

Identity, Diaspora and Return in American Literature

Edited by **Maria Antònia Oliver-Rotger**

Copyrighted material - provided by Taylor & Francis
Persis M Karim, San Jose State University, 17/10/2014

First published 2015
by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

and by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group,
an informa business*

© 2015 Taylor & Francis

The right of Maria Antònia Oliver-Rotger to be identified as the author of the editorial material, and of the authors for their individual chapters, has been asserted in accordance with sections 77 and 78 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

Trademark Notice: Product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Identity, Diaspora and Return in American Literature / edited by Maria Antònia Oliver-Rotger.

pages cm. — (Routledge Transnational Perspectives on American Literature ; 23)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. American literature—History and criticism—Theory, etc. 2. Identity (Psychology) in literature. 3. Return in literature. 4. American literature—Minority authors—History and criticism. 5. Displacement (Psychology) in literature. I. Oliver-Rotger, Maria Antònia, editor of compilation.

PS217.I35I35 2014

810.9'353—dc23

2014002888

ISBN13: 978-0-415-73558-2 (hbk)

ISBN13: 978-1-315-81888-7 (ebk)

Typeset in Sabon
by IBT Global.



SUSTAINABLE
FORESTRY
INITIATIVE

Certified Sourcing

www.sfiprogram.org
SFI-01234

SFI label applies to the text stock

Printed and bound in the United States of America
by IBT Global.

5 Returning Home

Iranian-American Women's Memoirs and Reflective Nostalgia

Persis Karim

It is impossible to read the now abundant body of Iranian-American memoirs produced during the 1990s and the mid-2000s without contextualizing the rise and popularity of this genre as an outgrowth of two important impulses among writers of the Iranian diaspora. The first of these impulses is driven by a desire to account for the dizzying and often tumultuous history of immigration and exile following the 1979 revolution in Iran; and secondly, to offer some corrective for those images and perceptions of Iran that have dominated US media headlines since then. As the editor of three anthologies of Iranian diaspora literature, I have had the unique opportunity to help shape the conversation about Iran and Iranian Americans by gathering and publishing literature of the Iranian diaspora which was unavailable to American and other English-speaking readers fifteen years ago.

While Iran's literary heritage was predominately defined by its masterful poetic tradition, only in the 1930s and 1940s did Iranian writers begin to explore and fashion a significant corpus of serious fiction. Few women writers were published in the early- to mid-twentieth century, and when they were, they were often subjected to far greater scrutiny and criticism than their male counterparts. Autobiography and life writing was almost non-existent in Iran, with the rare exception of a few travel narratives or life writing by members of the elite and royal classes. Because Iranian culture has historically discouraged the notion of an autobiographical self, and in the particular case of women, such an act of self-revelation was seen as counter to socially-defined notions of womanhood such as modesty, humility, and virtue (read as silence), women's autobiographical writing was a rare occurrence.

The departure and emigration of more than three million Iranians to the West helped foster a new interest in life writing and memoir by Iranian women, who were recording their experiences for English- and French-speaking audiences for the first time. In *Let Me Tell You Where I've Been: New Writing by Women of the Iranian Diaspora* (2006), I attribute the publication of the larger number of women's narratives to two major factors: 1) Iranian male immigrants are under greater pressure than women to excel in professions that require education and that command more generous salaries,

such as medicine, engineering, and law; and 2) women are for the first time freed from the burden of a long writing tradition that has often excluded female voices. More importantly, however, the “dramatic increase in the number of women writing and publishing outside of Iran” is “an outgrowth of Iranian women’s specific experiences; they have felt compelled to respond to the view of Iranian women purveyed by both the Islamic Republic and the Western media and have found themselves having to reshape their identities to fit the new reality of their lives” (Karim 2006, xxi).

These Iranian-American women’s memoirs contribute to knowledge about women’s specific experiences in migration, exile, and displacement and also move beyond some of the pervasive images and stereotypes about Iran and Iranian women which have been the centerpiece of US media representations. Those images, often linked to the perception that Iranian women lack any agency, or are veiled and therefore silent and invisible, are part and parcel of a long-standing representation of Iran and Iranian women against which these women also write. Because of this, we can comfortably assert that genre and gender are intimately linked in this project—both for the writers themselves and, in many instances, for the publishers of these books.

