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EDITOR'S NOTE



FOR SEVERAL MONTHS NOW, I have been editing the papers of 24 women working in different fields and in different places throughout the world. These women also come from very different parts of the Jewish community and work in a variety of settings: some are academics; some are writers; some are social workers. All originally presented papers in 1997 and 1998 at the Hadassah Research Institute on Jewish Women located at Brandeis University. Reading their work, thinking about their ideas, and sometimes struggling to translate them into English has been an unexpectedly absorbing experience for me and I've wondered what it is, exactly, that I find so rewarding. I've concluded that spending time in the company of an international, interdisciplinary group of Jewish women begins to fill a most basic and persistent need in me: the need of human beings to see themselves sympathetically represented and reflected in their culture.

As a Jewish woman growing up in post-war America, I rarely saw any semblance of my reflection in the mainstream culture. Although I grew up in the middle of New York City where almost everybody in my immediate world was Jewish, representations of Jews were absent from the museums I visited, the movies I saw, or the books I read in school. Except for *The Diary of Anne Frank*, which I consider problematic reading for a young Jewish girl, there was no Jewish heroine in the books of my childhood. I identified with active, adventurous girls like Jo March, Nancy Drew or Cherry Ames and liked reading about the dramatic lives of European and English queens. I didn't then notice that none of the women I was reading about were Jewish, or that Archie and Veronica seemed to have no Jewish friends; that there were no Jewish Mouseketeers; or that there were no Jewish girls in *American Girl* or *Seventeen*.

I was in my forties and listening to West Indian writer Jamaica Kincaid speaking at the Isabella Gardner Museum in Boston, when I suddenly perceived their absence (like Pnina Motzafi-Haller in her essay about *mizrahi* women in Israel, I applied the insight of an African-American woman to my own life). Jamaica Kincaid had done a brilliant and audacious thing: invited to choose her favorite painting at the museum and speak to a large audience about the reasons for her choice, she had beamed an old snapshot of her mother on the museum's large screen and talked about it.

All of us in the audience, of course, had been accustomed to viewing the parade of art history on such a screen – from the Greeks to the Renaissance masters to the Impressionists and Abstract Expressionists. We were accustomed to oil portraits and elaborately framed photographs. The effect of Kinkaid's snapshot was shocking and made the author's point more forcefully than her words: Had we ever seen the image of an ordinary West Indian woman on the walls of a museum? Had we ever contemplated her face? Her body? Her surroundings? Her life? How did we ascribe value to this snapshot when it was viewed in a private photo album, in a newspaper, or here, in the context of other portraits in the museum? We had all read or at least heard of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, but what about the invisible woman? In this case, what about an entire sub-culture usually hidden by the majority African-American minority culture?

I viewed many of these working papers as such snapshots that raised some of these and many other questions.

In addition to experiencing a kind of invisibility as a Jewish girl in America, I also felt an invisibility in the Jewish community as the daughter of Czech Jews (of *ashkenazi* descent on my mother's side; *sephardi* on my father's). We lived on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, where there were many Jewish refugees from Central Europe but where the definition of Jewish culture was determined by people who, like the majority of American Jews, were of Russian and Polish descent.

This particular group, I later learned, had jettisoned their working-class, Yiddish-speaking parents (as well as their working-class culture) in the Bronx, or Brooklyn, or Queens, or the Lower East Side.

They were West Siders now, middle-class, highly educated, new Jews, who frequented the American – not Yiddish-language – theater and Lincoln Center, collected art, read the cultural sections of the *Times* and the *New Yorker*. The men worked as professionals; the women were delighted to be full-time homemakers in the image of Betty Crocker. Most were political liberals who had flirted with Communism or Socialism in college; they had friends or acquaintances who were blacklisted and were deeply affected by McCarthyism. They had also been deeply affected by the events of the second world war and were in every way invested in a prototypically 1950s American mainstream lifestyle.



My family entered this Upper West Side Jewish milieu towards the end of 1948 like creatures from another planet. My parents were *both* Holocaust survivors and political exiles from Communism. They had grown up middle-class, did not speak Yiddish, had never seen a bagel, and were not especially interested in Israel. Although they had no sympathy for McCarthyism, they were staunch anti-Communists who regarded Stalin as another version of Hitler. During the 1950s, they struggled to earn money and to adjust to America. Like many Jewish (and other) refugee women, my mother supported the family. My father – a former Olympic water polo player and sometimes officer of the Organization of Czech Sportsmen in-Exile-in-the Western World – was mostly unemployed until I was ten years old.

All this is to say that, as I was growing up, I felt as invisible in the Jewish community as I did in the American one. And when I had finished growing up, although I was counted as an American Jew, I still did not feel like American Jewish culture included me. G.B. could have been describing the Epsteins when she writes “Iranian Jews do not easily mesh with the majority Jewish culture. Those who live in North America feel marginalized: their experience has been that American Jews know nothing about them... The Iranian Jewish diaspora is triggering a re-examination of hegemonic notions of American Jewish identity. Iranian Jews with their own ethnic and cultural tradition are challenging the American Jewish culture that was brought from Eastern Europe and that is presumed to apply to all arriving Jews regardless of their background. This ashkenazi standard for Jews is similar to the WASP standard for assimilation to North American society.”

The issue of cultural hegemony is addressed in an even more dramatic way by South African Sally Frankental. “It is a truism to note that all Jewish communities, in all times and places, reflect the context in which they are located,” she writes. “In the South African case, the segregationist policies of the colonial authorities, the Boer republics, and the Union, followed by the apartheid system of the past fifty years, form the inescapable frame for all who live in South Africa... the disproportionate numbers who arrived from one region, Lithuania, gave the community an unusual degree of homogeneity relative to other diaspora communities. This was reflected in the virtual absence of Hasidism (until the 1970s), in the particular form of Yiddish



spoken, and in a variety of foods and customs particular to Lithuanian Jewry. In addition, the east Europeans' lack of exposure to Reform Judaism meant that Reform or Progressive Judaism was established in South Africa only in 1933, far later than in most diaspora communities." All this, of course, shaped the lives of South African Jewish women.

