UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

Between Fiction, Memoir, and Manifesto:

Negotiating Exile in the Works of Abnousse Shalmani

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy in French and Francophone Studies

by

Arpi Melikyan

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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Negotiating Exile in the Works of Abnousse Shalmani

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University of California, Los Angeles, 2025

Professor Dominic Thomas, Chair

This dissertation examines the literary works of Abnousse Shalmani to explore the dynamic ways in which she negotiates exile and cultural displacement through transnational and transcultural perspectives. Following the Iranian Revolution of 1979, Shalmani and her family were exiled to France in 1985 – an event that marked a definitive rupture with her Iranian childhood. As a French literary writer, film director, and journalist of Iranian descent, Shalmani has garnered attention for her editorial publications, in which she engages with issues informed by contemporary cultural, historical, and political developments in both the West and the Middle East. To this end, her literary enterprise sheds light on the far-reaching global reverberations of

the Islamic Revolution and serves as a response to the Iranian regime's institutionalized and homogenizing structures of oppression, in which women are systematically denied equal standing with men in public life.

While Abnousse Shalmani has received considerable attention for her active involvement in journalism and the French media, her literary publications have not been the subject of academic scholarship. Through a close analysis of *Khomeiny, Sade et moi* (2014), *Les exilés meurent aussi d'amour* (2018), and *Éloge du Métèque* (2019), this dissertation seeks to redress the imbalance by investigating the themes and questions central to the negotiation of identity in the diasporic context, namely, assimilation, displacement, integration, and cultural hybridity. Across all three works, a constellation of cultural, historical, and literary references is interwoven with personal anecdotes, creating a rich tapestry of intimate memories that span Shalmani's childhood in Iran to her life in France following emigration. Her philosophical inquiries and critically informed insights contribute to ongoing global debates on gender and identity politics, censorship, women's rights, and the regulation of Muslim attire and the "immigration crisis" in the West – all of which remain pressing issues today and call for serious ethical, moral, and political intervention.

The dissertation of Arpi Melikyan is approved.

Lia N. Brozgal

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University of California, Los Angeles

2025

In loving memory of my father, Dr. Albert Melikyan

This dissertation is dedicated to my family
and to those who have been a guiding
compass to all the places I call home.

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Acknowledgements

I vividly recall the words of my late father: “I am split in two – I negotiate my identity between the part of me that is an Armenian patriot and the part that is a globalist.” My father’s compelling description of his dual identity, one that owed allegiance to a world community without compromising his unwavering love for his homeland, remains a beacon of encouragement for the possibility of living, as Salman Rushdie and Abnousse Shalmani have famously said, “caught between two stools.” The trajectory of my dissertation and intellectual inquiries has reaffirmed this conviction.

My family and I settled in the United States in 2001, and for as long as I can remember, the administrative challenges of immigration have been an ongoing subject of discussion in our household. Each conversation served as a daunting reminder of my marginal and tenuous legal status in the United States. As a DACA recipient, these uncertainties remain a persistent reality. Despite the many demands of immigrant life, my parents remained committed to providing their children with an outstanding education at leading American institutions. Embarking on my academic studies at UCLA and completing this dissertation would not have been possible without the moral and intellectual guidance of my parents.

My research interests are the culmination of my personal trajectory as an immigrant and also of the many enriching academic and professional interactions I have had with professors, colleagues, and students at UCLA. It has been a true privilege to be part of this vibrant community of scholars. I wish to express my deepest gratitude for the generous academic and financial support I have received from the Department of European Languages and Transcultural Studies and UCLA’s Graduate Division throughout the course of my studies.

I would like to thank my committee chair, Professor Dominic Thomas, not only for his mentorship throughout the arduous journey of writing a dissertation, but also for introducing me to the world of Abnousse Shalmani, whose work I have ever since connected with on both an intellectual and personal level. Her audacious nature, candor, and intellectual rigor continue to inspire me and represent qualities that I strive to emulate. I extend my gratitude to Professor Lia Brozgal, Professor Alain Mabanckou, and Professor Peter Cowe for their support and for helping shape my intellectual curiosities. I have been fortunate to learn from and collaborate with them in several valuable ways. I also wish to express my sincere thanks to all the professors at UCLA with whom I have worked and whose classes I have attended as both an undergraduate and graduate student. I am indebted to Dr. Kimberly Jansma, Dr. Laurence Denié-Higney, and Dr. Nina Bjekovic for their continuous support of my professional development as a language instructor. Their extensive knowledge of language acquisition and pedagogy has been an invaluable source of learning and has contributed immensely to my growth as an educator.

