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Traveling Between Iranian and American Identities

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by Leila Pazargadi

**M**arch is full of commemorations and festivities, not just for women during Women's Herstory Month but for Iranians, who are busy preparing for the Persian New Year on March 20th. During the two-week Eid-e-Nowrooz celebration, Iranians mark the new year with the beginning of spring. Nowrooz is thus a time of rebirth and renewal, during which family members come together around a Sofra-ye Haft Sin, a table display decorated with objects beginning with the Persian letter for "S." A traditional spread includes garlic cloves (*sir*), vinegar (*serkeh*), seeds of wild rue (*esfand*), coins (*sekkeh*), grown wheat (*sabzi*), apples (*seeb*), and a wheat pudding (*samanu*) symbolic of Iran's 2000-year-old cultural past.

In this time of celebration, I find myself reflecting not only about this year's accomplishments but also about my research on Iranian women writers and my travels to Iran during the past summer. As an Iranian born in the United States, I have been immersed in both Iranian and American cultures and find the intersection between the two particularly interesting, especially as it pertains to the

*Persian Class at Dekhoda Institute:  
Students were from the Netherlands,  
France, Germany, Taiwan, Korea,  
Italy, Sudan and the U.S.*



ever-increasing Iranian Diasporic community in Los Angeles and Orange County. Raised with somewhat traditional Iranian cultural values, which includes a mandatory decree that requires that only Persian be spoken within the home, in effect I grew up in “Little Iran” in the heart of a very conservative and American Orange County.

It is not surprising that I chose Comparative Literature as my realm for exploration, study and growth, since as a comparatist I can study literature in a global context. In my research project, I specifically focus on contemporary Iranian women writers, comparing writers from the Diaspora with those who are publishing “inside” the nation of Iran. My project explores how Iranian writers abroad have found it essential to record their stories about relocating themselves in the “West” in order to reconstruct their ties with Iran. I explore how these writers compare with those writing in Iran.

Perhaps, I am a bit naïve in valorizing myself as an academic shero, whose quest is to research and preserve Irani-

an women’s narratives. Nevertheless, I feel that through the study of my literary forbearers, I am not only beginning to investigate the richness of Iran’s literary past but I am also exploring my own position as a woman oscillating between Iranian, Muslim, and American identities.

Because my literary focus is contemporary Persian literature, last summer I decided to strengthen my language skills in a formal environment and enrolled in a Persian language class at the Dekhoda Institute in Tehran. I had been to Iran only once before; so, this trip would be my second “return” to Iran. I was impatient to arrive in Tehran, not just to reunite with my family and friends but to fully immerse in my language. It was an entirely new and unique experience for me to travel to a country where I could speak Persian all the time, when I had previously only had the chance to use Persian in the home or at a market or cultural event. As students at Dekhoda, we used newspaper articles, short stories, and poems to strengthen our literary skills. It was there at the institute that I had my first chance

to read a short excerpt by a celebrated woman writer, Goli Taraghi, who has since greatly inspired me. In her memoir, *Khaterhai Parakandeh* (Scattered Memories), Taraghi uses the language of our mothers and grandmothers to record her life story, thus presenting the Persian language through the inflection of a woman's tongue. I will never forget the image of little Goli standing in the snow, waiting for the Shemiran bus to take her to school. The images that she paints within her novel engage the reader with the quotidian, while her simple, yet expressive style of writing invokes the tradition of storytelling preserved by mothers and daughters for generations.

Later that summer, as fate would have it, I met Goli Taraghi in London. After completing my summer term at Dehkhoda, I traveled to London on a CSW travel grant to present at the Sixth Biennial Conference of the International Society for Iranian Studies, co-sponsored by the Iranian Heritage Foundation at the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies. At the conference, I presented on my work as part of the "Women Writers Panel," in which I examined the writings of immigrants who have published in the genre of memoir, most notably Azar Nafisi's controversial *Reading Lolita in Tehran* and Azadeh Moaveni's *Lipstick Jihad*. After my presentation, I was surprised to see, seated in the front row with raised hand, none other than Goli Taraghi. It was an honor to see her there, but more importantly to learn from her advice and insight into the subjectivity of writing, especially as an Iranian woman.

At the conclusion of both the conference and my Iranian and European adventures, I got caught in the height of the Heathrow bomb scare last August, which revealed that such ordinary toiletries as nail polish remover could be used to create explosives. Making my way through long delays, long lines, and numerous security checks as well as racial profiling, I attempted to cross national, international, and cultural borders. While many were undoubtedly questioned and/or searched, as an Iranian-American with dual citizenship, I had taken for granted the privileging of my

"double" status: my ability to travel to almost any part the world. And yet, I was still seen as an "ethnic other" by the Heathrow airport security agent who judged my nationality as "foreigner" according to my last name. Could I, Leila Pazargadi, small-town Yorba Linda native of Orange County be perceived as a potential terrorist threat? These thoughts were truly disconcerting as I prepared for re-entry into the United States.

Even after the trips that I have taken between the U.S. and Iran, I am still struck by how I struggle with the formulation of my identity politics: Am I Iranian, American, or Iranian-American? I question how my identity politics shift in Los Angeles, or "Tehrangeles" (as Iranians have sometimes called it)? With the fusion of traditional and modern values in the U.S., how does the Persian culture mutate into something beautiful, practical, or even materialistic and unrecognizable? Like my literary predecessors, I find myself grappling with the same questions of cultural and identity displacement, invoking their experiences and fusing them with mine in the exploration of contemporary Persian literature.

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