In reading these papers, I was struck by how many kinds of Jewish women there are, how profoundly we are influenced by our country of origin and the continuity or discontinuity of Jewish life within its borders, and by our experience of such factors as entitlement, dislocation, prejudice and outsider status. History, particularly this century's history, has not treated all Jewish women equally. In writing their papers, some authors – like Katalin Talyigas of Hungary – was reconnecting to and reconstructing the history of Jews in their country for the first time. Others, like Micaela Procaccia, who lives in Rome, is steeped in her history and writes with the surety of long immersion in the past: "In the year 1537, a Roman Jewish working class girl named Lariccia cried for days because of an unwanted match," begins her paper. "The day before the *qiddushin*, or betrothal, a washerwoman named Clemenza heard Lariccia saying to her father: "I do not like this man, nor do I desire him. I refuse him and reject him, nor do I want him." She declared herself to be "the unhappiest of all women," and on the next Shabbat, she told her father that she would not agree to let "the *qiddushin* become *nissu'in*.' Her father then hit her with the butt of a knife."

The biographical section of this volume itself makes for fascinating reading – as much for the wide geographical spectrum represented as for the facts each woman deemed important to include. As different as each woman is, I find much in common with her. It was easy for me to enter into her world.

Although this first HRIJW collection of writing by Jewish women around the world is inevitably uneven and incomplete, it is a respectable beginning. The authors represented here are, in some countries, part of a larger scholarly and cultural project of researching and writing about women's lives; in others, they are pioneers – the first of their kind. In some countries, they have been able to draw on a large body of data and literature; in others, they are themselves creating that data and literature. Ana Lebl from Split (now in Croatia) lives in an aging and relatively poor community of only 100 Jews

with scarce resources; Americans Riv-Ellen Prell and Pamela Nadell enjoy the support of Jewish Studies as well as Women's Studies departments at major American universities. Our Israeli and Latin American contributors bring both these realities into yet another perspective.

Some of the authors chose to spend time reworking their original presentations; others were content to have published what they originally presented. Many have struggled to express themselves in English – their second or third or fourth language. As a writer who has often had to communicate in foreign languages, I admire their pluck; as editor, I hope they forgive my journalistic bias, my many questions, and my inadvertent mistakes. Parts of all their work – even where it represents a starting point – moved and inspired me. I hope it will move and inspire you.

Helen Epstein

October, 1999

IRANIAN JEWISH WOMEN DISCOVER THE POWER OF WORDS

by Farideh Dayanim Goldin

Iran, a country famous for its literary heritage, is known both for beautiful poetry and for a rich oral tradition. Yet, until very recently, Iranian Jewish women had no place in this history. What kept them from writing and from becoming writers? Before we discuss, criticize, or praise the literary works of Jewish women of Iranian heritage, we need to understand the women's long silence, the conditions that constrained them in the past, and those that constrain them now.



For many centuries, life for Jewish women in Iran meant poverty, early marriages, and illiteracy. Although this destitution was the lot of most Iranians, Jewish women suffered the most by having the lowest social standing. Bernard Lewis, a scholar of Jews under Islam, explains, “the rank of a full member of society was restricted to free male Muslims” (8). Slaves, women and nonbelievers were not equal members of society. Jewish women were classed the lowest, suffering the double jeopardy of sexism and anti-Semitism.

Like other groups of severely oppressed people, the Jewish community itself pushed women down even further. During World War II, Rabbi Yitzhak Meir Levy witnessed with a “violent shock” the unbearable lives of Iranian Jews, “where girls of nine or ten years of age were permitted to marry” (Cowan 259). Under such circumstances, young girls became perishable commodities. Unless married at a very young age, they “spoiled” and were no longer of value. My paternal grandmother, Tavoos, used to tell the grandchildren the story of her first engagement:

I was only nine years old. Your great grandmother, Bibi, would take my hand and lead me to the streets of the *mahaleh* (the Jewish ghetto) to my fiancée’s house. There, his mother would sit me by a pile of vegetables and herbs to clean for dinner. It was my test to see if I was clever and a good worker; if I was obedient; if I was not *zaban deraz* (a girl with a big mouth).

My fiancée, a man in his twenties, would come home for lunch and put me on his lap and play games with me – and everyone would laugh. But as soon as they were busy and I had a minute alone, I ran away...

Every time I escaped, Bibi would scream, beat her chest in exasperation and cry, “You are ruining your reputation! Who would marry you now?” Finally, the family returned me one day saying I was not suitable for their son. I had to wait until I was 15 since no one came to ask for my hand. I was married to your grandfather, who had recently lost his wife in childbirth. He had three children from the previous marriage that I had to nurture. But your grandfather was a *tsadik*, a righteous man, a respected Rabbi. He was a good man.

Whereas my grandfather was a learned man who had mastery over Hebrew, my grandmother never learned to read or write even her own name.

The custom of early marriages made the Jewish women of Iran, “farming models,” as Andrea Dworkin labels them, “to plow for the purpose of growing crops [of children]” (Tong 81-2). Lacking birth control, they gave birth to numerous children without the benefit of medical care and, in the process, many lost their own lives. Jewish women nurtured babies when they were children themselves. They raised their

children in dark hovels of Jewish ghettos, worrying about food and medical care. In the 1930s, a traveler to Iran observed with horror how young Jewish women aged early, their energies focused purely on survival (Landshut 62). The slave-like labor to which Jewish women were condemned created a slave mentality: a loss of desire for power, for improving their lives and for control over their own destinies.