I am also thankful to have been part of the organizing committee for the Graduate Student Colloquium in Armenian Studies in the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Cultures. During the 21st annual colloquium, Dr. Shushan Karapetian, in her speech as keynote speaker, shared a remark that continues to resonate with me. As I bring this chapter at UCLA to a close, with the hope that I have produced meaningful work, I carry with me her insight that a dissertation is “an entry-ticket to the world of academia.” Dr. Karapetian’s statement remains a gentle reminder that excellence is a mindset, not an end goal. As an up-and-coming scholar, I recognize that my academic contributions – like life itself and the connections I forge with loved ones, friends, students, colleagues – are also works in progress that require diligent and patient cultivation on a daily basis. The thought-provoking conversations and interactions at UCLA have

been a source of inspiration for my present and future academic projects. Dr. Hagop Kouloujian's generosity and willingness to support my academic endeavors have encouraged me to expand my research in Armenian Studies.

Lastly, to reflect on my journey as a graduate student, I cannot overlook the profound personal challenges I have faced, one of which was the loss of my beloved father during the Covid-19 pandemic. While it may sound cliché, reading and writing have offered me a meaningful space in which to navigate and find solace amidst what, at times, seemed like insurmountable difficulties. On a broader scale, I must also acknowledge the many challenges that we, as global citizens, faced in the early 2020s, which – unfortunately – remind us that the shadows of the 20th century continue to cast their influence on today's world. Having had the privilege to engage thoughtfully and productively with historical and political developments during the course of writing my dissertation has been a gift for which I am deeply grateful.

I sincerely thank my dissertation advisors, professors, family, friends, and loved ones for their continuous support, with the hope that my present and future academic contributions will not only reflect the positive outcome of their guidance but will also serve as a meaningful expression of gratitude for the intellectual curiosity, wisdom, and care that they all have imparted to me.

Curriculum Vitae

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LANGUAGES

Armenian Native language
English Native proficiency
French Native proficiency
Spanish Near Native proficiency

Introduction:

> We wanderers, ever seeking the lonelier way, begin no day where we have ended another day; and no sunrise finds us where sunset left us. Even while the earth sleeps we travel. We are the seeds of the tenacious plant, and it is in our ripeness and our fullness of heart that we are given to the wind and are scattered.
>
> — Kahlil Gibran, *The Prophet*

> Le métèque est une fiction, le créateur et la création, le Maharal de Prague et le Golem. Il se crée en usant des histoires comme de la glaise pour se donner une forme. Il arrive que la créature échappe à son maître, et parfois le métèque se retrouve à courir après son Golem, devenu plus fort que lui, incontrôlable. Alors, le métèque s'efface derrière l'œuvre qu'il a lui-même enfantée.
>
> — Abnousse Shalmani, *Éloge du Métèque*

As an airplane carrying Iranian passengers departed from Tehran and left Iranian airspace headed to France, the exiled emigrants breathed a sigh of relief. Nevertheless, myriad doubts lingered in the minds of the newly defeated communists and royalists on their way to a new place they would eventually call home.[1] The imminent arrival in Paris promised respite from the turbulence of the 1979 Islamic Revolution, yet the future was filled with uncertainty. Among the hopeful travelers fleeing the rise of Iran's first Supreme Leader were eight-year-old Shirin, her pregnant mother Niloophar, and her father Siamak, who were soon to reunite with the remaining members of the Hedayat family.[2] While the hasty departure from their homeland eased the pain

[1]After the Iranian Revolution of 1979, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the Shah of the Imperial State of Iran, was overthrown by the Islamic revolutionary Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. What began as a united effort between Khomeini and a "wider coalition" of ideological groups, namely, "Islamists, secular liberals, nationalists, communists, and Islamist-Marxists," to remove the Shah from power and "to protest against the Westernisation of Iran," culminated in the consolidation of the Islamic theocracy and the persecution and exile of those who did not adhere to its political, social, and religious ideologies. For more on the Islamic Revolution and its broader geopolitical influence from 1979 onwards, see: *Ideology and Iran's Revolution: How 1979 Changed the World*.
Ali Ansari and Kasra Aarabi, *Ideology and Iran's Revolution: How 1979 Changed the World* (London: Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, February 11, 2019), 9, https://www.institute.global/insights/geopolitics-and-security/ideology-and-irans-revolution-how-1979-changed-world.