Although many of the earlier memoirs written by women document exile and the losses associated with an abrupt departure from Iran, some of the memoirs published in the second decade after the revolution included memoirs of return to Iran. Tara Bahrampour’s *To See and See Again: A Life in Iran and America* (1999) and Azadeh Moaveni’s *Lipstick Jihad: A Memoir of Growing Up Iranian in America and American in Iran* (2005) are two of the most popular and widely-read of the return narratives by Iranian-American writers. In this essay, I consider the nostalgia and disconnection that plagues their experience as diasporic Iranians as key in their motivation for returning to Iran and in their subsequent efforts to resolve their identities as hyphenated “Iranian-Americans.” Prior to 1999, “Iranian-American” lacked currency as an identifying label, and, in fact, most Iranian immigrants hid their identity by referring to themselves as “Persians.”

But like many who utilized the label “Persian” to identify themselves in the aftermath of the revolution and the hostage crisis, these authors convey an ambivalent identity precisely because of the emotional and cultural “haunting” of their Iranian heritage. Avery Gordon’s use of the term “haunting,” which she defines as “how that which appears to be not there is often a seething presence, acting on and often meddling with taken-for-granted realities” (2008, 8), is a useful way to understand how many Iranian Americans responded to their displacement and sense of exile after 1979. In the case of these Iranian-American memoirists, the “ghost” of Iran (rather than any dead or missing person) is rendered inaccessible, undesirable, or ambivalent because of the author’s circumstances of arrival in the United States or the specific challenges of adjustment to life there after immigrating. Both Bahrampour’s and Moaveni’s experiences as children growing

up in the shadow of the hostage crisis were punctuated with a kind of “double-exile”—not being able to fully integrate their Iranian experience of childhood (as in the case of Bahrapour) or their parents’ nostalgia and alienation as post-revolution immigrants in a country that had great enmity for their homeland (as is the case with Moaveni).

Tara Bahrapour and Azadeh Moaveni thus wrestle in their memoirs with their families’ abrupt and difficult departure from Iran and the lingering memories of their childhood or the inheritance of their parents’ nostalgia for Iran. Gordon’s notion of the “ghost,” represented for these authors by a tenuous, and even seemingly lost relationship with Iran, is one form by which these authors are “haunted.” And, as Gordon offers, this experience of being “haunted” draws the authors “affectively, sometimes against [our] will and always a bit magically into the structure of feeling of a reality [we] come to experience, not as cold knowledge, but as transformative recognition” (2008, 8). For these Iranian-American women memoirists, writing becomes part of the process of what Svetlana Boym calls “reflective nostalgia,” which “dwells on the ambivalence of longing and belonging and does not shy away from the contradictions of modernity” (2001, xviii). This essay considers some of the effects of that reflective nostalgia and the ways that these memoirs become a transformative moment in the fragmented subjectivities of these Iranian-American authors.

Because a number of Iranian-American memoirists left Iran in the period immediately after the 1979 revolution or during the long, eight-year war with Iraq, those who go back to Iran and write about it in their “return narratives” are challenged by both their estrangement and familiarity with Iran and its resonant cultural impact. In many cases, these authors’ encounters with Iran are both emotional and ambivalent and provide the occasion for exploring both a sense of “belonging” and “non-belonging” in Iran and the United States. It is interesting to note that in the subtitles of both Bahrapour’s and Moaveni’s memoirs, Iran and America are included; this suggests not only the traversing of these countries across time and space, but also the impossibility of accounting for a life fully lived, or fully understood, in one culture and one country alone.

The popularity of the memoir genre reflects a larger anxiety about incorporating the traumas and losses of the Iranian revolution and the subsequent emigration of nearly three million people out of Iran to nations in the West, the largest number of which now reside in North America or Europe. The most popular and widely-read of the memoirs may be Azar Nafisi’s *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books*. This memoir has been critically analyzed and extensively written about, both for its contribution to the genre of memoirs about Iran and for its potency as a critique of gender, reading, and the politics of life in the Islamic Republic. I have, however, elected to focus instead on two other memoirs that are representative of a younger generation of Iranian-American writers whose identity is more definitively “divided” between Iran and America. These memoirists articulate a much more self-reflexive

and intimate portrait of the return narrative as well as a confrontation with historical memory based on their complex identities as Iranian Americans. Additionally, the subtle and important differences between their respective biographies, their places of birth, and their complex processes of return to Iran are part of what adds up to what I call the “kaleidoscope effect” of Iranian-American experience. Iranian Americans are by no means a homogeneous group. Because they represent distinctive moments of migration, with some migrating to the West well before the 1979 revolution and some afterwards, it is important to understand the many iterations and distinctions within this community. Among the now approximately two-plus million Iranian Americans, there are also significant variations of identity. Many who identify as Iranian American have one Iranian and one American (or other nationality) parent. Some were born in the United States, and some were born and spent their childhoods in Iran. Some speak Persian fluently, and some speak little or no Persian. Some are Muslim, Jewish, Christian, or Baha’i. Some have Persian surnames, and some do not. These distinctions make for a diverse group and accounts for the kaleidoscope effect that makes the term “Iranian American” useful for many within this ethnic group, but, ultimately, a term that not all are comfortable using. It is only in the last decade that the term “Iranian American” has attained currency among a broad cross section of North Americans.

