not apply to the United States, but it is true that, even during the height of popularity of memoirs written by Iranian women, her *Khaterat-e زندان* remains virtually unknown. This supports my earlier assertion that because English has become an international language, a writer, especially an Iranian woman who is labelled *mamnu-ol qalam* (the one who is forbidden to write), would have difficulty succeeding financially without an English translation. Parsipur wrote to me, “The problem is that I have never found money from my work. This is the reason of my silence. I need to work so I can’t write the books.” In her interview with Saremi, however, Parsipur noted that her silence is a result of her separation from her heritage, her country:

Now, in America, I’m away from my homeland and no one understands my language, and I don’t understand theirs. When I publish a book now, ten people here read it and tell me it’s interesting, but it’s not a fortifying experience. If I was in Iran, the feedback would be more inspiring because it would come from a big community. For there to be a fire, there must be some fuel. When you live in exile, you burn yourself out. (Saremi)

Parsipur misses the feedback, the reaction that her fierce pen generated in Iran. In a way, the source of her literary creativity was Iran and its people, and now that she is away from both, she is silenced once again. I suggested to her that she try to arrange for an English translation of her memoir so as to make it accessible to a larger readership, including second-generation Iranians who might be fluent in

spoken but not written Persian. Maybe a new readership in the United States can rejuvenate her literary voice. Similarly, the memoir of the Iranian human rights activist Mehrangiz Kar, *Gardanband-e moqadas (The Holy Necklace)*, remains largely unnoticed. The book received one review, from Niloofar Beizai, who criticized Kar for her political views, while also commenting that she found it difficult to review the book objectively owing to its personal aspects. Kar's autobiographical essay "Death of a Mannequin," a haunting memoir of the rapid loss of women's rights under the Islamic government, was translated and published in the anthology *My Sister, Guard Your Veil; My Brother, Guard Your Eyes*, which received positive reviews. In a telephone conversation with me (9 Aug. 2010), Kar acknowledged the difficulties of finding good translators and publishers who would promote her books.

Of political memoirs written by three well-known Iranian women intellectuals, Shahrnush Parsipur, Mehrangiz Kar, and Shirin Ebadi, only Ebadi's book achieved financial and critical success. Since she is not a literary figure, Ebadi knew that, if her story was to be heard, she needed a well-known writer and translator. Her co-writer, Azadeh Moaveni, is a journalist and a writer of two of her own memoirs, *Lipstick Jihad* and *Honeymoon in Tehran*. Based on notes written in Persian by Ebadi, Moaveni and Ebadi produced a successful book, capitalizing on Ebadi's fame as a Nobel Peace Laureate, but the Iranian government's tight control on the press prevented the publication and distribution of *Iran Awakening*. When Ebadi faced a similar situation in the United States, she sued the American government for barring her book from publication, arguing that "restrictions on the publication of books by authors in countries subject to US sanctions are unconstitutional" ("Iranian Nobel Laureate"). During her visit to Brandeis University in 2008, I asked her whether she would consider translating her memoir into Persian and publishing it in Iran. She smiled and graciously told me, "You know that's impossible for now, unfortunately. One day—maybe." Indeed, political memoirs by anyone, especially women, are deadly in Iran. Ebadi's memoir succeeded largely because it is written in English and has found a wide readership. Of the three memoirs written by Parsipur, Kar, and Ebadi, the two written in Persian (including the only one written by a literary figure—Parsipur) remain largely unknown. Meanwhile, *Daughter of Persia*, a memoir written in English by a non-literary memoirist, Farman Farmaian, has been translated into many languages and claims wide readership. Language does matter.

As noted earlier, some scholars of Iranian women writers—such as Farzaneh Milani, Michael Hillmann, and William Hanaway—have argued that continuous

political oppression against freedom of speech and literary expression and the indirect style of writing in Persian have been the main obstacles preventing Iranian women from writing memoirs. The dearth of memoirs written in Persian by Iranian women even today, and the lack of success of the few written in Persian in exile, testify to the truth of these scholars' assertions. I do not, however, agree with William Hanaway's suggestion that autobiography is a culture-bound genre, "too Western-centered and culture-bound for Iranians to make use of" (62). Literature and literary genres are shared and mimicked with cultural twists by writers around the world. I predict that the time will come for Iranian women memoirists to write successful, widely read memoirs in Persian. Just as Iranian women novelists have succeeded in writing large volumes of *roman* (the Persian term for "novel") since the Revolution, other Iranian women will find a way to manipulate the language and the genre to accommodate their thoughts and to record their life narratives.

#### NOTES

- 1 The so-called strong version of this hypothesis (the claim that the language we speak actually *determines* our thought processes) is now generally considered untenable: it is not that the scope of our thought is delimited by the language we speak or that it is impossible to express certain ideas in certain languages. However, a language's lexicon and grammatical structures facilitate the expression of certain concepts and relationships while complicating the expression of others. As Kramsch explains, "The way a given language encodes experience semantically makes aspects of that experience not exclusively accessible, but just more salient for the users of that language" (13).
- 2 I draw here and in the following section on an article I wrote for *Persian Heritage* in 2004, "Iranian Women and Contemporary Memoir."
- 3 Esfandiari's *Le palais des solitudes* (translated into English as *Palace of Solitude*) was written in collaboration with Louis Valentin, while Dona Munker is openly credited as a co-author of Farman Farmaian's *Daughter of Persia*.
- 4 Behbahani's remarks were made as part of an address delivered at the annual conference of the International Society for Iranian Studies (ISIS), Bethesda, MD, 28–30 May 2004.

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