[2] In the prologue of *Les exilés meurent aussi d'amour*, Shirin, the novel's protagonist, introduces herself as being named after an "antique reine arménienne depréssive (certainement vierge)" (depressed ancient Armenian queen (certainly a virgin)). Omid, a Jewish family friend of the Hedayats, later recounts to Shirin the legend of the romance

of physical separation, the family's reunification in France would initiate a series of unforeseen events that would mark a break with their previous lives.

Abnousse Shalmani's novel *Les exilés meurent aussi d'amour* (2018) opens with the precarious moment at which displaced individuals and groups leave their home and begin to think about life post-migration. Although the uprooting of the exiled subjects is situated within the historical context of the Iranian Revolution, the prologue of the text adopts a broader perspective to emphasize the universal experience of the exilic condition. The departing Iranians, like all exiles who leave from a place where they could no longer return, were "tourmentés par les mêmes questions, étouffés par les mêmes doutes, assommés par l'Histoire" (tormented by the same questions, suffocated by the same doubts, knocked out by History).[3] The novel interlaces the genre of historical fiction with elements of magical realism to explore the cultural, familial, and political challenges of a communist Iranian immigrant family that struggles to renounce their revolutionary pursuits following their precipitous escape to France. In narrating the Hedayat family's migrant trajectory from the perspective of Shirin, the young protagonist who reveals

between the Zoroastrian Sasanian prince Khosrow II and the Christian princess whom she is named after, offering a possible explanation for her father's choice in granting his daughter a mythological name imbued with "la dimension des dieux" (the dimension of gods). Omid's narration presents Shirin as the sole daughter of the queen of Armenia, Mahin Banu. Although Shirin and Khosrow share a mutual love, they continually miss opportunities to form a relationship due to various obstacles, including political obligations that force Khosrow to be away at war, Shirin's mother's disapproval of their union, his rivalry with Shirin's suitor Farhad, and his marriages to other women. Despite these challenges, their love for one another persists. Khosrow and Shirin eventually reunite and marry, but their happiness is short-lived when Khosrow's son from a previous marriage kills him on the wedding night for his own infatuation with Shirin. Overcome with grief, Shirin commits suicide on Khosrow's tomb, marking the tragic end of their love story. Shalmani's reference to this ill-fated romance, narrated most famously by the twelfth-century Persian epic poet Nizami Ganjavi, highlights the intertextual and intercultural nature of the novel and foreshadows the separation between the protagonists, Shirin and Omid, and their own inability to consolidate their romantic relationship due to familial restrictions and unfortunate circumstances. The intertextuality of the novel functions as a narrative device that drives the plot while also underscoring the dynamic interactions between diverse religions and cultures, as exemplified in the epic poem. Furthermore, the symbolic gesture of Siamak granting his daughter a name that carries what Shirin refers to as the "dimension of gods" points to the novel's decentering of familial hierarchies and power structures, highlighting the important role of the gradually developing bond and exchange between father and daughter.
Abnousse Shalmani, *Les exilés meurent aussi d'amour* (Paris: Éditions Grasset & Fasquelle, 2018), 13 and 101.
All English translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

[3] Ibid, 12.

herself to be the author of the book as the novel comes to an end, Shalmani draws compelling parallels between the rite of passage to adulthood and the process of identity formation of displaced subjects on the path to integration. Thus, the narrator's emotionally charged trajectory of assimilation into the cultural and social fabric of France unfolds through the various transitions that occur over the course of her thirty years of exile, gradually revealing Shirin's experience of cultural and familial estrangement.

From the moment Shirin lands in Paris, the disconnect between home and the adoptive country becomes immediately apparent as she observes the stark disparities between their new residence and the one they indefinitely leave behind. The sudden disillusionment Shirin experiences upon her arrival at the modest and unhomely Parisian apartment in which the entire Hedayat family is to reside echoes the sentiments of displaced migrants at the time of their entry into the adoptive community. Shirin's initial impression of their humble abode evokes feelings of confinement and immobility, prompting her to define the alienating experience of exile as follows: "L'exil, c'est d'abord ça: un espace confiné, entouré d'un monde inconnu et vaste, et d'autant plus inaccessible qu'il paraît impossible de s'échapper de la cage où s'amassent les restes misérables du pays natal. J'étais coincée" (Exile is first of all this: a confined space, surrounded by an unknown and vast world, and all the more inaccessible as it seems impossible to escape from the cage where the miserable remnants of the native country gather. I was stuck).[4] Shirin's sense of captivity is further reinforced when she finds herself plagued by doubt, a persistent state of ambiguity and uncertainty to which she continually resorts as a mechanism for questioning her surroundings and the interrelational dynamics among the various members of her family. Upon reuniting with her maternal aunts, their interactions yield a new awareness of life

[4] Ibid, 18.

abroad. These women whom Shirin aspired to resemble had been transformed by exile, and this becomes a source of confusion given that she had constructed a loving image of them from afar. The absence of affection from her aunts incites within Shirin feelings of abandonment and uprootedness, and a longing for a place where she may find refuge. Exile thus manifests itself as an unsettling experience that alienates and destabilizes the protagonists, compelling them to negotiate between an irreconcilable past and an unpredictable future.

