



A LIFE IN THE DIASPORA: PERSIS KARIM IN CONVERSATION

Persis Karim can justifiably be called the “midwife” of Iranian American literature. Perhaps no other single person has supported, nurtured, and promoted as many different Iranian literary voices in the English language as Karim has, giving her an intimate perspective on the development of an emerging facet of ethnic American literature. From the mid-1990s, she has worked to bring dozens of authors’ writings into print, editing three anthologies that span almost two decades of diasporic experiences. The third collection, Tremors: New Fiction by Iranian American Writers, is co-edited with novelist Azita Amirshekan. On the occasion of this latest anthology, I sat down with Karim and asked her to reflect on the arc and trajectory of Iranian American literature, the obstacles writers have encountered, and the new directions they are charting beyond the imperative to present a positive image of a stigmatized people, culture, and place.

For anyone who meets you today and spends any significant amount of time with you, it’s quickly apparent that you are a hub for Iranian American writers, connecting them with each other and with broader audiences. Can you talk about how you first became interested in thinking and writing about Iran?

I was working as a reporter after college, and the newspaper’s printer was an Iranian who had been involved with the Tudeh Party. Through him I got involved with a group of Iranian expats. This was 1985-86. The Iran-Iraq war was in full swing and nobody was talking about it, nobody was reporting on it. I got together with these Iranians, most of whom had been in the U.S. two, maybe three years. I was educating myself about modern Iranian history at a very rapid clip, mostly through these young expats, and I was writing about it.

Because I was the only native speaker of English in the group, I was put into a spokesperson role and ended up speaking a lot about the Iran-Iraq War. I started learning Persian and I said to myself, “I need to learn more about Iran.” That was when I decided to go to graduate school. That was in 1990, when I was accepted to attend a masters program in Middle East Studies.

In your desire to learn about Iran, what drew you to literature as a vehicle?

Well, as you know, once you start studying Persian, the roles of language and literature are so embedded with each other that you can’t learn Persian without learning about literature and vice versa. I wrote my master’s thesis on *Savashvar* [a novel by Simin Daneshvar]. It is the first Iranian novel by a woman and the first novel that critiqued the era that my father had lived through – the period of the occupation of Iran during World War II. I really connected with it because my father had told me stories about what he had witnessed. That novel really sparked my interest in modern Iranian literature. Although I read Sa’adi and Hafes, with great difficulty of course, I was really interested in modern Iranian literature, in how much the sensibility of becoming a modern nation-state was infused in the literature of that period. So after I finished my master’s degree, I decided to go on and do a PhD in Comparative Literature. It seemed obvious to continue studying Persian. I read a bunch of books: Sadegh Chubak, Hushang Golshiri – the giants of that period between 1960 and 1985. *Ghobryadegi* by Daneshvar’s husband, Jalal Ale Ahmad. And there you could see the tension, again [as with *Savashvar*], but articulated anew, between an anti-imperialist, anti-American-domination-over-Iran sensibility and a nativist Iranian one. So I ended up writing a dissertation that involved Iranian literature, but I wanted it to be more comparative, because I was also reading North African literature in French. I was principally interested in [Algerian author] Assia Djébar and in Leïla Sebbar, who is French Algerian. I was seeing a pattern of this kind of 20th century anti-imperialist thinking and also a kind of alienation at the idea of moving to the West. So it became a dissertation that was focused on the idea of exile and diaspora.

Were you part of any kind of Iranian expat community during this time? How did you come up with the idea for the first anthology, *A World Between*?

In fact, in graduate school I had met several Iranian-born scholars and graduate students, as well as four half-Iranians, and some Iranians who had been born in Iran but were raised in the U.S. We were having conversations about these experiences that I had never had before. For instance, we talked about what it is to be Iranian when you’re born here, or “half,” or have lived most of your life in the U.S. The way we were talking about it, to me, seemed like a new conversation; I had no vocabulary for it.

My father was Iranian and my mother was French but I was raised in the U.S. identifying with aspects of Iran and Iranian culture. That’s when I realized, well, a lot of the people that are studying [Persian] literature are Iranian, so they must be thinking about the same ideas.

