



**RADICAL
HISTORY** *Review*

Fall 2009 105

The Iranian
Revolution
Turns Thirty

Reflections on Literature after the 1979 Revolution in Iran and in the Diaspora

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One of the most interesting effects of the Iranian Revolution of 1979 (and here I would like to indicate that I am using the term *Iranian* as opposed to *Islamic*) is that it has given rise to dramatic and unprecedented literary productivity. Although writers and intellectuals did play a role in the movements and events that led up to the revolution, their output and influence after the establishment of the Islamic Republic has been notable both in terms of production and impact. Both inside and outside Iran, writers have taken the opportunity to reflect on and write about the changes and tensions that have shaped Iran's postrevolutionary society and, for those who chose to leave Iran for other parts of the world, about the challenges of remaking their lives elsewhere. Nowhere is this more evident than in the emergence of a vibrant postrevolution literature dominated by women both inside and outside Iran.

Given that Iran's literary tradition has for nearly a thousand years been shaped and dominated by men, the presence of women authors in the period before the revolution was spotty at best. With the exception of a handful of female poets and writers like Parvin E'tesami, Forugh Farrokhzad, Simin Daneshvar, and Simin Behbehani, women writers have remained largely invisible and were often dismissed as secondary to male writers. The revolution and its campaign to rid the culture of foreign and Western influence, however, emphasized a "homegrown," native Iranian culture (whether in film, television, or the literary arts), and writers seeking to work within the confines of both explicit and implied rules for cultural production have

devised clever ways to document, criticize, and account for the shifts in Iranian society and life after 1979. Women have taken their diminished access to public spaces and have capitalized on the private realm of letters to add their own voices to a literature that has historically excluded them. Another aspect of writing in Iran now is the shift away from poetry, a genre historically tied to the tradition of classical Persian prose, to the genre of fiction. Women lead the way in this new explosion of fiction, and according to Majid Eslami, the editor of the literary and art magazine, *Haft (Seven)*, women dominate the fiction lists and are, in his words "the avant-garde of Persian literature."¹

Concomitant with the emergence of women writers has been an increase in female readership, creating a market for women's writing unprecedented before the revolution. While censorship has been a continual force for writers to contend with, both before and after 1979, women authors have commanded an audience for their work despite the prohibition of certain explicit topics and images. Among the most prominent women writers of the new generation who have won acclaim and received notable literary prizes are Zoya Pirzad, Fariba Vafi, and Shiva Arstui. Those authors whose work directly challenges the system or critiques the position of women in the Islamic Republic—such as Shahrnush Parsipur, the author of *Women without Men* (1989)—have had to face formal sanctions or even the banning of their books. Some writers have had to choose exile to continue to write. For some of those writers who left Iran immediately after the revolution, writing has proved a difficult occupation. Finding publishers or translators for their work has proved challenging, and maintaining a connection to their Persian-speaking readers has been at best inconsistent. Those who have been successful have often taken up writing in the language of their host country. These include novelists like Goli Taraghi, who writes in both French and Persian, and American-based novelist Farnoosh Moshiri, who writes almost exclusively in Persian.

Women in the diaspora have also dominated the literary production of the postrevolutionary period in North America and Europe. While a handful of men have written novels and memoirs (the novelist Salar Abdoh most immediately comes to mind), women writers have been largely responsible for making Iran and the postrevolutionary immigrant experience visible in literature. Women writers of the Iranian diaspora especially appear to have comfortably left behind any concerns about adhering to the tradition of Iranian letters and have instead made writing one of the most important media for representing their particular experiences of exile, immigration, and identity. Present in much of the writing by women are the tensions between Western and Iranian culture, between Islamic and, say, American culture and values, and the obvious desire to both maintain connections to Iran and Iranian culture and divorce the country from the prevailing view of the Islamic Republic today.

In 1999, when the first anthology of Iranian American writing, *A World*

Between: Poems, Short Stories, and Essays by Iranian-Americans was published, I, a coeditor of the tome, repeatedly had to answer the question why so few men's voices found representation in the collection. I jokingly answered then that I thought it was because men were too busy being doctors and engineers. This is not altogether false. For Iranian women and their Western-born children, the idea of being a writer and narrating something of their experience held more possibilities in the West than in Iran. As long as Iran remained closed to Americans and as long it was held in the static iconography of the revolutionary moment, there was an opportunity for women writers to tell their stories in a fashion that would diverge significantly from the more male didactic and politically discursive style that dominated Iranian letters just prior to the overthrow of the Shah.