Abnousse Shalmani's representation of exile as a condition of geographical dislocation and emotional disorientation in the introductory pages of *Les exilés meurent aussi d'amour* provides an interesting point of entry to the recent discussions of questions pertaining to identity construction and immigration in France – a country she describes as "built upon cosmopolitanism" rather than multiculturalism.[5] The distinction Shalmani highlights in an interview with *Asymptote* magazine is crucial for understanding the broader historical and political context of France's assimilation policies and the various ways in which they have shaped her perspectives on integration as an exiled subject. Shalmani characterizes French society as cosmopolitan given that the French Republican model of citizenship "sees a citizen before [their] origin," whereas a multicultural society "never gets past the origin."[6] This dissertation begins by exploring *Les exilés meurent aussi d'amour* (2018) and the autobiographical essay *Khomeiny, Sade et moi* (2014) to analyze the various ways in which Shalmani negotiates the displacements of exile from a female perspective, particularly how this dissociative experience is complicated by a sense of un-belonging within prescribed, binary cultural, familial, ideological, and religious structures during the process of integration into the

[5] Nina Sparling, "In Conversation: Abnousse Shalmani on the Politics of the Female Body," *Asymptote*, December 15, 2016, https://www.asymptotejournal.com/blog/2016/12/15/11103/.

[6] Ibid, 3.

host community. The first two chapters of this dissertation will also analyze Shalmani's exploration of doubt as both a dialectical and ontological process through which subjectivity and autonomy are claimed – a theme prevalent in her journalistic and literary publications. Shalmani attributes her intellectual thinking and education to the profound cultural influence of the Enlightenment, and more specifically, the French Revolution, which she claims was not only an "événement historique mais l'outil de la critique universelle. L'universalisme, qui est la bête noire des réactionnaires – de Joseph de Maistre aux islamistes en passant par les néoconservateurs – tant ses principes résonnent en tous ceux qui à travers le monde remettent en question Dieu, l'État absolu, les préjugés et les coutumes et se battent pour la démocratie, le droit, la liberté individuelle, le sexe sans Dieu, le rire" (historical event but the tool of universal criticism. Universalism, which is the bane of reactionaries – from Joseph de Maistre to Islamists to neoconservatives – as its principles resonate with all those around the world who question God, the absolute state, prejudices, and customs, and fight for democracy, law, individual freedom, sex without God, and laughter).[7] Guided by the tripartite motto *Liberté*, *Égalité*, *Fraternité* (Liberty, Equality, Fraternity), the ideological foundations of the French Revolution helped shape "the basic definition of what being republican meant: a universal citizen led by reason and education out of the divine and the irrational and into a democratic and modern way of life."[8] Contextualized by these disruptive intellectual and philosophical frameworks from which Enlightenment thought and reasoning emerged, Shalmani in the article "Les Enfants de Spinoza et de Sade" reconceptualizes the experience of exile, suggesting that "[s]i l'exil est toujours une douleur, il fut surtout une chance pour la petite fille née à Téhéran" ([i]f exile is

[7] Abnousse Shalmani, "Les enfants de Spinoza et de Sade," *Revue des deux mondes (1982)*, June 2016, 62.

[8] Eliane Françoise DalMolin, *France from 1851 to the Present: Universalism in Crisis* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 91.

always a pain, it was above all a chance for the little girl born in Tehran).[9] As a former political refugee, Shalmani has gained insights into her experience of exile through the principles and "tools" associated with Enlightenment thinkers, namely, "free will, the separation of powers, the autonomy of the individual in a community, Reason as a compass in place of the superstitions of the Church, and so on."[10] Shalmani's understanding of displacement calls to mind Edward W. Said's rethinking of the exilic condition in "Reflections on Exile," where he describes the experience as a "nomadic, decentered, contrapuntal" existence, a moment when "[s]eeing 'the entire world as a foreign land' makes possible originality of vision," and an "*alternative* to the mass institutions that dominate modern life. […] But, provided that the exile refuses to sit on the sidelines nursing a wound, there are things to be learned: he or she must cultivate a scrupulous (not indulgent or sulky) subjectivity."[11]