Moaveni and Bahrapour represent aspects of this kaleidoscope effect: Bahrapour was born in the United States to an Iranian-born father and an American mother, and she immigrated with her family to Iran at the age of four. They later moved back to the United States after the 1979 revolution, fleeing, like millions of others, the uncertainty and violence of revolution, a new government, and later, the Iran-Iraq War. Moaveni, on the other hand, was born in Palo Alto, California, to post-1979 immigrants who left Iran after the revolution, and she was raised in northern California; she did not go to Iran until she was college-age. Moreover, and not so surprisingly, Bahrapour and Moaveni both worked at various times as journalists for American news outlets,¹ and in different ways they embody many aspects of the Iranian immigrant experience but offer different conclusions about what it means to return to Iran and the ways that that return complicates rather than “resolves” their identities. In an essential way, Bahrapour and Moaveni write from a “reflective nostalgic” stance because “they see everywhere the imperfect mirror images of home, and try to cohabit with doubles and ghosts” (Boym 2001, 251).

Because the return narrative is a confrontation with the past, these authors are engaged with the hope of liberation from a past that haunts them and, in many ways, keeps them tied to an exilic and diasporic consciousness that is suggestive of their outsider status, and one that has repeatedly been tainted by the negative depictions of Iran and the tense relations between the two countries² to which these authors have family and national ties. Indeed, Bahrapour and Moaveni employ a process of life writing in Amy

Motlagh's analysis "in which the narrating American self-exploits crises of personal trauma through the technologies of postmodern narrative to claim a unique diasporic identity, resolving crises of self being negotiated by the society on a broader scale" (2008, 19–20). Further, these narratives work to resolve, however ambivalently, what Manijeh Nasrabadi identifies as the melancholic process of emigration and diaspora and thus enables the process of working through the memory and the physical return to place to construct hybridized and consciously "transformative" (2011, 491) "strategies of belonging for 'diasporic citizenship'" (2011, 488).

Tara Bahrapour's memoir, *To See and See Again: A Life in Iran and America* (1999), was among the earliest Iranian-American memoirs to be published and signaled the arrival of Iranian-American women's memoir writing. Previously only one other memoir, *Daughter of Persia*, by Sattareh Farman-Farmaian, an Iranian exile of royal Qajar heritage, had been published, in 1992.³ *To See and See Again* represents Bahrapour's biography as a half-Iranian, half-American who, although born in the United States, spent her formative childhood years in Iran. As the child of a nationally- and culturally-mixed marriage between an American woman and an Iranian man, Bahrapour charts some of the memories of that childhood and her Iranian family, as well as her return to Iran much later. Bahrapour's family fled the tumult of the 1979 Iranian revolution and the subsequent hostage crisis at the US Embassy in Tehran, transplanting themselves to Portland, Oregon, when Bahrapour was a teenager. Because Bahrapour's parents met at the University of California in Berkeley in the 1960s and later went to Iran, Bahrapour has a unique position as an "insider-outsider," spending many of her childhood years in that country as well as returning regularly to the United States to visit her mother's American family. Her perspective of growing up in Iran is colored by her American mother's culture and choices, as well as by the ways that Iran and the United States then maintained cultural and political ties, allowing Bahrapour and her mother to return to the United States for family visits. Bahrapour remembers her childhood through the unique lens of her bi-cultural life in Iran, one particularly punctuated by the free choices of her American mother:

Baba doesn't know much about American music and he can't really sing on key, but he wants Mama to do what she likes, even if it's different from what Iranian women do. I hear that when we first moved to Iran, Aziz came downstairs and asked Baba why his wife let the house get so messy, but Baba just took her gently by the arm, led her to the door, and told her that this was our house and we wanted to be comfortable in it. By now the relatives are used to Mama doing strange things, and they don't ask why she sits with a guitar on her bed, and sends tapes of her voice to America. My cousin Niki only asks, "Don't you get sad being all alone in your room like that?"—because Niki hates being all alone. (1999, 54)

Bahrapour's childhood in Iran is marked by the negotiation of American and Iranian values and customs, and her mother becomes the symbol of "otherness" in Iran, an otherness that she later revisits in herself as a teenager and young adult in America.