In *Black Feminist Thought*, Patricia Hill Collins writes of the power of the “blues” to lift black women’s spirit and to help them endure the hardship of poverty, racism and gender-bias (99). Jewish women in Iran did not create any “soul” music to comfort them. In fact, with cultural restrictions against (nice) women’s singing, they often went about their chores in silence. Neither did they possess the knowledge to pray for comfort. Electrical services were not available until the 1950s. Access to television came much later, not until the 1970s outside Tehran. Jewish women were cut off from the progress of world Jewry and at times even from other Jewish communities around the country.

The women of the royal harems were writing poetry during the Qajar dynasty in the latter part of the 19th century (Moshir Salemi). Often more educated than those in the rest of the country, some had the opportunity to travel abroad and to hear poetry recited in the Persian courts. They were also affluent: their cooks, maids and nannies allowed them much leisure time to ponder life. Music, song and poetry were familiar to the many princesses. Some even ventured into writing poetry themselves.

Jewish women had no such options. Facing oppressive poverty, illiteracy, early marriages, and a heavy burden of housework and child care, they had no opportunity to write during those years. When Moslem women were trying to express their literary creativity, even if under many political and religious restrictions, Jewish women missed the era completely, too busy with the drudgeries of life.

What then sustained Jewish women through these years of total desolation and isolation? The strain of hardship was often lessened through the cherished *dard-e del*, talking of the “aching heart.” Iranian Jews lived in multi-family homes until the latter part of the 20th century. Women gathered in the kitchen or around the washtubs exchanging gossip. Visiting the synagogue, dropping the *khaleh bibi (cholent)* by the community oven, collecting water from the public water spouts also became occasions for seeking advice, sharing new stories, and embellishing the old ones.

My grandfather and his fathers before him were rabbis and *dayanim*, highly respected judges in Shiraz, who tried to resolve disagreements in the community to avoid the Islamic courts. Their wives commanded much respect among the Jewish women of the ghetto. On many afternoons, the children spread a *kilim* by the front door for my grandmother, where she would make herself comfortable. The younger women of the family served her tea, *sharbat* (a fruit-flavored drink), limeade, and of course the *qalyan* (waterpipe). After cleaning up from the big afternoon dinner, women would stop by, sit, gossip, and “talk of the aching heart.” The old matriarch always reached into her bag of memories for advice. In the Iranian tradition, these women used *zarbolmasal* (fables) to communicate their feelings. Thus, they created new stories by mixing myth with reality.

Dard-e del had many functions. It was a healing tool, a source of empowerment, and a Middle Eastern version of a “support group.” The custom created a reservoir of stories that circulated among women as yet unaware of the power of written words. Generations later, Iranian Jewish women reach back to this collection of oral histories to record their mothers’ stories, to cross over from talking themselves free to writing themselves free.

The lack of formal education for Jewish women and their reliance on oral tradition encouraged superstition. In a survey of the Iranian Jewish community in the 1950s, Siegfried Landshut observed that a common occupation of women was “the selling of charms and amulets against illness, danger of one sort or another, and to ward off the Evil Eye” (64). Lacking knowledge of prayer, women often relied on superstition and witchcraft to control the events around them. They used *espond* (wild rue), salt crystals and amulets in the shape of an eye to avert the evil eye from a new baby, a pregnant woman or a sick family member. Women did not leave babies alone, fearing *jhins*, or *az’una* (harmful spirits) could take their souls. The belief was that the *az’una* is a cat’s friend or a cat could embody its spirit (Loeb 219). My paternal grandmother, Tavoos, always warned that warts were a result of splashing water on cats. A remnant of that strange folk belief appears in the contemporary novel *Persian Brides*, by Dorit Rabinyan, an Israeli writer of Iranian heritage.

When she was a young girl, it was her second nature to persecute cats. . . . “*Avoundareh*, poor things,” the villagers threatened her, shaking their hands in the air. “The god of the cats will take terrible revenge on you, *avoundareh*, bad girl.”

But Miriam Hanoum did not heed their warnings, and when at last she married and bore her first child on a hot night, her arms were scored with scratches left by the claws of dead cats. . . . A hate filled embittered alley cat stretched his lithe body, climbed in through the open window, padded up the baby, and crouched on top of it, covering its nose and mouth. When the baby stopped breathing, the cat rose quietly and slunk back out through the window. (32-3)

Rabinyan adopts many of the folktales told by her Persian grandmothers, exemplifying how superstition thus became a part of Iranian Jewish women’s oral history, supplying future generations with stories to enrich their literary creativity.

The only thorough study of Jewish literary creativity in Iran has been done by the Center for Iranian Jewish Oral History, documented in three volumes: *Yahoudian Irani dar tarikhe moaser* (The History of Contemporary Iranian Jews) and two volumes of *Padyavand*. There were Jewish poets writing in Judeo-Persian, Hebrew and Persian as early as the 12th century, according to Amnon Netzer:

The Jews of Iran gave expression to their spiritual world and conveyed their religious and social experience in the language of poetry. It seems that this form of artistic and aesthetic expression served as a source of emotional strength, ameliorating the physical and mental agony of the centuries of suffering and persecution. (41-114).

None of these poets were women.

Jewish men worked as entertainers at weddings and various *simchas*. They wrote poetry and music in imitation of the great Persian poets as well as their own originals. Jewish women entertainers, often singers or dancers, had the reputation of being *harjaee* (whores) for daring to step into the public arena. Is it possible that a few Jewish women might have written poetry which they were afraid to call their own, fearing slander?

Jewish women of Shiraz sing *vassonak* (wedding songs) to the bride in various ceremonies connected to weddings. A young bride was often accompanied to the public baths with close female friends and family.

Food and music was an important part of this tradition.