Shalmani is a French literary writer, film director, and journalist of Iranian descent who has gained prominence for her editorial publications in which she engages with issues informed by contemporary cultural, historical, and political events.[12] Born in Tehran on April 1, 1977, she and her family immigrated to France in 1985 to evade persecution in the Islamic Republic of Iran due to their Marxist affiliations. In this capacity, she has emerged as an important interlocutor on a range of (often controversial) questions, notably pertaining to immigration in France, feminism, Islamism, laicism, gender and identity politics, and the Middle East. Shalmani has regularly contributed op-eds to a broad range of French newspapers and magazines such as *Le*

[9] Op. cit., Shalmani, "Les enfants de Spinoza et de Sade," 62.

[10] Op. cit., Sparling, "In Conversation: Abnousse Shalmani on the Politics of the Female Body."

[11] Edward W. Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Literary and Cultural Essays* (London: Granta Books, 2001), 189 and 191.

[12] In her latest publication, *Laïcité, j'écris ton nom!* (2024), Shalmani writes that she is not Franco-Iranian but French – a French woman born in Tehran.

Figaro, *Le Monde*, and *L'Express*, is frequently interviewed, and has become a well-known commentator on various French television programs. The 2018 open letter "Nous défendons une liberté d'importuner, indispensable à la liberté sexuelle" (We defend the freedom to importune, indispensable to sexual freedom), of which she was a signatory, was a source of considerable public debate given that it went against the dominant set of opinions associated with the sexual abuse allegations made against Harvey Weinstein that were the catalyst for the #MeToo social media campaign. The letter was signed by 100 women from diverse intellectual and professional backgrounds and provides a unique commentary on the aforementioned movement given that the letter opposed #MeToo's positions, denounced what it saw as Anglo-American feminism, and advocated instead for women's representation as autonomous agents rather than mere victims of sexual abuse. Shalmani's participation in a letter spearheaded by the actress Catherine Deneuve is reflective of her stance on feminism. As a "universalist-feminist,"[13] Shalmani rejects essentialist-feminism and advocates for equality between genders that "is wholly committed to the idea that a woman, no matter where she is, where she lives, merits the same rights as men. It reminds us that no tradition, no custom, no religion holds up before the law. And the law is equality between men and women in all respects."[14] Shalmani's continuous engagement with

[13] In the interview for *Asymptote* magazine, Shalmani specifies that she is a universalist-feminist. See "'Universalist feminism encourages us to put aside our differences' Interview with Nathalie Heinich in conversation with Cristina Ion" for more on the ongoing debates between universalist feminism and differentialism, two competing paradigms in feminist discourse. Similar to Shalmani, sociologist Nathalie Heinich is a universalist feminist, who "believe[s] in the republican vision of living together, which calls for us to put aside our differences in favor of what we share," and argues that feminism has "always been divided between these views." Heinich claims that differentialist views are now popular due to the influence of American feminist thought, "which centers on the defense of minorities and the affirmation of the specific nature of minorities as a means to combat their marginalization and domination. [Unlike differentialism and essentialist feminism,] [t]he universalist, republican view, on the other hand, calls for us to put aside our differences—not in an absolute manner, but within the civic framework of citizenship—in order to achieve a form of equality that does not systematically assign individuals an identity other than their role as citizens."
Nathalie Heinich and Cristina Ion, "'Universalist Feminism Encourages Us to Put Aside Our Differences': Interview with Nathalie Heinich in Conversation with Cristina Ion," *Cités* 73, no. 1 (2018): 104-5, www.cairn-int.info/journal-cites-2018-1-page-103.htm?contenu=article.

[14] Op. cit., Sparling, "In Conversation: Abnousse Shalmani on the Politics of the Female Body".

current debates – the burqa/veil, inclusive writing, Islamism, laicism, sexual freedom, politics in Iran – informed by questions pertaining to gender, adds a poignant perspective to her exploration of identity construction in the experience of cultural, geographical, and psychological displacement. The intersectionality of her inquiries into gender equality and cultural hybridity provides the framework for the consideration of the various ways in which she situates herself within the diasporic context and examines the process of identity formation of immigrants and exiled subjects through cultural and dialogical negotiations.