After her family hurriedly flees the chaos of the revolution, however, Bahrapour seeks a way to recover those memories of Iran in the aftermath of the traumatic events of such an abrupt departure from the country. In the final scene, in which the door shuts on her childhood in Iran, Bahrapour finds herself at the airport looking at the horizon of Tehran, searching for some emblem of the life she will soon leave behind:

I strained to look past the airport building at the gray swath of smog hanging below the charcoal sky—another day beginning over Tehran. This was my home. It was in trouble and I was leaving it. At that moment, Iran in all its shakiness became more precious to me than any safe country could ever be. I looked hard at the horizon casting out for some building or mountain peak to keep with me while I was gone. There was nothing. So I forced myself to take in the nothingness, to memorize the hazy sky over Tehran, and I kept the picture burning into my mind's eye long after I walked down the aisle and took my seat. (116)

After her family's arrival in Portland, Bahrapour undergoes an unsettling transition to remember her life in Iran. And, due to the fact that the taking of the fifty-two American hostages has occurred by the time she starts middle school, most of what she can narrate to her American peers is about the revolution through her perspective as a child. Because she senses that Iran has only become visible to Americans through the events of the revolution, she narrates not what is personally dear to her, but what gives her the greatest attention and sense of inclusion from her new schoolmates. Prompted by their questions, Bahrapour narrates the excitement of the revolution when "the streets were full of rioting and people yelling and starting fires, and our bus driver made us close the curtains and get down" (125). When Bahrapour is asked, she tells the story of the revolution "as if it were some holy legend" (125). But inside, Bahrapour feels a troubling sense of fear that is akin to a kind of deep haunting:

It scares me to think that I am the only one in my class to have seen these things, the only one to whom Iran is real. A whole country, a whole life of streets and shops and shopkeepers and bus routes that only I know. With my classmates gathered around, I search my mind for every shred of it that I can remember, like the old ladies in Iran who include in their stories facts like what plates Khanoum So-and-So served lunch on thirty years ago, or what color the walls of the women's quarters were in Haji So-and-So's house in the village. Now I see why the old ladies

do this. Repeating each detail, no matter how small, is a way to keep alive something that only they remember, something that would disappear forever if they did not repeat it. And it works. (125)

The “scariness” that Bahrapour expresses is a feature of exile that Boym describes as “a double conscience, a double exposure of different times and spaces, a constant bifurcation” (2001, 256). At the moment when Bahrapour narrates her stories about the revolution in Iran at the request of the students, she becomes marked by the ghostly specter of exile, in which she is desperate to save herself “from forgetting” (1999, 125). Against this fear of forgetting is the difficult and sometimes ambivalent prospect of trying not to be implicated in the larger historical narratives of violence and hegemony that swirl around her as she adjusts to life in the United States. At the moment when the fifty-two American hostages are taken at the US Embassy, Bahrapour observes the sudden conflation of the terms “Iranians” and “terrorists” in the daily news reports on television. At one point, a boy in her class tells her to “Go home, Iranian” (132). But Bahrapour’s response internally is to feel a kind of secret pride, “seeing what Iran can do” (133). Without a full understanding of the situation in Iran or in the United States, she recognizes how the hostage crisis, “can scare Americans so badly that they flood into their own streets and shout slogans, just like the Iranians” (133). Rather than fully claiming her Iranian or American nationality, she feels how the vexing historical events or her life make a complete identification with either country or culture impossible.

To See and See Again not only chronicles Bahrapour’s arrival in the United States and her challenges in navigating her teenage and young adult years but also her awakening from the “haunting” memories which reveal themselves in full force after she starts college at UC Berkeley. After a number of encounters with other Iranian Americans, she begins to feel that she “is discovering a lost part of myself” (183). Her narrative, which moves from childhood to adolescence to young adulthood when she decides to go back to Iran, chronicles not only those lost memories which were part of the fabric of her Iranian upbringing, but also “re-mem-bering” those lost parts anew as she confronts them upon her return to Iran.

Bahrapour’s return to Iran is both satisfying and challenging, and it forces her to rethink her nostalgic memories of her idyllic childhood, growing up in cosmopolitan Tehran, where she attended an international school and could navigate her bi-national identity with fluidity. As the plane readies for its landing in Tehran on her first return visit, she must put on a *hijab* (the required head covering for women in Iran), something that was not required when she left. She pulls out the black square of fabric and drapes it over her head, feeling the scrutinizing eyes of fellow passengers and hearing the mocking comments of regular returnees to Iran, including one man who says, “Look it’s her first time back. Look at what a big scarf she has brought” (214). Her arrival in the airport only augments her alienation