Ay hamoumi, ay hamoumi, ab-e hamoum tazeh kon
Khaom aroos miad hamoum, sharbatesh amadeh kon

Bath keeper, bath keeper, refresh the water at the hammam
The bride is coming to the hammam, prepare for her a refreshing drink

Vasoonak are sung during *banandazi* (removing body hair), at the ceremony of examining the bride's virginity, during the wedding ceremony itself, and at *hajleh* (taking the bride to the wedding bed):

Shab gozasht o nim-e shab gozasht,
o chashme doomad entezar
Kheir bebini naneye aroos,
in gol az khoonat dar ar

Night has passed and midnight has approached;
the groom still awaits
We wish you the best, mother of the bride,
Allow this flower to leave your home

Ki be hajleh? Shazdeh doomad ba zanes
Ki begardeh dor hajleh? Doshmanay dor o bares

Who is at the *hajleh* (the marriage canopy)?
The bride and the groom
Who is orbiting the *hajleh*?
The enemy around them

“Being orbited by the enemies,” places the bride and groom in the center of the world. It symbolizes the *kapora*. Another stanza expresses the bride's anxiety about her new home:

Man namiraftam be qorbat to ferestadi mana
Gar bemiram man be qorbat khoun-e man girad tora

I would not have ventured to unknown places as you have sent me
If I happen to die there, my blood will be a stain on you.

The mother of the bride prays:

Che konam chia konam keh roud-e joonam mibaran
Ey khoda nazret konam keh rahe dourash nabaren

What should I do, what can I do?
they are taking my loved one.
Please God, I pray that they (the groom's family)
will not take her far away

Yet another poem, sung by the women of the groom's family, comforts the bride and her mother:

*Omadim aqdesht konim- o naymadim sakhtesh konim
Rokhsat az babash begirim farda shab aqdesht konim*

We have come to betroth her
and not to harden her life
We have come to ask her father
his permission to betroth her tomorrow night

Thus, the purpose of *vasoonak* is to praise the bride, to comfort her and her mother and to reassure them that the unknown world the young girl is entering will be safe.

The almost complete version of *vasoonak* in *The History of Contemporary Iranian Jews* is described as Shirazi folk wedding songs (238-251). During the twenty two years that I lived in Shiraz, I rarely heard the poems sung by anyone but women. The same holds true for wedding ceremonies held by Shirazi Jews in the U.S.

It is my hypothesis that the poetry was created by women over time, and that it served to include them in a ceremony that was otherwise not theirs. Men signed the wedding contract and argued over its legal and financial terms. Men performed the religious parts of the ceremony, said the *brakha*. Women, I believe, found their own words and ways to include themselves in this crucial life event. They created their own unique community and gave it importance and dignity with songs and poetry. *Vasoonak* is a part of Shirazi women's oral tradition, created by women who probably could not read or write.

Three different movements were responsible for creating equal access to modern education to Iranian Jews. First, various Christian missionary schools reached out to the poverty-stricken Jewish community in Iran in hopes of converting them to Christianity by acts of kindness. In the second half of the nineteenth century, according to Abraham Cohen, not only did they offer free education for those who could not afford it, but they also fed the students and gave their parents financial assistance. They attracted girls to their institutions by offering vocational training (23-4).

Second, *Otzer ha-Torah* schools were established in Iran in 1947 with the help of the Joint Distribution Committee, American Sephardic Jews and the philanthropist Yitzhak Shalom (28). The program was led by Rabbi Yitzhak Meir Levy. The main purpose of the school was Jewish religious teaching. However, its narrow focus on *ashkenazi* rules and customs and its lack of respect for and understanding of Iranians' unique beliefs and needs, made it irrelevant and unpopular among the majority of Iranian Jews. Additionally, the school for girls that was established in Tehran only was "small and poor" (Cohen 29-30).

The third movement was the *French Alliance Israelite Universelle*. The efforts of this organization, started during the reign of Naseredin Shah of Qajar dynasty in 1872, did not bear fruit until 25 years later. The king feared that the establishment of a Jewish school would provide its enemies with an excuse to lead the masses against a "Jew loving" government (Nateq 116-8).

The French-based *Alliance* was led by Joseph Cazes who at first expressed his hesitation about opening a school for girls as well:

Since the day I arrived in Tehran, the Jewish community requested opening of a girls' school along with the boys. I was speechless and told them that it was not impossible but it needed patience and time. (132-33)

Cazes finally opened both a boys' and a girls, school in 1898, the latter with an enrollment of 150 girls and a faculty of female teachers from France (*Alliance* 42). Later, he noted that the school not only helped the girls but also prevented them from the attraction of missionary schools (Nateq 132-33, translation to Persian from *Les Juif d'Iran*). *Alliance* elementary schools later opened in the cities of Isfahan, Shiraz, Hamedan, Kermanshah and Sanandaj (Cohen 24).

Unfortunately, each school opening sparked waves of anti-Semitic activities and pogroms. For example, Moslem clergymen in Isfahan complained that the newly established school had hidden two Moslem women under “suspicious” circumstances. In reality, the two women had been hired to teach sewing to the Jewish girls (Nateq 136). There were also reports of Jewish women being accosted or even kidnapped by agents of the Garland Christian Missionary on their way to *Alliance* (136).

Missionary zeal and the desire of the Moslem clergy to incite the people against Jews for political reasons made the already difficult educational situation even worse for Iranian Jews. However, the *Alliance* schools were successful in changing the direction of Jewish women's education in Iran.

Just after the turn of century, *Alliance* had 150 female students in Tehran; 270 in Isfahan by 1904; 250 in Hamedan; and 90 in Shiraz, the site of most anti-Semitic riots. The girls' school in Kermanshah was established seven years later after the boys' school there. Most girls attended school until age 14. In preparation for their marriage, they studied sewing, knitting, carpet making, cooking, reading and writing (Nateq 139).

Jewish life improved in 1925 as the Pahlavi dynasty came to power in Iran. Reza Shah eliminated the clerical influence in government and the legal barriers for religious equality. During the reign of his son, Mohammed Reza Shah (1941-1979), Jews started to leave the ghettos. Schooling was no longer the privilege of the elite. Many Jewish women were allowed to postpone early marriages in favor of higher education. As the rate of literacy increased among Iranian women in general during the “White Revolution” of the 1960s, the pace of Jewish women's education accelerated.