The question of ethnic and national identity and belonging is an important point of discussion in Shalmani's literary and journalistic publications, and one that she has continuously addressed.[15] During her speech in 2023 as president of the jury for the 17th ceremony of Le Prix de la laïcité – an event initiated in response to the first veil affairs in Creil, France aimed at promoting laicism and honoring prominent figures who defend its values – Shalmani made the following statement:[16] "Je n'aimerais pas qu'on me regarde comme une pauvre exilée iranienne. […] Je ne suis pas franco-iranienne, je n'ai pas la double nationalité, je suis française qui est née par hasard il y a 46 ans à Téhéran, donc quand vous me croisez, ne baissez pas la tête de côté par

[15] See Patrick Weil's *How to Be French: Nationality in the Making since 1789* for a comprehensive historical analysis of French nationality law and policy from 1789 onward. The guiding inquiry of his study is 'What makes one French?' – a "critical question" that, from the mid-1980s, sparked "harsh political debates, […] revealing a deep divide in French society […]." The political and legal debates surrounding this thorny question are shaped by whether the "elective conception of the nation" – *jus soli* (codified into French law in 1889) – or the "ethnic conception of the nation" – *jus sanguinis* – is a "fundamental principle of the Republic." Despite ongoing contentions in political and legal discourse and the state's legal framework for "Frenchness," "many young people of immigrant origin claimed that legal citizenship did not matter much in practice, that they were in any case still seen by others as foreigners." In his study, Weil asserts that nationality is "a boundary line that is constantly being renegotiated and crossed, not an enclosure. What distinguishes France from other countries is that for as long as it has been defining its nationals, it has experimented with many ways of defining who is 'French by birth[.]' Since the Revolution, France has changed its laws more often and more significantly than any other democratic nation has, and policies governing French nationality have been the object of continual political and legal confrontations."
Patrick Weil, *How to Be French: Nationality in the Making since 1789*, translated by Catherine Porter (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 1 and 3.

[16] Abnousse Shalmani, *Laïcité, j'écris ton nom!* (Paris: Éditions de l'Observatoire, 2024), 11.

respect, considération ou pitié, vous m'insultez" (I would not like for one to perceive me as a poor Iranian exile. […] I am not Franco-Iranian, I do not have dual nationality, I am French who was by chance born 46 years ago in Tehran, so when you meet me, do not lower your head sideways out of respect, consideration or pity, you are insulting me).[17] Despite Shalmani's rejection of a hyphenated national identity that seemingly marginalizes her ethnic origins, she claims a subjectivity that is as rich as it is complex. She begins the article "Les Enfants de Spinoza et de Sade" by reflecting on the "plurality" of her identity and how it has influenced her subjectivity as an immigrant, echoing what Salman Rushdie has described as "double-unbelonging" in *East, West*.[18] Shalmani writes:

> Je suis née à Paris. À 8 ans. Avant, j'étais née à Téhéran. Depuis, je vis le cul entre deux chaises. Entre Orient et Occident et même si c'est inconfortable, c'est la place que je préfère: c'est celle de la liberté. Je suis métèque et je suis la somme de mes choix.[19] Et mes choix se sont affranchis de la naissance et de la religion Je suis une mécréante. J'ai choisi d'être libre. J'aime trop les livres, je crois en les idées. Je suis l'enfant de Spinoza et de Sade. L'enfant de la liberté, de l'athéisme et de l'universalisme. […] J'ai échappé à toute forme de totalitarisme, moi qui suis née dans une famille marxiste, dans un pays qui a connu la première révolution islamiste et qui a vu les uns tenir la main des autres.[20]
>
> I was born in Paris. At 8 years old. Before that, I was born in Tehran. Since then, I've lived caught between two stools. Between the Orient and the Occident, and even though it's uncomfortable, it's the place I prefer: it's the place of freedom. I am a metic, and I am the sum of my choices. And my choices have freed me from birth and religion. I am an unbeliever. I chose to be free. I love books too much, I believe in ideas. I am the child of Spinoza and Sade. The child of freedom, atheism, and universalism. […] I have escaped all forms of totalitarianism, I, who was born into a Marxist family, in a country that experienced the first Islamist revolution and saw some hold the hands of others.

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[17] Abnousse Shalmani, "Laïcité: le discours flamboyant et courageux d'Abnousse Shalmani," YouTube video, 15:44, November 8, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BtvwU0sqG_c&t=27s.

[18] Salman Rushdie, *East, West* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1994), 141.

[19] The Athenian metic social status, which originated in Greek Antiquity, referred to non-citizens or foreigners who settled in the city of Athens. Shalmani's use of the term "metic" interchangeably with "foreigner" in her publications is a subject that will be discussed in Chapter 4. In both the French and Athenian contexts, the label carries connotations of political and social tensions. In *Éloge de métèque*, Shalmani explores the concept of hybridity in relation to the socio-political condition of immigrants and marginalized populations of France by tracing the etymology and cultural evolution of the label "metic."