I wrote a call for submissions [for what came to be *A World Between*] – I honestly can’t remember how I had the audacity to just send this out. I made a poster and sent it all over the country to Middle East Studies departments, Literature departments, Creative Writing departments. Iranian.com was not even fully operational. The internet was there but nobody used it the way we use it now. This was 1997. I sent it to a bunch of professors and, lo and behold, several months later I was getting stuff in the mail. I’m guessing I had something on the order of 4,500 pages of material. Short stories, poems. It was as if someone had opened a door that had been locked for 25 years and out of it came this flood of voices, stories, sentiments, and experiences that had never really made their way to the written page before. It was very exciting.

What do you think was most significant about pulling this first anthology together?

It was really phenomenal because we just scratched the surface; it was the beginning of an itch that needed to be scratched. Suddenly it was like, OK, now we can talk about this. There had been this incredibly heavy silence that hung over Iranians in the aftermath of ‘79; leaving Iran, the Hostage Crisis, the Iran-Iraq War, all these traumatic, major historical events had closed people in and made them afraid to speak, to identify, to talk about their pain. This was the opening that many people needed to be able to say, “I have a story and this is an important part of who I am.” It was an incredible moment of awakening and participation that I didn’t even fully understand.

What response did the book elicit from other Iranians in the U.S.?

Iranians stood up and said how proud they were, of me, of Mehdi Khorrami [A *World Between* co-editor], of the idea that somebody recognized this story and gave it a space in the world. The book had this kind of aesthetic and literary resonance for Iranians in the U.S. in a moment when I think it was desperately needed. Without really even grasping it, there was the moment of midwifing an Iranian American sensibility, aesthetic, literary voice, all those things. A lot of the pieces in there, some of them were amateurish, some of them were really... the ache of them...

In some ways, I feel this book helped to give these writers the confidence that their stories, their narratives, their experiences had an audience, which was very important. And what was really obvious was that by and large these were all women.

I'm glad you brought that up. Can you talk about why there is this dominance of women writers, even in the early years of the literature?

When I was first touring with the book, people would say, "Wow there're 36 writers and 29 of them are women. What's up with that?" The joking answer is, well, the men are busy being doctors and lawyers. The more serious answer, I would argue, is that women, to some degree, didn't have the self-confidence or the cultural norm to be writers in Iran. Their experience of being in the U.S., either as exiles or immigrants or second-generation or half-Iranians, gave them the desire and confidence to tell their stories without the burden of the male literary tradition against which they were defining or comparing themselves. So I would say that, in some ways, it was a liberatory moment for women of the Iranian diaspora to be able to write, because they were writing in English (that was my criteria), they were writing about their specific experiences of being Iranian American. Whether they were men or women, but especially women, these writers got to reinvent themselves in a new language, in a new context, but still draw on a rich literary tradition. And many women wrote, "Thank you, this is so great and when are you doing another anthology because I want to be in it."

Once you decided to devote the second anthology exclusively

to women's writing, did the submissions reveal any new trends and developments that were significant?

I could see that, at that moment, the memoir was really circulating as the genre of choice, whereas poetry seemed to be the immediate and strongest genre in 1999. You had a whole generation of people who'd been raised in the U.S., who'd lived through the Hostage Crisis but had now gone to university. Some of them had maybe read *A World Between* and recognized, "Oh yeah, there's a literature for my experience." There was more confidence and also a tackling of different kinds of issues. So whereas the first collection was primarily about the traumas that had unfolded in Iran, the second collection [*Let Me Tell You Where I've Been*] focused on what it was like growing up in the United States, looking back towards Iran but simultaneously ahead at the realities of a permanent presence here. Iran was more in the shadows.

The current collection, *Tremors*, is the only one in which you limited the pieces to a single genre: fiction. Can you talk about this choice and what you think the proliferation of Iranian American fiction means for the literature as a whole?