By 1970's the overall rate of literacy among Iranian women was 31% (Lanczowski), but few Jewish women had received higher education. Azizeh Baral attended Tehran University in 1939. “I was the only Jewish girl,” she remembers, “and I was distraught that so many capable high school friends could not find their way to college (Yahudian: vol ii, 63-265).

However, Jewish women were soon in schools of higher education in large numbers. They chose a path of knowledge that could provide them with financial security, in which the study of literature was almost never included. Given this situation, it is understandable that no poems, short stories or novels are known to have been written by a Jewish woman in Iran until recently.

There are two possible explanations for this lack of enthusiasm. Even during the reign of the Pahlavi dynasty, “words” were dangerous. Expressions of free thinking, diversity or dissatisfaction would lead to prison sentences. Rivanne Sandler writes that for serious Iranian writers “freedom of expression meant the freedom to depict society as it was.” He adds, “writing about certain aspects of Iranian life thus became a political act in itself ” (247). Having recently left the ghetto, Jews feared the government. They also felt indebted to the regime. They did not desire to forfeit their newly founded comforts by being critical.

Additionally, Jewish women were expected to keep their opinions to themselves. Parvaneh Saraf writes, “it was not long ago that women were not called by their own names. They were someone’s mother or wife” (27). For years, she adds, their questions were responded with “*khasve shalom* (God forbid),” which silenced them (28).

In the 1960’s, an outspoken Shirazi woman, Ashraf Cohen dared to ask the men congregating for worship on Rosh Hashanah to approach the government authorities and request Jewish holiday leaves for their sons from the army. She was booed and jeered by male worshippers and asked to retreat to the balcony with other women. “Do you see the other women voicing an opinion? Go sit with them, where you belong!” A female spectator remembers feeling small and humiliated (Sabbar). Her husband’s recollection is of an immodest woman, a *zaban deraz* (one with a long tongue), stupidly talking of matters of which she had no knowledge. Such silencing of women’s everyday voices, I believe, had a direct impact on their literary creativity.

Many women were still forced to marry young. Those who aspired to write had to either delay or forgo of their creativity. Mahin Amid, a poet living in Los Angeles, remembers writing poetry in high school and hoping to continue her work in college in the 1960s, but her parents insisted on marriage instead. She was married at age 18. Her training in poetry comprised a few private lessons.

Shokouh Darvish, an aspiring writer, unwillingly married a cousin at age 15. Her sons’ struggle with the genetic disorder Hereditary Inclusion Body Myopathy, which is the direct consequence of marrying a close family member, is at the core of her writings. Homa Sarshar, another Iranian Jewish writer, was also married after high school. “Parents were afraid that their daughter would not get married if they were too educated,” Sarshar said. “Get married first,” Sarshar’s parents told her, “you can always have higher education later in life.”

Furthermore, secular education in Iran stressed rote learning rather than comprehension. Geography was taught without a map, history without class discussions. If taught, art was a direct copying of another artist’s work. World literature and philosophy were systematically eliminated from the curriculum. Teachers disapproved of critical thinking, which is the basis of literary creativity and mocked students who dared to ask intelligent questions.

Additionally, students in high school majored in either *tabiee* (earth science, biology & chemistry), *riazi* (mathematics and physics) or *adabiat* (Persian language & literature). Whereas English was the second language taught to biology and math students, Arabic was the foreign language for those studying Persian literature. Studying Arabic and Persian literature, most Jews thought, was not Western and would not help them in life. There was also the fear of facing a more severe form of anti-Semitism from teachers of Arabic and Persian language and literature. A Jewish woman, who chose to study math instead of literature in the

1990s, blames her anti-Semitic literature teachers. Looking back over the lost years, she questions, “Will I ever write?” (Broad Minds 110)

For those who studied math or sciences, writing classes did not exist and there were no instruction given for *ensha* (essay writing) in language classes. Subject matters were often tightly controlled to muffle any sign of individuality and free thinking. When I was a junior in high school, a stubborn classmate in Namous high school in Shiraz was sent to the office for writing about her religion, Baha’ism. She was reprimanded and was threatened with expulsion.

The few Jewish women who studied English literature in the institutes of higher education later did not have a chance to pursue writing. They were mostly encouraged to work as translators. In college, the most motivated women often chose sciences over literature. Gina B. Nahai was encouraged to take a course of study that would give her financial independence. Her father said, “I sent Gina to a Swiss boarding school so she could learn to be independent, knowing that some day she would live in a different country. I never thought she could reach her potential as a Jewish woman in Iran (Barkhordar).” Nahai was awaiting her acceptance to the law school when she started recording family stories in order to pass time. The tales became the start of her first novel, *Cry of the Peacock*. By the time her admissions papers to law school arrived, she had decided on a change of career and instead studied creative writing.

Michelle Koukhab’s parents had assumed that she would study medicine like her father. They wanted her to have a job with financial security. Michelle did not share her poems with them at first, fearing their disappointment. Shirindokht Daqiqian, a successful graduate of the *Alliance School, Etehad*, is a well known translator still living in Iran. In an interview, she credited her brother for pushing her to study chemistry instead of literature in Meli University in Tehran. “Science gives you a different angle in life and expands your mind,” Daqiqian said. She is only one of many women I have interviewed who write for “themselves,” shying away from calling themselves poets or writers, never considering publishing their work.

Yet another pattern of withdrawal from creative writing appears in the career of Homa Sarshar. After leaving her job as a translator and immigrating to the United States, she worked as a journalist for an Iranian radio station in Los Angeles. She edited three books on the history of Jews in Iran and published two volumes of books consisting of her editorials for the Jewish monthly magazine, *Shofar*.