[20] Op. cit., Shalmani, "Les enfants de Spinoza et de Sade," 61.

In *Imaginary Homelands*, British-American author Salman Rushdie, who is of Kashmiri Muslim descent, writes of a similar identitarian pondering in his attempt to define and navigate his cultural hybridity – a process he characterizes as a transgression of sorts:

> The Indian writer, looking back at India, does so through guilt-tinted spectacles. […] I am speaking now of those of us who emigrated … and I suspect that there are times when the move seems wrong to us all, when we seem, to ourselves, post-lapsarian men and women. We are Hindus who have crossed the black water; we are Muslims who eat pork. And as a result—as my use of the Christian notion of the Fall indicates—we are now partly of the West. Our identity is at once plural and partial. Sometimes we feel that we straddle two cultures; at other times, that we fall between two stools. But however ambiguous and shifting this ground may be, it is not an infertile territory for a writer to occupy. If literature is in part the business of finding new angles at which to enter reality, then once again our distance, our long geographical perspective, may provide us with such angles. Or it may be that that is simply what we must think in order to do our work.[21]

Although Shalmani has embraced Western culture and society from the moment she arrived in France, her autobiographical narratives demonstrate the various ways in which her trajectory of integration was complicated by her political refugee status, resulting in instances of discrimination, in particular, a resistance by people of "French stock" to consider her "French" due to her Iranian origins. These experiences have often placed the focus on her "immigrant" identity, requiring her to elaborate on her connection to France and her command of the French language. Consequently, her fluency in French, a language she was not born into but was immersed in from the age of eight, has been a source of scrutiny by some who have anticipated an accent attributable to her immigrant background.

Shalmani's autobiographical essay, *Éloge du Métèque* (2019), also begins by engaging with these ontological questions related to identity and belonging. She notes that during encounters in bookstores, libraries, and book fairs, she is frequently asked to expound on the various ways in which the experience of exile and "the loss of her native country" have impacted

[21] Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism, 1981-1991* (London: Granta Books, 1991), 15-16.

her ethnic and national identity, and how these factors have in turn influenced her decision to become a writer. The nature of their inquiries focuses on a duality that precludes reconciliation with a plural migrant identity that has successfully assimilated into the host country:

> ‘Seriez-vous devenue écrivain sans l’exil?’; ‘Vous considérez-vous française ou iranienne?’; ‘Qu’est-ce qui demeure d’iranien en vous?’, etc. […] J’ai l’habitude de répondre que tout ce que j’ai d’iranien, la France lui est passé dessus, étant arrivée à Paris à huit ans sans avoir jamais plus revu Téhéran, ayant perdu ma langue maternelle dans la bagarre pour m’approprier la langue française.[22]
>
> ‘Would you have become a writer without exile?’; ‘Do you consider yourself French or Iranian?’; ‘What remains Iranian in you?’ […] I usually respond that whatever Iranian traits I have were overridden by France, having arrived in Paris at the age of eight without ever having seen Tehran again, having lost my mother tongue in the struggle to appropriate the French language.

In the 2023 interview with Vanessa Tolub for the magazine *Front Populaire*, “La Conversation: regard d’une exilée sur l’Iran, avec Abnousse Shalmani” (Conversation: An exile’s view of Iran, with Abnousse Shalmani), Shalmani further problematizes binary and particularist conceptions of identity by elaborating on the rupture she experienced with her country of origin, acknowledging it as a factor that facilitated her cultural and linguistic integration into the host community. She proceeds to express gratitude for her adoptive country and the French language, her “intellectual tool” with which she has claimed a sense of belonging in France and French culture.[23] While Shalmani neither denies nor rejects her Iranian background and its (limited) cultural influence, the conversation suggests her rejection of a competing hyphenated national identity that limits agency, given her earnest willingness to assimilate into French culture and to excel in French. Shalmani thus embraces her voluntary choice to adopt an identity that “floats” by way of “cutting her roots” so that she is neither “immobilized” nor bound by her ethnic and

[22] Abnousse Shalmani, *Éloge du Métèque* (Paris: Éditions Grasset & Fasquelle, 2019), 11-12.