Since 2006, I would occasionally see a novel here or there. Dalia Sofer's *The Septembers of Shiraz* was published. Laleh Khadivi's *The Age of Orphans* had been published. Between 2005 and 2010, there was another generation that had gone to school, many of whom were getting MFAs. Many people were starting to realize that there was a broader exposure to Iran out there. You have Iranian communities that are articulating something about their presence through Mehregan festivals or Nowruz. There was an awareness of Iran out there that wasn't just bad news; I think Iranians were starting to really weave themselves into the fabric of American life by 2000. That becomes part of the language and the sensibility that's communicated in the writing. You're no longer an outsider. You're an insider with an outsider's perspective. I would say that's a really good place from which to write fiction, and I would also say it's a really American place from which to write fiction.

What do you mean by that?

What I mean is that, everybody is to some degree a marginal figure in America, with the exception of the 1%, and I think

all really interesting American literature in some ways emanates from negotiating that marginality.

I noticed the anthologies have come out seven years apart. You have marked the passage of time somewhat evenly. Can you talk about the latest collection, *Tremors*, and how you would situate this book in terms of shifts in expat consciousness, Iranian American consciousness, and the split gaze of diaspora, looking backward and forward at the same time? It seems this book is addressing all of this and more.

We're at this moment when Iranians have had to come to grips with and reconcile themselves to the idea that these 30 years have meant a lot of loss, a lot of tension—both inside Iran, but also for Iranians here. There is this idea that they've held their breath for thirty years, hoping that things would change either in Iran or between Iran and the United States. What I see that fiction can do, that maybe poetry or non-fiction have a harder time doing, is to express the idea that stories live inside us. We create stories about ourselves regardless of where we live or what period we're living in. I think fiction helps people come to terms with the inevitability of history and the inevitability of not being able to alter the past. Sometimes a creative engagement with history can answer our needs in ways that the "truth" of the circumstances cannot.

This is something that Iranian literature in the U.S. shares with all immigrant literatures, all ethnic literatures. Filipino writers and Mexican writers and Chinese American writers often wrote the initial moment of representation against a moment of violence and repression and the act of being narrated by white society or American society in a really negative way. These literatures move to assert some notion of self-representation, often against experiences of racism and bigotry and violence. Finally, they get to a point where the urgency of needing to represent themselves to the people who are trying to represent them in a particular way is no longer as important. They have enough confidence in who they are, and then the fiction itself becomes the vehicle by which they can say, "This is me and this is not me. Get used to it." So I think it's an incredible thing that we're at this moment with Iranian Americans who feel that this is the moment that fiction really belongs to us.

That shifting temporality and geography that fiction

facilitates is very apparent in *Tremors*. You have stories set during the time of Reza Shah, during his son's regime, and just after the revolution in both the U.S. and Iran. You have a whole section devoted to stories that are not set in either the U.S. or Iran, some of which do not involve Iranian characters at all. It does seem like fiction has a capaciousness that poetry and memoir don't necessarily have.

I think you put your finger on it. Ultimately, there is no one Iranian experience and, hence, there is ultimately no one Iranian American literature. It's defined by a spectrum of experiences, issues, circumstances, and sensibilities. If we take that as the point of departure for representation, then it's a really good thing because what you can say is, "This is Iranian. This is Iranian. This is Iranian." And they all are, to some degree, not that Iranian.

I think about the title of that first anthology, *A World Between*. We're still "in the between" and I think "the between" is a very rich place to explore. But I will say this, and maybe this is a bit bold and naive of me, I don't think it's just about Iran, the place. It's the way in which Iran figures as a cultural, aesthetic...it's like a wellspring. I mean, look at me, I've never been there. I'm going to come clean; I haven't been to Iran. But I have family there. Iran has been seared into my consciousness because of the way my father raised me. And there are lots of people like you and me who are half-Iranian. Why do we get a PhD and spend an enormous amount of time studying a place that's really hard to go to, really hard to tolerate its politics? What's that about? That's not about Iran, the place. That's about a kind of manifestation of something that has a real power to communicate culturally, aesthetically, linguistically—it's a muse, if you will. The place is fraught and complicated and contradictory and troubling and beautiful. It's produced incredible things that have had an impact on so many other places in the world.