Sarshar views the Iranian revolution as a “catastrophe” that “paralyzed” her “pen” and silenced her “tongue” (preface). The Revolution was also an impetus for a different kind of creativity in her. Throughout the two volumes of her memoirs and essays, *dar koocheh pas koochehay-e qorbat* (*In the Back Alleys of Exile*), Sarshar includes her poetry, which is a reflection of her deep sorrow for leaving her homeland “These writings reveal my natural passage through the five recognized stages associated with loss: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance,” she writes. “I started to search for a new identity, and even began to compose poetry with a boldness which surprises me today....”

Sarshar wrote the first known play by an Iranian Jewish woman. “From Esther to Esther” is an account of the heroine’s internal struggle with her new American identity (Terua 5-28). She strives to define the Persian queen’s strengths and weaknesses as a woman and to define her own image in the process. The play examines the dichotomy of Queen Esther’s story: was she manipulated as just a “beautiful body” or was she the mind behind a courageous act to save the Jews? Some Iranian Jews shunned the play, Sarshar

said, believing the Queen's image insulting. The message of the play, the role of Iranian Jewish women in keeping the family together in exile, was lost on many.

The criticism may show that, as the novelist Nahid Rachlin once observed, "Iranians have not learned to read for fun." Although Sarshar's play reaffirms her courage at the end, the mere fact that she has dared to examine the Queen's motives is shocking to Iranian Jews. Sadly, partly because of this criticism and partly because she has become comfortable with her new identity as an Iranian-American Jewish woman, Sarshar has ceased to write creatively. In an interview, she emphasized that she is a journalist – not a poet or a playwright.

This silencing, both voluntary and forced, of talents is evident among many Iranian Jewish women. They often lack formal literary education that could enhance their confidence in their writing. I interviewed Mahin Amid, a poet who immigrated to California after the revolution. Her poetry was published in various journals in Iran. One of her poems, celebrating women's expanded role in society, was displayed at the tomb of Reza Shah in Tehran. When, after the Revolution, she was approached by the government to write a poem in praise of Khomeini, she refused. "I told them I don't write poems for kings or government leaders. I write poetry as an expression of my feelings." Amid's house was ransacked, her jewelry and money confiscated by the government agents. The Iranian government pronounced her "*mamno ol qalam*," the one with a forbidden pen. She soon left Iran for the United States.

Amid's poetry has matured in the United States. Her poems, often in style of classical Persian poetry, were of love and its miseries. Now, social consciousness gives them a soul. She wrote the following poem out of anger for a government that dictated her moves and her disappointment at those who followed without asking:

At the end, chains on feet I danced
though informed, feigning ignorance I danced.
With their rhythm I danced
not, but in punishment, chains on feet I danced.
Though everyone watched my dance of death,
they did not see, for invisible I danced.
I did not enliven the night of those drunk with wine,
alone and rejected, for those without feet or head I danced.
There was a mirror reflecting me and the likeness of others,
broken heart, weary, and anxious I danced.
Music and song reached the world from the baths,
in darkness for the deaf I danced.
I set forth with lofty purpose and reached out with good wishes,
so I would not be accused, for passersbys I danced.
In the evolving world, like a captive in a cage,
wings folded one over another, flying with tied feathers I danced.
Like a breeze in a flower's hug, I am a companion and a confident,
but in a gale with tattered clothes I danced.
From sunrise to sunset I have seen a ray of hope,
searching for it from border to border I danced.
I looked and saw others looking with wonder,
without knowing, for the satisfaction of others I had danced.¹

¹ This is a simple translation of the poem without attention to poetic form and rhyme.

A book of Amid's poems was published in 1987. The rest of her poems are scattered in various journals or unpublished. Two Jewish-Iranian magazines, *Shofar* and *Chashm Andaz* publish poetry and short stories, and there is a literary circle among Iranian Jews living in the Los Angeles area that encourages women to write. But most poets and writers I interviewed seemed astonished that anyone would be interested in their writing.

Michelle Koukhab is a promising female poet. "For me, poetry has been an outlet to create a new language where I can understand all my cultural parts," she says. Poetry fuses Michelle's two cultures, her life in America as a woman with many opportunities and her Iranian world, which she has seen only through her parents' stories and the tastes and smells of Persian food at home. She writes about her borrowed memories:

I ask for stories of purple onion domes
and auditoriums with red velvet chairs.
Men in mustaches and women without faces.
My mother tells me about community bathrooms:
shriveled bodies standing close,
stained flesh, puddles
of dead skin and water.
Chickens she raised in her back yard
ran reckless, their heads still red.

I would have liked to go to market:
A woman vends seedless grapes;
a man sells sabzi for homemade dinners,
and the street's breath is of rotten meat, garbage.

Today in Iran, door closed
a Persian woman copies
television screens of Madonna.
Her thick black hair
hangs in her glitter eyes.
Silver blouse half-buttoned, naked
shoulders, one nipple.
Slinky legs parade over
Persian rugs. Her mouth
painted strawberry,
kisses vacant air.

Michelle's interest is a new phase in her life that has taken both parents by surprise. "Growing up in the United States, she avoided Iranian music and literature, trying to integrate into American life," Michelle's mother said. Michelle now combines the two diverse and sometimes opposite cultures to recreate herself.

In 1946, William S. Haas wrote that the novel was a form of literature that did not exist in Iran:

"For, of the two great subjects of the novel, the first (love between man and woman) could not, in view of woman's status, become the object of literary description and analysis – except in lyrics – while the second (the social problem) did not present itself at all. It would not be surprising if some women writers would appear on the scene, as they have done in Turkey and India, to contribute their part to the literary effort. (186)

Hass predicted accurately that education would be the catalyst for women writers' interest in prose. However, as in poetry, Jewish women did not keep step with the rest of Iranian women. Simin Daneshvar, Iran's first female novelist published her first novel, *Savushun*, in 1969. Since then, Iranian women have written short stories and novels in a fast pace, many of which have been translated into English.

