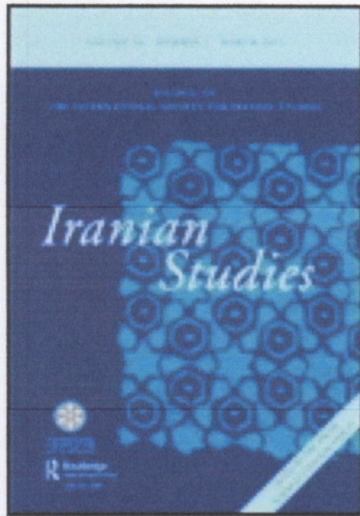


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Tremors: New Fiction by Iranian American Writers

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Tremors: New Fiction by Iranian American Writers, Anita Amirrezvani and Persis Karim (eds.), Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2013, ISBN 978-1-557-28995-7, 346 pp. (paperback)

Persis Karim is by now a field-defining anthologist of Iranian-American literature in all genres, by both well-established and rising authors. She compiled the first-ever collection of works by members of the Iranian-American diaspora in *A World Between: Poems, Short Stories, and Essays by Iranian-Americans* (1999), a ground-breaking volume that gathered prose, poetry, and personal reflections by a then severely under-published ethnic minority in the United States. These stories of immigration, cultural identity, loss, and longing resonated broadly with both scholarly and popular audiences, and led to the publication of Karim's second anthology, *Let Me Tell You Where I've Been: New Writing by Women of the Iranian Diaspora* (2006), which explores the predominance of women's voices within Iranian-American literary culture and similarly includes both fiction, poetry, and memoir.

The introduction to *Tremors: New Fiction by Iranian American Writers* (2013), by Karim and her co-editor, the talented novelist Anita Amirrezvani, addresses a major shift in Iranian-American writing over the past decade. The 1990s and early 2000s, the editors note, were characterized by a flood of memoirs and life narratives, whose popularity was infamously bookended by the international bestsellers *Not Without My Daughter* (1991) and *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2003)—both of which elicited extensive reactions surrounding problematic and stereotypical portrayals of Iran. Since then, however, they argue that there has been a substantial growth of fiction, both novels and short stories, as Iranian-American writers have “come of age,” many of them after publishing memoirs and personal essays. In observing this trend, they implicitly propose the intriguing theory that fiction is a more “matured” or “settled” genre than life narrative, the latter lending itself more naturally to a community in flux or transition, in search of its own literary bearings.

It is interesting to observe, in light of this notion of settlement-through-genre, that most of the pieces in *Tremors* (22 of the 27 short stories and novel excerpts) are categorized in either Section I, “American HomeLand,” under which Amirrezvani and Karim have grouped “work by authors whose stories delve into the complex and sometimes troubling experience of immigration and assimilation in the United States,” or Section II, “Iran, Land of Resilience,” which “address the complexities of Iran's rich and diverse ethnic and religious culture” as well as its “long and turbulent history of repression, torture, and violence.” This local/diasporic division is triangulated by a third section, “OtherLand,” which contains a mere five “stories by Iranian American writers who see themselves in a larger global context.” It is as if, to borrow from the anthology's title metaphor taken from Erika Abrahamian's novel *Tremors*, the seismic shift of Iranian-American literary movement toward fiction has in some ways cemented authors' stories into two categories: on one side, “American stories”—experiences of cultural alienation and adjustment—and “Iranian stories”—tales of home, be they fondly nostalgic or post-traumatic.

Both Sections I and II are littered with beautiful turns of phrase and brilliant insights, and they do not present as bifurcated a view of “home” and “abroad” as their section titles might imply. Several of the first section’s pieces convey the sense of buoyant hope and possibility that can accompany immigration and new friendships forged across cultural lines. Others among the “American” stories reveal the heart-breaking difficulties of adapting to a sometimes cruel, unwelcoming new home. Porochista Khakpour’s “In the House of Desire, Honey, Marble, and Dreams” constructs a dystopian vision of the Iranian regime’s female dress code in the microcosm of the domestic sphere, transported to a diasporic household in Southern California. The author’s characteristic sharp wit and light touch of irony and symbolism subtly shift preconceptions about the hijab and its familial and social repercussions. Ultimately, the story casts a dark shadow over the utopian promises of immigration as it demonstrates that unequal social structures can remain oppressive even when ripped from their larger contexts. Another Iranian social configuration transplanted to diaspora is the force of prayer in “Something to Pray For,” Karim’s own inclusion in the anthology. As a kind of counterpoint to Khakpour’s story, prayer forges an affective connection between two inmates held in custody without explanation under the (implicit) Patriot Act in a hostile host country. Both stories complicate the anthology’s definition of the word “freedom,” a loaded term for the Iranian-American community given the extremity of political and diplomatic relations between the two states this group has variously, in Khakpour’s words, “compromised on calling home.”

Some of the pieces in “American HomeLand” bear similarities to other categories of ethnic American fiction with longer traditions, but unlike these comparable bodies of work, Iranian-American literature lacks a major bestselling work of fiction (along the lines of Amy Tan’s *Joy Luck Club* or Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony*) to establish itself firmly in a well-known tradition. Instead, the stories in “American HomeLand” carry an inevitable risk of biographical fallacy since they are likely to be read in the context of the Iranian-American memoirs and autobiographies that so dominated the market before them. Across the board, however, the pieces convey such stylistic and imaginative strengths as standalone works of fiction that they release the reader from any such preconceived notions.