Over the years, what are some of the biggest obstacles that Iranian American writers have faced? Do you see any differences today?

I think Iranians are still dealing with some really enduring stereotypes about what the place of Iran is and what the culture of Iran is. They're encountering an audience that doesn't have any opening into Iran's history, politics, or culture other than this diet of media headlines, which makes it

really hard to come into the conversation. I'll tell you a little narrative one of the writers in *Tremors* told me. Her novel just came out but she'd shopped her book around for almost five years. It's about a relationship between a mother and daughter, and there's a very positive relationship between the daughter and her father. The father is a very loving, doting father. The publisher told her, "You need to change this dad figure. He's too loving. Make him more stern and punitive towards his daughter, maybe have him beat up his wife." If this is what's happening in the literary publishing world, imagine what's happening in the everyday readership world. If publishers are afraid to assert a different vision of Iran because it doesn't sell...

On the other hand, I think Iranians themselves have been afraid to write about painful episodes in their lives, in their histories, in ways that aren't just feeding the stereotypes of the West, or feeding the interests of a publishing house, but that is also self-critical and self-analytical. Really good writing doesn't let anybody off the hook. I think it would be too simplistic to say it's all the publishers' fault or the American media's fault. There's a kind of dance that's being played out here. I also think maybe Iranians who are writing have had to deal with "Iran fatigue." Oh you know, "that's been done." It's very difficult to get people to recognize that, even if you're telling a story that might be familiar, there are lots of ways to tell the story. Let's face it, how many novels are basically retellings of *Romeo and Juliet*?

The anthologies you've edited really expose the narrowness of vision that makes "Iran fatigue" possible as a phenomenon in the publishing industry. This speaks to the importance of carving out a space for Iranian American literature, as opposed to "books about Iran." Can you talk about this category itself and your role in fostering it?

Wearing the mantle of being an Iranian American writer is an act of political assertion. When I decided to use the words Iranian American in 1999 for that first anthology, I did so very deliberately. Nobody was using that term, especially not in a public document. Everybody was either saying "Persian" or "Iranian." I wanted to say, no, we are of these two worlds, and I wanted to bridge it with a little hyphen in between. Now I don't feel as attached to the hyphen, but I still feel there is some weight that "Iranian American" carries because it's a

way of claiming your American presence and saying, I'm not going to forget Iran. Just because you think it should be blown off the map, I am not going to forget it. It's an act of solidarity, connection, kinship with the people that still belong to me and my family who reside in that place. Even if you disagree with the regime, you wouldn't want to see it go through what Iraq went through. In 1999, when we decided to identify as Iranian American — and everyone who gave us their stories essentially agreed to this, I don't know how consciously — the category brought with it certain problems. People called it an ethnic ghetto. I'm of two minds about that. Let's face it: we live in a society that ghettoizes people, that ghettoizes cultures, that ghettoizes the act of being ethnic. I used the articulation of "Iranian" and "American" with the intention that there is no one Iranian American. It encompasses all of North America and it encompasses a politics of being an American, which is also fraught, just as being Iranian is.

Over the years, what has been your approach to promoting Iranian writers without simply rehashing typical Orientalist themes that catch people's eyes? I'm thinking here of veils, pomegranates, rugs, cats, etc. How would you respond to the criticism that the pomegranate featured on the cover of *A World Between*, for example, coincides with the promotion of orientalist imagery about Iran and Iranians?

Specifically, on the question of the pomegranate, when *A World Between* came out in 1999, no one had done that before. The pomegranate is not necessarily an Orientalist image. The pomegranate was a very unknown object in the U.S. at that time, not like cats and carpets. The reason the pomegranate ended up on the cover of *A World Between* wasn't because I thought it would sell books. It was because I told my cousin, who is a painter in Tehran, "I'm looking for a beautiful cover so how about if I send you the material and you create something?" She noticed there were several poems in the collection that referenced pomegranates, including Arash Saedinia's beautiful poem, "Namaz." That image came to my cousin because it leapt out of the material in the book, not as an Orientalist symbol. For all three books, I worked with different visual artists. I did not have the publishers do the book covers; I worked collaboratively with each artist. I think it's important to recognize and appreciate beautiful aspects of Iranian culture. Carpets, yes, may have traveled the course of imperial exchange in the 18th and 19th century.