Considering the small Jewish community of only 25,000, I was amazed to find a Jewish woman now writing in Iran. She is Ilham Yaqoubian, author of *Daryay-e Khamoush (The Silent Sea)* and *Tondbad-e Sarnevesh (The Strong Wind of Fate)*. The inaccessibility of Yaqoubian's books is a major obstacle to her recognition. Jewish female critics both in Iran and abroad ignore her work as mediocre. Shirindokht Daqiqian, a literary critic and a well known translator in Iranian circles, would not acknowledge Yaqoubian as a writer: "How can one begin to compare her work to Toni Morrison's *Beloved* or Nadine Gordimer's *July's People*," the two books Daqiqian has recently translated into Persian. I asked her if it was possible for Iranian writers to be social critics without fearing reprisal from the government. She emphasized that one of the qualities that distinguishes a superb writer is her courage. Persian, she said, is a flexible language that can accommodate ambiguities. She added that Yaqoubian's topic and style need improvement; that she needs to read more of the masterpieces and to educate herself in the techniques of good writing in order to set herself apart.

Unfortunately Yaqoubian was denied a visa to the United States, where she was hoping to participate in various conferences for Iranian writers. Her work is not included in the annual publication by the International Center for Iranian Jewish Oral History.

When criticized for writing in English, the Indian writer, Anita Desai explained, "to me the English language was the key to a world literature" (*The Other Voice* 64). In fact, many Indian authors have claimed international recognition by writing in English (Dharwadker 237). Yaqoubian needs the English language market. Unless translated, Yaqoubian's books will fail to have an impact abroad.

Lack of recognition, however, is not the first impediment Yaqoubian has faced in publishing her novels. She wrote her first novelette at age 16 and submitted it for publication at age 20 at the insistence of family and friends. The publisher was hesitant. The author had three elements against her: youth, gender and religion. The book was heavily edited without the author's permission to pass the ethical, social and political requirements for publication. The only original copy is still held by the publisher who refuses its return.

In her second book, Yaqoubian had to manipulate both her language and themes to avoid similar censorship. The very first words in *Tondbad-e Sarnevesht* are "*benam-e khoda* (in God's name). Throughout the story, God's name is evoked as responsible for many of the events. Fate determines Shaqayeq Amini's life, and faith in God propels her toward the future. She is incapable of controlling events and instead stays passive in the face of natural and supernatural forces. She allows family and friends, who are wiser than a single woman, to make the important decisions for her.

Another author of Iranian heritage is Susanne Pari, the daughter of an Iranian Moslem father and a half-Jewish American mother. Pari's life was divided between her home in Iran, where she never had contact with Iranian Jews, and her home in a predominately Jewish neighborhood in New York City. She felt that her mother was alienated from both sides of her family. Pari's father once told her, "you understand that no one here knows that your mother is Jewish," implying that it should be an "unpleasant"

secret between them. Although her mother had converted to Islam for sake of her husband's family, Pari realized that her mother's Jewish background was a liability for the entire family in Iran. However, the Jewish community in the United States has claimed Pari as one of their own. She is often invited to speak to Jewish groups.

A comparison of Yaqoubian's book with Pari's *The Fortune Catcher* underscores the gift of freedom of speech that Pari enjoys. Both books contain love stories and end with happy marriages. In the following scene, Leyla and Dariush realize their love for each other in *The Fortune Catcher*:

When he kisses her, he feels their bodies trembling. She tastes like cinnamon. He kisses her neck and she presses her hands against his back. He feels as if they have done this many times before, as if he does not have to think what comes next, as if that had also has already happened before. He feels her nipples against his chest and pulls back to look at her. She is perfect, he thinks. They stand there staring – breathless, expectant. He puts his hand over her breast. She closes her eyes. (70)

In contrast, Shaqayeq in *Tondbad-e Sarnevesht* meets the husband her mother has chosen for her. Her mother greets her after school:

We had a guest today, a very nice and wise woman. I had heard about her before. She has a nice son with a good job who has seen you and has approved of you.

I know you will like him. I have seen the son from a distance. (64)

When facing her daughter's refusal, she adds coldly and with indifference: "Anyhow, I have given them a positive response and we have made all arrangements" (65). Shaqayeq feels like a sacrifice. However, when she meets Farhad in a room full of chaperones, she realizes that he is handsome. At the end of the chapter she recognizes that she has misjudged her mother, who has made the right choice for her happiness (83-5).

Whereas Pari's only concern is writing a viable book that would please her readers, Yaqoubian worries about censorship and even the threat of judicial punishment. However, she is amazingly clever in manipulating the language. She creates two voices: one serving the heroine's needs and the other society's ethical and moral codes of conduct.

Although morality dictates the necessity of an arranged marriage, it is Shaqayeq who chooses her husband. She finds Farhad to be a kind and open minded man who encourages her to continue her education. Their private communications are wrapped in a shroud of small events and endless conversations to divert attention from the transgression of ethical codes. In the end, Shaqayeq marries Farhad for his looks, his intelligence, his unquestioning respect for her and their compatibility. The author conveys a love that simmers just below the surface of the book.

In Yaqoubian's novel, time and events are never identified. The setting is Tehran and the northern cities along the Caspian sea. Is it before or after the Revolution? Only "the clock" and "the seasons" tell us the time. There are no religious clues. The weddings and funerals are devoid of any ceremonies. The names are all Persian. Ironically the only one with a religious connotation is her own name, Yaqoubian, meaning a descendent of Jacob.

While Yaqoubian was trying to find a publisher for her first novel, another Iranian Jewish woman was writing her first novel, *Cry of the Peacock*, in the United States. Gina B. Nahai was born in Tehran. She studied in a Swiss boarding school and emigrated to the United States with her parents in 1977. She has her Masters in Creative Writing from University of Southern California. Nahai has just finished her second novel, *Moonlight on the Avenue of Faith*, and is currently working on her third novel, *Sunday's Silence*.