The second section of *Tremors* features stories about Iran as it currently exists in the American diaspora’s literary imagination, and beyond being written in English, there are other reasons they cannot be placed squarely in an “Iranian” category. Jasmin Darznik’s imaginative reconstruction of Forugh Farrokhzad, in the excerpt from her novel *Unveiled*, contains glimmers of the poet’s own stunning, stripped-down aesthetic, but also draws on the humor, minimalism, and pensive mood of the American short story tradition. Marjan Kamali’s “Tehran Party” sets the highly entertaining scene of a typical post-Revolutionary underground fête, which avoids descending into cliché in two ways: first, by framing the conversations in terms of joy rather than fear of being raided; second, by avoiding the usual excessive explanation (in English) of terms like *tarof* by showing rather than telling, interweaving such snippets into cocktail party conversation as: “Oh no, thank you, may your hands not ache.” “Thank you, my soul is yours.” “Please, I would rather throw dirt on my head than have you not eat

my cake.” “Tehran Party,” like many of the stories in “Iran, Land of Resilience,” is uniquely Iranian but also reveals the inevitably Americanized aspects of modern Tehran life through the omnipresence of terms like “Kehleenex” and “Hoovehr.” The story plunges quickly from lighthearted chatter to a vivid, stirring young girl’s vision of what a free Iran would look like, potentially defamiliarizing the term “demo-krah-see” for a wide range of American readers. Finally, the excerpt from Amir and Khalil’s graphic novel *Zahra’s Paradise*, about a young man’s search for his missing brother who disappeared after the 2009 protests in Tehran, demonstrate that Iranian-American authors are on the cutting edge of new genre development, included among a wave of award-winning, incisive, and poignant graphic novels that have been published across the Middle East in response to uprisings in recent years.

The “Iranian” stories in *Tremors*, as a whole, delve into the rich and complex fabric of a country remembered and reconstructed decades and, in some cases, generations after the author’s departure. Each, in its own way, challenges stereotypical views about Iran. Chronologically, there are stories set long before the Islamic Revolution and long after, and a few that have no explicit historical framework at all. But there is a notable absence of stories from exactly that time, indicating the anthology’s desire to broaden historical perspective beyond 1979, the year on which representations of Iran in popular media, in fiction and nonfiction alike, are so frequently fixated.

Some of the most interesting stories are found in the book’s third section, “Other-Land,” which contains stories that, as per the editors’ introduction, “move fluidly beyond the boundaries of Iranian and American culture.” This third category might not have been possible had this work been published closer to the Islamophobic and polarizing attitudes toward Iran that marked the early 2000s. The anthology benefits from the more nuanced views of Iran made possible by the Green Movement protests of 2009, which increased global awareness about Iran as a youthful, liberal, social media-savvy culture with democratic aspirations. The slow move toward transparency and a gradual thaw in many complex, fraught, long-standing problems in international relations has gained a new boost since the election of President Rouhani shortly after the publication of *Tremors*.

Iranian-American stories, this third section seems to imply, need not embrace either side of the hyphen; in fact, they need not address national or cultural labels at all. Leila Mansouri’s image of an ominous tornado spiraling through the Midwestern skies towards the house where the narrator’s Russian wife and mother-in-law live; Amy Morlagh’s taste of a crisp French baguette bittersweet in her mouth as she spends a summer in Europe living the slow demise of an intercultural relationship; Nassim Assefi’s chilling sound of a prayer recited in the moments before a suicide bomb blast in a Kabul internet café—these moments are microcosms of the globally oriented stories they propel, stories of the human experience of world travelers, whether those travels take place literally, imaginatively, or merely in terms of broadened perspective. These last five pieces, arguably, are the strongest indication that Iranian-American literature, following in the footsteps of an older Iranian literary diaspora in France including Sadeq Hedayat, Goli Taraqi, and Marjane Satrapi, has now entered the realm of “world literature.”

The last story in the collection, Elizabeth Eslami's "Everything Gets Mixed Together at the Pueblo," pivots on a disorienting but refreshing inversion, a panoptical gaze of the Native American inhabitants of a town-turned-tourist-attraction onto the "pink people." Again, this story has seemingly nothing to do with Iranian culture, but is laden with clever and incisive commentary on tourism and the strange compartmentalized exoticism that global capitalism creates within tourist sites. The side-by-side presence of the town-dwellers wearing feathered headdresses, rebuilding mud houses, and selling fry bread with tour guides Kathy and Jennifer who eat Twinkies for lunch, and whose houses do not look particularly "exotic," nonetheless gives the reader pause to think about Iran and other societies "shuttered" from the view of American tourists for what is now thirty-five years.

Unlike the pueblo in Eslami's story, which is the product of a continuous contact zone between dominant majority white America and exploited minority "native" America, Iran since the Islamic Revolution has closed itself off—politically and economically, if not culturally—to such bicultural contact for more than a generation. Like the stories in Part I and Part II of this book, the fruit of epistemological and affective divisions of that decades-long isolation from global capitalism and US cultural hegemony—for better or for worse—is a marked division between those Iranians who "stayed" and those who "left," to build entirely new lives and new literary communities—whether in Europe, the United States, Canada, or elsewhere. The counterpoint of the pueblo, then, sheds light on the kinds of productive and problematic ramifications that might have resulted if the US and Iran had a different kind of modern history together—one characterized by more dialogue, if not by less tension and discord.

Unlike the personal idiosyncrasies and historical particularities that characterize life narrative, fiction aims for the universal, and trusts that the enchanting power of narrative will maintain a lasting resonance that is invulnerable to the political or cultural specificities of a given epoch. To fictionalize is to canonize, and with this anthology, Karim and Amirrezvani have extended our view of the "minority genre" of Iranian-American literature into a triptych, a literary community that can be viewed from three intriguing vantage points—triangulating the genre's possibilities for further introspection, connectivity, and growth.

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