and sense of foreignness, when, at the customs booth, after she declares in her “clearest, strongest Farsi,” that “I am Iranian. I have come with travel documents” the officer rejects her travel documents and asks, “Why don’t you have a passport?” (215). When another passenger translates for her to the customs officer that she has been away and is returning to Iran for the first time, the customs officer asks, “Why is her Farsi so bad?” (215). Thus begins Bahrapour’s long journey back to the Iran of her memory, where she realizes how much the country has changed and how much she has missed. While she wants to move beyond the frozen, almost mythical memory of her childhood experience of Iran, she struggles to integrate what was lost of herself into the Iran of the present and to understand how it is that the Iran she remembers is no longer that same Iran today. She cannot fully address her longing for what is lost. In one of the most poignant scenes in the memoir, Bahrapour writes about her visit to the women’s bath, where she remembers what she likes about her life in Iran:

I like the slightly bawdy banter among women in my family; I like the touching. It reminds me of the way I used to touch my friends and cousins before the sixth grader in America warned me not to. Once in America, I forgot the pleasure of casually entwined fingers, of arms linked together in friendship. I strictly followed the rules of American adolescence and made it clear to my family that kissing me was no longer acceptable. (342)

But Bahrapour weighs such acts of her Iranian kinship and intimate bonds against other opportunities and experiences no longer available to women in Iran. She notes how her sense of belonging in Iran would also fade the longer she stayed there, saying, “but being away from America, I might also start to feel more American, more trapped. I might become impatient with the old ladies’ talk of marriages and deaths and old property squabbles, and start missing the other kind of old lady—the book-reading, hiking, and swimming woman that I imagine my mother will be and that I want to be, too” (342). For Bahrapour, the return to Iran provides partial satisfaction, not because she feels she can access some parts of her idyllic childhood, but rather because by visiting Iran and seeing it for herself, she confronts what Boym calls the “unbridgeable gap” that reveals the “incommensurability of what is lost and what is found” (2001, 256). She can accept what is there now, and what she has become, and is thus able to choose her identity. In a moment free of both the nostalgia and the loss that was deeply embedded in her memories, she seems more resigned to simply understanding her displacement as one shared by others:

Now, on the Web site (*iranian.com*) and everywhere else I find Iranians, I see a similar sense of displacement. Strangely, it seems strongest in Iranians my own age. Those young enough to have adjusted

to America but old enough to still remember Iran seem to have the most difficulty choosing their cultural allegiances, perhaps because they were too young to have made their own decisions about staying in Iran or leaving. Their personal essays are particularly wrenching, and their entries on the Web site's "lost and found" corner make plaintive appeals to their pre-revolution ghosts. (Bahrapour 1999, 348)

The ghosts to which Bahrapour refers are the small personal ads on the website where Iranians are looking for former classmates from particular schools or towns from whom they were abruptly separated when millions of Iranians dispersed after the revolution. Strangely, the power of the internet and the website on which she reads these entries seem to both express the displacement and the possibility of moving beyond the haunting.

Azadeh Moaveni's memoir, *Lipstick Jihad: A Memoir of Growing Up Iranian in America and American in Iran* (2005), shares some of the same haunting sensibilities expressed in Bahrapour's memoir, but it operates almost in the inverse because Moaveni's childhood in San Jose, California, is punctuated with the longing and nostalgia of her immigrant parents, which she inherits even as an American-born-and-raised girl. The first line of *Lipstick Jihad* tells us her origin immediately: "I was born in Palo Alto, California, into the lap of an Iranian diaspora community awash in nostalgia and longing for an Iran many thousands of miles away" (Moaveni 2005, ix). However, the subtitle of Moaveni's memoir takes its lead from Bahrapour's subtitle, "a life in Iran and America," but essentially names what many Iranian Americans actually feel: that identity is not static and that hers is configured differently in the two locations, Iran and the United States. Moaveni articulates the idea that her "growing up" was not yet complete until she also went to Iran and had to feel like an outsider there as well as in the United States. The title "lipstick jihad" is suggestive of a struggle for female liberation in both contexts and is part of the larger narrative of being female and Iranian-American. Moaveni is perhaps, at least initially, more deeply-rooted in the United States than Bahrapour because she was born three years before the revolution and raised in Northern California, spending her entire childhood in the San Francisco Bay Area. Her education was entirely in American schools in the United States up through her university education at the University of California, Santa Cruz. In the first sentence of her memoir, Moaveni also characterizes her birth as being in "the lap of an Iranian diaspora community awash in nostalgia and longing for an Iran many thousands of miles away" (ix). She is aware that she was raised on the "distorting myths of exile" (vii) and that her particular myth was based on a notion of "Persia" characterized by carpets, poetry, and nightingales, and thus she was not directly engaged with the physical and cultural reality of Iran. In the shadow of the country of her parents' birth and exile, she turns away from the Iran of the media, where one encountered the "bad news" of revolution, war, and hostage-taking.