Nahai is the first novelist to write of Jewish women's experiences across the last two centuries in Iran. Her two published books are the first known novels to portray Jewish life in Iran from a female point of view. She concentrates on women's lives in the Jewish ghettos, their victimization by the Moslems, abuse by their own male co-religionists, and their unbroken will to survive. The author's masterful use of myths and the traditional style of exaggeration give her novels a Persian flavor. Nahai explores the web of customs and traditions that suffocated girls in marriage to older men in *Cry of the Peacock*:

Joseph the Winemaker had never slept with a woman before. He came into the room that night to see his wife, and found a child crying in his bed. Behind the door, a dozen people had gathered to see the marriage consummated. They were the bride and groom's parents, the rabbi who had married them, the elders who commanded authority solely by their age and years of suffering. They would wait there until Joseph had conquered his bride and proven his manhood and her chastity. (79)

Through such scenes, the author draws clear pictures of Iranian Jewish women's lives in the beginning of the twentieth century.

Another writer of Persian heritage is the Israeli author, Dorit Rabinyan. Her first book *Persian Brides* is written in Hebrew. She depicts two young Jewish brides from the small fictional village of Omerijan, recapturing Jewish life in countless forgotten corners of Iran. Many women of my generation have heard similar stories from their grandmothers.

The bride was expected to display her skills at cleaning and chopping the *sabzi*, the seasoning herbs that Janjan sold in the bazaar. Nazie was nine years old and Flora thirteen when the joyous ululation, *li-li-li*, burst out around Homa, and the bride's kohl-painted eyes widened in alarm. The women of the family and the village formed a circle around her, pressing their breasts together and shaking them as they danced with widespread legs, laughing and beating on drums.

Nazie was tense as if it was she and not Homa who was going to marry the singer's son. She ignored the teasing and observed everything closely, learning and absorbing, so as not to fail the *sabzi* test when her time came. (141)

Nazie, who has not menstruated yet, is taught to value life only within the boundaries of marriage. She looks like a child playing "house" at her wedding night. Her dress is many sizes too large; the shoes slip off her feet. She needs to urinate but is too shy to ask permission.

Mousa came in and at once kissed Nazie's lips. His eyes were shut, and his lips tinkled on hers like a teaspoon stirring sugar in a glass of tea. Putting his hand to the front of her dress, he unbuttoned it slowly, until the damp feather breasts fell out with the strip of bed sheet and rolled on the floor. He tickled her with his fingers. Nazie giggled, and the stream of urine that flowed into her underpants spread a pleasant warmth between her thighs. Mousa did not notice the odorous circle that spread slowly through her damp dress. He only opened his eyes and saw Nazie laughing in the dark when he heard his mother's jubilant voice shouting:

“Well, you finished, Mousa, you finished there?” Miriam Hanoum thumped on the door enthusiastically. “You two finished now?” (236)

Dorit Rabinyan ends the book with these words, showing her preoccupation with our Persian matrilineage. The author poses harsh questions about women’s lives in patriarchal societies. How could have it happened to our mothers? How would anyone allow a child to marry? Is it rape or matrimony? Why did mothers encourage the horrors that had been once theirs?

Rabinyan’s stories are drawn from her mother and grandmothers’ bags of memories. Unlike Nahai, she has not researched Iranian history. There are errors in her novel such as the presence of camels in northern Iran. She mixes real-life stories with tales of superstition to recreate imaginatively the country she has never seen. The result is a fascinating mystical story.

The language is a powerful tool Rabinyan employs to step back in time and place. The Persian words flavor the book and add yet another layer of meaning for Persian-speaking readers. Some of the Persian words are usually used only by the older generation of Jews. An Iranian woman said:

Having left Iran 23 years ago and my grandmother being dead for almost 10 years, I never thought I would hear these words again. I definitely never expected to see them in print. I was told by my parents not to use the unsophisticated Jewish ghetto words. We had left the ghettos, trying to integrate ourselves in the more sophisticated world of educated Moslems. We would have liked to forget “words” that would identify us as ghetto Jews, or simply Jews. The feeling that these same words stir in me is difficult to explain: a combination of sadness, nostalgia and belonging. I feel that my background is important and that my grandmother’s voice, although small, should be a valued part of me. (Zamanian)

No book by Iranian women writers explores life in today’s Iran as closely as *The Fortune Catcher* by Susanne Pari. The two main characters of the book, Dariush and Layla, are wealthy, well-educated and westernized members of the Tehran elite, like the author herself. Her reference to Jewish life does not go beyond showing the blind mistrust of Jews by the Moslem fanatics and the Israelis’ attempts to help them leave the country to safety. Yet Pari succeeds in portraying various segments of Tehrani culture. Pari is unafraid of criticizing the Islamic regime and exposing Iranians’ unhappiness with their religious leaders, nor is she afraid of using sexuality as a normal expression of human feelings. On both fronts, she is contesting the accepted norms of Iranian society today.

What is the future of women’s writing in Iran and abroad? How will the books written in Iran reach Iranian women abroad, and will books by Iranian women abroad be translated into Persian? There is already a second generation of Iranian women in exile. Will they, as writers, be able to give their books a Persian flavor and theme?

The future of Jewish women writers of Iranian background is unclear. In the United States and Israel, as first-generation immigrants die, as the memories of the second generation fade, will the third generation carry the torch? Of course the descendants of Iranian Jews will write. But will it be of Iran? Will the stories carry the memories through the minds of women writers who do not speak the language, who have never seen the country? Moslem women living in Iran will keep their stories flowing. With the rush of Jewish immigration out of Iran, however, the well will eventually run dry for Jewish women. It is imperative for them to write now before the stories are forgotten.

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