Although the period immediately after the revolution found many Iranian immigrant writers and intellectuals unmoored from their reading audiences and with few opportunities to publish their work, the younger generation of Iranian diaspora writers sought opportunities to speak to Western reading audiences. Those writers were largely women who, ironically, suddenly obtained in a Western reading audience the opportunity to speak freely and without fear of judgment about their self-disclosure. Many of these writers were able to move seamlessly between Persian and English or Persian and French, and they have had formative experiences in the West that make it possible for them to connect and relate to the West, while still retaining their "authentic" Iranian sensibilities. These writers include memoirists like Tara Bahrapour (*To See and See Again: A Life in Iran and America*), Marjane Satrapi (*Persepolis* and *Persepolis 2*), and fiction writers like Farnoosh Moshiri (*At the Wall of the Almighty* and *In the Bathhouse*). These writers, whose work appeared in the late 1990s, helped make visible the experiences of living through the Iranian Revolution and its accompanying problems—war, exile, and adjustment to a new culture—but also have found ways to challenge the representation of women both in the Islamic Republic and in the Western media. They are essentially writers whose lives and work operate at the juncture between two cultures.

One of the most obvious phenomena of Iranian diaspora literature has been the explosion of women's memoirs, which have proven particularly popular on the U.S. publishing market. One might argue that the attraction of the memoir as a genre lies in its affording an opportunity for self-revelation and self-representation that might otherwise be difficult in the current literary culture of Iran. The individual experience posited by the memoir seems to align itself nicely with American individualism; the memoir also has been skillfully marketed to suggest that Iranian women are telling their true lives and their secrets to an American reading public who might otherwise not be able to move beyond the occulted, veiled images of Iranian women purveyed in the media. While the memoir is indeed a problematic genre, often privileging the individual life and thus creating a self-other dichotomy or, in the case of the Iranian women's memoirs, suggesting that women's experi-

ence serves as the essential symbol for the oppressive forces of Islam or the Islamic Republic of Iran, it has also proved a source of information that Western readers might not otherwise encounter. In Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books* and Azadeh Moaveni's *Lipstick Jihad: A Memoir of Growing up Iranian in America and American in Iran*, for example, Western readers encounter some of the most problematic ways in which women have had to navigate life in the Islamic Republic. But those images and representations have also faced the harsh criticism from Iranian-born scholars and critics living and working in the West such as Hamid Dabashi, author of *Iran: A People Interrupted* (2007) and Fatemeh Keshavarz, author of *Jasmine and Stars: Reading More than Lolita in Tehran* (2009), who see these memoirs as a kind of collusion with the larger politics of the U.S. government, and particularly in the past eight years, as a reification and cementing of Iran as a kind of static Oriental other. For these critics, the publication of numerous memoirs by women in the period immediately following the 9/11 attacks in the United States only served to underscore an image of Iran that was articulated in George W. Bush's famous "Axis of Evil Speech" of January 2002.

While many of us who work in literature do not dispute the power of self-representation, we also recognize the limits of what the memoir or any other literary representation can and should do. As we reflect on the thirtieth anniversary of the Iranian revolution and mark three decades of literary production that has been largely grounded in the events of the revolution and its impact, one sees a shift in both the literary and political landscape. I am hopeful that a narrative often reading as a "I've lost everything but America has redeemed me" tale, sometimes parroted in the later memoirs, will exhaust itself and lose some of its allure for Western readers, who will move toward a greater curiosity about Iran itself, rather than focusing on lamentations about what Iran once was. I am also hopeful that the literary maturation I have witnessed in the past five years will continue to produce a stylistic and aesthetic shift in the literature of the Iranian diaspora. I am also certain that the urgency of telling one's story (which is a hallmark of the immigrant narrative) eventually will give way to attention on how one tells the narrative, to the idea of *the literary* instead of simple *storytelling*.

More recent novels and memoirs have paid greater attention to language and to the importance of historical accuracy and research, rather than remain obsessed with personal memory, and to the complexities of living between cultures that have long harbored suspicions about one another. These new writers, both women and men, writing either prose or poetry, are looking for ways to draw on their heritage and culture, but they are less inclined to pursue the narrative of revolution as trauma, or to have the idea that Iran and the historical departure from the country should serve as the narrative center of their work. There is a literature that begs the question what it means to move beyond any particular national category, beyond even any particular kind of hyphenated writer, to instead mine the field of cultural,

historical, and aesthetic riches that lies at the heart of any cultural transplantation. The perspective of these younger, more culturally syncretic (and maybe more intellectually savvy) writers is less oriented toward the past and more focused on what is yet to be, and perhaps, their work is much more attenuated by the perspective of “neither” and “both.” It also remains to be seen if a shift of politics will also necessitate a shift in the literary perspective. As a writer, reader, critic, and educator, and as someone who still believes in the power of literature, I am hoping for both things.

Note

1. Nazila Fathi, “Women Writing Novels Emerge as Stars in Iran,” *New York Times*, June 28, 2005.