Moaveni identifies her own tendency to erase parts of herself by avoiding “any mention of my Iranianness” (9) almost as an act of survival; she notes how Iranians of her mother’s generation are paralyzed by the nostalgia and myths about Iran and thus unable to move forward. For second-generation Iranian Americans like Moaveni, however, “parents’ biographies, autobiographies—veiled or revealed—autobiographical fictions, testimonies, and memoirs become the restorative institution of personal and group memory” (Seyhan 2001, 17).

Moaveni’s childhood, steeped in the complexity of a bifurcated sensibility that often made her feel conflicted and ambivalent, is another version of what Bahrapour expresses:

Sometimes the intricacies and exoticness of this inner Iranian world made me feel lucky, as though I’d been granted an extra life. There was Azadeh at school, who managed to look and sound like the other kids, barring the occasional lunchbox oddity; and there was Azadeh at home, who lived in a separate world, with its own special language and rituals. More often though, living between cultures just made me long for refuge in one. Maman’s attempts to fuse both worlds, instead of compartmentalizing them, complicated everything. She didn’t want to sacrifice anything: neither her Iranian values, nor her American independence. She refused to abdicate one side for the other, not even for a time, and it made our life together harrowing and unruly. (Moaveni 2005, 19)

Like Bahrapour, Moaveni seems to understand that her experiences in the United States as a child are directly related to the often hostile and at times violent antipathy of Americans toward Iran. Moaveni experiences her Iranianness as an outgrowth of “living perpetually in the shadow of the hostage crisis” and the constant preoccupation and endless questions that dominated the lives of the Iranian diaspora community. She identifies all these questions as leading to the “most important one of all: who had managed to maintain their dignity, keep their way of life intact, and who had been forced, either by financial ruin or mental weakness, to dignify the revolution by allowing it to determine all that was to come?” (11).

For Moaveni, answering those questions about her future was beyond her grasp as a child, but as she grows up, she begins to see the possibilities available to her. She embraces the legacy of her parents’ decision to leave Iran as a quiet reminder that, unlike them, she can determine her own future as an American girl. So, rather than sinking into the kind of melancholic trance that plagues her mother and other relatives of her parents’ generation, who continue to harbor a vague notion that they will eventually return to Iran after the dust settles, she chooses to grow up Iranian in America by internalizing her connections and interests in Iran. It is when she is at the university, steeped in the culture of ethnic self-discovery and

when she and other Iranian Americans are the beneficiaries of a much more positive image of Iran,⁴ that Moaveni begins to explore her background and realizes that “being Iranian didn’t have to be about silly emotional culture clashes with my mother, but a sense of self anchored in history” (27). This new pride in her heritage gives her the boldness to “assume, with reckless confidence that since I was Iranian, I would feel at home in the one place I was meant to belong—Iran” (28).

In this bold act of seeking to belong in Iran, Moaveni sets out to return to Iran for only the second time in her life. As a five-year old, she visited Iran with her mother for a short time; however, her decision to travel to Iran as an adult woman nearly two and a half decades after her birth in California was to “see whether the ties that bound me were real, or flimsy threads of inherited nostalgia” (33). The impetus for her return was galvanized during the year she spent studying Arabic at the American University in Cairo, when she witnessed through the computer screen a student revolt that was unprecedented in the two decades of the Iranian revolution. She recounts watching these protests, thinking, “the last time mass riots overran Tehran, a revolution followed. Could it be happening all over again without *me*? How could there be another revolution when I still hadn’t understood the first one?” (35). Almost immediately, Moaveni packed a bag and headed for Tehran, determined to “witness history, if only as a tourist-spectator” (35).

Moaveni’s trip to Iran becomes both a quest for personal and familial connection and the beginning of her journalistic claim to Iran, both of which leave her disappointed. Rather than discovering a seamless and easy sense of belonging in Iran, which she assumed “with reckless confidence” that she would attain since she felt “Iranian” in the United States, she felt out of place. She assumed that she would feel at home in the one place she was “meant to belong—Iran” but instead has to contend with feelings of a second displacement (28). Her naïve expectations of belonging and claiming Iran are quickly shattered on her first visit there, when she feels the poignancy of her own nostalgia challenged by the reality on the ground. Like many of her compatriots, and particularly those of her parents’ generation, Iran was held in a kind of stasis with the hope that they could one day return to an Iran that was in a similar condition to the country they had left behind decades ago. After observing a student-led demonstration in her first days there, she comes to understand just how much of an outsider she is:

As the demonstrations breathed life into my conception of Iran, I saw that the expatriate view—Iran as a static, failed state in unchanging decline—had little to do with the country itself, and everything to do with the psychology of exile. It was an emotional trick to ease the pain of absence, the guilt of being the ones who left, or chose to stay outside. It was a delusion that deferred a mournful truth: that we would never regain the Iran of before 1979, that we would never go back. (37)

It is in her “homecoming” that Moaveni finds herself feeling more American in Iran than she ever did in the United States. Moaveni’s efforts to document and analyze the student rebellion and share with the outside world the underground Iranian youth culture (the “lipstick jihad” of her title) brewing beneath the surface of a rigid and restrictive Muslim society lead her to a different conclusion about her Iranian self. Instead, she spends more time writing about her alienation from Iran and about all the ways she does not fit in there. Her great disappointment is that not being able to move easily in Iran, even under the cover of being a journalist, thwarts her mission to shatter the nostalgic cloud of her upbringing and discover the “real” Iran of her heritage. Instead, Moaveni must contend with feelings of not belonging and the distortions of her own myths about Iran. Rather than recognizing the limits of her affiliation through name, blood, and biography, she instead condemns herself, writing, “there must be something wrong with me” and adding, “I put myself on trial and ruled myself guilty as an American” (153).

This guilt for being an American is the mirror of her childhood, when she worked so efficiently to maintain an outward ease with her American identity so as to avoid her Iranianness, while also not forgetting that America did not like her kind. By the end of the book, Moaveni has moved from a full-on embrace of Iran before she arrived there to a kind of psychological exploration of what is wrong with that nation and why she cannot possibly fit in. At one point she confronts just how American she is: “The more I tried to superimpose my Iranian identity on Iran, on the distresses and contours of my life there, the more I saw that it did not match up. In unguarded moments, the knowledge worked its way into me, until finally it became shinningly obvious: Of course I was partly American. It was strange, how this question of once agonizing importance became unremarkable” (135).

In the chapter titled “My Country Is Sick,” she identifies some of the ill-fated aspects of the revolution such as its overly rigid interpretation of Islam, its policing of gender, its repression of youth culture, and the many contradictions that Iranians live with on a daily basis, such as a lack of personal freedom, corruption, and inability to speak freely. These facts led her to feel that “Iran had disappointed me horribly” (212). Rather than this trip leaving her with a healing sense of her identity, Moaveni writes that “Iran was slowly making me sick” (212). As she becomes both depressed and exhausted due to excessive overwork, she is fearful that she must confront another haunting reality, that “I would probably feel out of place everywhere, always, that my family would be divided forever, between America and Iran; that I would always feel alone” (212). Moaveni’s return to Iran thus initiates a kind of melancholy sickness that is both psychological and physical and in which she concludes her “relationship to Iran was bilateral, not negotiated through a third party (my mother) and at the mercy of our turbulent relationship. Before I came to Iran, my mother essentially was Iran to me” (212).

While these two Iranian-American memoirists confront the complexity of their Iranian and American identities, their return to present-day Iran

(not the Iran of their childhood or the nostalgic memories of Moaveni's parents of Iran before the revolution) causes an inevitable confrontation with the ghostly elements of nostalgia. Both Bahrapour and Moaveni imbue that "return" visit with a different set of significations and meanings that ultimately lead them to confront the impossibility of ever fully belonging in Iran. Through their engagement with a reflective nostalgia, these two authors deal with the aspects of Iran's haunting presence in their lives, and they are thus able to transform themselves. They invoke Boym's notion of reflective nostalgia, which "dwells on the ambivalences of human longing and belonging and does not shy away from the contradictions of modernity" (2001, xvii). Rather, the return journey for each of these authors compels them to reconsider what constitutes the experience of being Iranian American and to seek out new affinities of national and cultural connectedness to Iran based on criteria other than those imposed by others or the random acts of history that haunt them.