Carpets were associated with an aspect of the "Orient." But, in general, we should not fall into another trap, which is to reject or dissuade ourselves from drawing on the beautiful things that Iran has contributed to world culture. Painting, language, the *ghazal*—if we become reactive and feel we can't work with these aspects of the culture, where does that leave us?

Ultimately, these anthologies move away from the idea that there is a singular Iranian American experience, a singular articulation of our literature, a singular notion of what it means to be an Iranian. In all three collections, I've worked very hard to communicate a collective, multi-vocal, and diverse expression of Iranian-ness and connection to Iranian heritage. I think this is very different from the big trade publishers who have been selling books by featuring images of veiled women on the covers.

I'm not interested in selling books. I'm interested in the act of self-representation and giving Iranians the opportunity to represent themselves across the spectrum of politics, class, and gendered identities, and to create a space to redefine the Iranian experience. We have to be self-critical, but we also have to be celebratory about our accomplishments. We make the mistake sometimes of thinking that if you are promoting Iranian literature, you are automatically caving in to a kind of ghettoization of Iranian literature or self-aggrandizingly promoting aspects of Iranian culture in order to get people to read your book. I think those binaries are very tired.

You mentioned that the new fiction in *Tremors* feels less constrained by the need to correct misrepresentations of Iranians in mainstream U.S. culture. And yet, as you and Anita lay out in your introduction, there is still a representational morass you are wading into whether you like it or not. Can you talk about some of the different creative strategies that have emerged in this collection to deal with this situation?

Let's talk about Mehdi Tavana Okasi's story, "Other Mothers, Other Sons." It's the first story in the collection and I think it's beautifully written. It's from the point of view of a kid who comes to the United States with his mother, a single mom. The boy's mother seeks out other Iranians and things go badly. Okasi basically blows open the ethnic nationalist myth that just because you're Iranian, and just because you speak Persian and came from the same place, that you have

the same experiences or interests. So he rejects the idea that solidarity is automatically defined through shared national or ethnic allegiances. And he does it really well because he shows the disappointment that this kid has both with his mother and with the people his mother chooses to help raise him. He critiques the idea that we're all Iranian and therefore we have to be together.

Another strategy is for people to talk about their historical disappointments. The two stories that come to mind are the excerpt from *Sky of Red Poppies* by Zohreh Ghahremani and Maryam Mortaz's "Balcony of Desire." The first takes place during the period of the Shah when SAVAK is intervening in schools and interrogating people, torturing them, and this young girl becomes politically awakened to the ugliness. And then Maryam Mortaz's story, which is set just after the revolution, is about the way the school becomes a site of rearticulating Iranian national identity through Islamic ideals. Both of these stories are critiques of Iranian history, censorship, and surveillance. These authors show that people want to confront that history when a lot of times people just wanted to forget it. I think that this process is brave and important because it entails self-reflection.

What would you say is the ongoing legacy and impact of these three anthologies?

I've been thoughtful and intentional about the concept of creating a community. That community is not exactly a physical community and it's not exactly a virtual community. It's a community that's based on an ongoing conversation. The literature becomes a vehicle by which people can connect with, identify with, represent or represent against. I don't feel that these are my books; I feel that they belong to everybody.

Books are sometimes expected to do certain things, like correct an image or drive an image or cement an image or make a lot of money. But that's not what my work has been doing. Especially in *Tremors*, there is such a diversity of perspectives, characters, and settings, that the impact of something like this is to actually defy that essentializing project so that people are made to ask the question, "Is this Iranian?" Well, yes. It is all Iranian, and it is also something other than Iranian.