Rather than concluding that Iran is simply a foil against which these authors can redefine their American identity, each memoirist makes a crucial move toward understanding her personal dilemmas and angst of belonging in the larger schema of diaspora. They participate in what Gordon (2008, 202) suggests is a kind of transformation which is motivated by a troubled state but which leads these writers to resolve their diasporic identity in their relentless pursuit to belong; and yet, they also understand that they can never fully belong to neither Iran nor America. As a result, each author finds new grounds for building solidarity with Iran and Iranian culture outside the realm of the political stalemate that has characterized US-Iranian relations. Instead, they each come to see their personal healing and transformation not in an easy relationship to one place, one culture over another, but through the prism of negotiation. This more fluid, more forgiving identity gives way to other possibilities and other affiliations which focus less on the individual and more on the collective experiences of diaspora. Indeed, later writers who define themselves as Iranian American begin to move away from the memoir, as a genre of literature that seems to have encapsulated the traumas and despair of exile and diaspora, and toward other representations, including fiction. In a strange way, the movement toward memoir, toward using memoir to resolve some of these anxieties of belonging, has liberated these authors, and many more after them, from the idea that one must choose one culture over another. Instead, we witness how the positive aspects of the "between" creates a rich narrative landscape from which writers, whether memoirists, poets, or fiction writers, continue to explore and thus move beyond a singularizing diaspora consciousness.

NOTES

1. Tara Bahrapour has worked for *The Washington Post* since 2004. Prior to that, she worked for *The New York Times* for nearly three years as a freelance reporter. For three years, Azadeh Moaveni worked across the Middle

East as a reporter for *Time* magazine before joining the *Los Angeles Times* to cover the war in Iraq. She currently lives in London and writes for a variety of publications including *The Guardian*, *Foreign Policy*, and *The New York Times*.

2. While the United States and Iran had had a relationship in the late nineteenth and twentieth century, several significant events contributed to a series of mistrustful encounters that eventually led to the breaking off of formal diplomatic relations after the 1979 revolution, when the then-Shah of Iran was deposed by a popular uprising. The 1953 CIA-backed coup d'état that toppled the Iranian government's democratically-elected Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh inaugurated the beginning of tense US-Iranian relations. After the taking of fifty-two American hostages in the US Embassy in Tehran in 1979, in which those hostages were held for 444 days, US-Iranian relations deteriorated. For over three decades, the United States and Iran have had no formal relations, with each government periodically accusing the other of behaving in a way that is incompatible with the international community. Under the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005–2013), US-Iranian relations were at an all-time low. US President George W. Bush identified Iran as one of the countries in "The Axis of Evil" in his State of the Union address on January 29, 2002, shortly after the September 11, 2001 attacks. This speech implicated Iran indirectly in acts of terrorism, and, in a sense, cast a second shadow over the Iranian-American community. Today, Iran and the United States have made overtures toward diplomacy in the P5+1 Agreement, signed in November 2013, whereby Iran and the United States have agreed to enter into a series of agreements to ease economic sanctions on Iran in exchange for Iran curbing its nuclear ambitions.
3. *Daughter of Persia: A Woman's Journey from her Father's Harem Through the Islamic Revolution* was co-authored with American writer Dona Munker. This memoir chronicles Farman-Farmaian's life as the daughter of a family of the deposed Qajar monarchy that, until the early twentieth century, had ruled Iran and had maintained great wealth and landholdings, with large extended family networks and harems, until the revolution in 1979. Her memoir weaves together her own personal and family narrative with the twentieth-century history of Iran, often blurring the categories of life writing and history, particularly a history of trauma that she suggests is at once personal and national.
4. This period in the mid-1990s was defined by Mohammad Khatami's more liberal and reform-minded politics. Under Khatami, the fifth president of Iran, who advocated freedom of expression, greater civil society, and more openness with the West, many Iranians in the United States took this period as a hopeful indicator that they could self-identify without some of the shame and judgment that resulted in the immediate aftermath of the hostage crisis.

REFERENCES

- Bahrapour, Tara. 1999. *To See and See Again: A Life in Iran and America*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.
- Boym, Svetlana. 2001. *The Future of Nostalgia*. New York: Basic Books.
- Farman-Farmaian, Sattareh. 1992. *Daughter of Persia: A Woman's Journey from Her Father's Harem through the Islamic Revolution*. New York: Crown Publishers.
- Gordon, Avery. 2008. *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

- Karim, Persis, ed. 2006. *Let Me Tell You Where I've Been: New Writing by Women of the Iranian Diaspora*. Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press.
- Moaveni, Azadeh. 2005. *Lipstick Jihad: A Memoir of Growing Up Iranian in America and American in Iran*. New York: Public Affairs.
- Motlagh, Amy. 2008. "Towards a Theory of Iranian American Life Writing." *MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literatures of the United States* 33 (2) (Summer): 17-33.
- Nafisi, Azar. 2003. *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books*. New York: Random House.
- Nasrabadi, Manijeh. 2011. "In Search of Iran: Resistant Melancholia in Iranian American Memoirs of Return." *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 31 (2) (Special Issue): 487-97.
- Seyhan, Azade. 2001. *Writing Outside the Nation*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Copyrighted material - provided by Taylor & Francis
Persis M Karim. San Jose State University. 17/10/2014