[23] Abnousse Shalmani, “La Conversation: Regard d’une exilée sur l’Iran,” *Front Populaire*, April 23, 2023, https://frontpopulaire.fr/fpplus/videos/la-conversation-regard-dune-exilee-sur-l-iran-avec-abnousse-shalmani_vco_21255660.

cultural origins, unlike her parents, who as immigrants deeply identify as Iranian.[24] This mobility is achieved not by the complete erasure of a former identity that is rooted in the past, but by a subjectivity that enables itself to be in continuous negotiation with the present. Accordingly, Shalmani conceptualizes new spaces of agency and belonging for displaced and marginalized individuals, mitigating the potential risk of stigmatization associated with minority populations and disadvantaged groups: "Je refuse de considérer l'exilé, l'immigré, le musulman comme inférieur, je ne lui dois pas plus de respect qu'à un autre, il est humain à mes yeux et je m'adresse à lui d'égal à égal, sans considération pour le passé, à hauteur de présent, à hauteur d'homme" (I refuse to consider the exile, the immigrant, the Muslim as inferior. I do not owe him more respect than to anyone else, he is a human in my eyes, and I address him as an equal, without regard for the past, on equal terms in the present, as a fellow human).[25]

The discussion of Shalmani's ethnic and national identity with Vanessa Tolub is followed by an equally important conversation that draws attention to Shalmani's perspectives on feminism, which have been shaped by migration and her experience of living in the Islamic Republic of Iran until the age of eight. In the interview, she recalls instances from her childhood of being asked what career she would like to pursue. Her response was always "un écrivain français" (a French writer) – not the feminine equivalent *écrivaine* but *écrivain* in its masculine form.[26] While some professions in French have their corresponding feminine form, the majority, such as *écrivain*, are traditionally denoted in the masculine. Shalmani's recollection of her

[24] Op.cit., Shalmani, "La Conversation: Regard d'une exilée sur l'Iran," *Front Populaire*.

[25] Op. cit., Shalmani, *Laïcité, j'écris ton nom!*, 54.

[26] For more on Shalmani's critique of gender-inclusive writing, see: Abnousse Shalmani, "J'ai toujours voulu être écrivain, pas écrivaine," *Slate*, October 6, 2017, https://www.slate.fr/story/152174/toujours-voulu-etre-ecrivain-pas-ecrivaine.

adamant choice of response alludes to her stance on the current polemical public debates regarding inclusive writing, a practice embraced by some French speakers seeking to promote representation and equality in the French language, with the adaptation of gender-specific job titles being one of the objectives. The debates in France are generally between "rightwing-leaning language purists and the left and feminists."[27] According to Shalmani, the initiatives of those in favor of inclusive writing reinforce female victimhood, which implicitly places the focus on women's perceived lack of agency and their need for protection. She writes:

> Les défenseurs de l'écriture inclusive en sont convaincus: le langage conditionne l'inégalité, et structure la domination (ou le contraire). Le masculin l'emportant sur le féminin, les femmes sont naturellement infériorisées, il faut donc changer cette odieuse règle qui […] condamne les femmes à être exclues de la grammaire, de la parole, de la société, de la galaxie. […] Les femmes n'ont pas besoin d'être protégées, elles ont besoin de liberté pour exister et faire la preuve de leur endurance. Car derrière la fragilité se dévoile la victime éternelle qu'est la femme et qui arrange les sexistes depuis des millénaires pour justifier sa mise à l'écart et sa discrimination au nom de différence. […] Féminiser les métiers ne rendra pas le rapport de force moins inégalitaire […]. Au contraire, choisir sa vie, en dehors de toutes les injonctions parentales, sociétales, religieuses et culturelles, demeurera toujours une démarche féministe. Et gagnante.[28]
>
> Defenders of inclusive writing are convinced: language conditions inequality and structures domination (or the opposite). With the masculine prevailing over the feminine, women are naturally inferiorized, so this odious rule that condemns women to be excluded from grammar, speech, society, and the galaxy must be changed. […] Women do not need to be protected, they need freedom to exist and prove their endurance. For behind the fragility, reveals the eternal victim of being a woman and which has suited sexists for millennia to justify their exclusion and discrimination in the name of difference. […] Feminizing professions will not make the power imbalance less unequal […]. On the contrary, choosing one's life, outside of all parental, societal, religious, and cultural injunctions, will always remain a feminist and winning approach.

[27] Katy Dartford, "France Moves Closer to Banning Gender-Inclusive Language," *Euronews*, November 1, 2023, https://www.euronews.com/culture/2023/11/01/france-moves-closer-to-banning-gender-inclusive-language.

[28] Abnousse Shalmani, "J'ai toujours voulu être écrivain, pas écrivaine," *Slate*, October 6, 2017, https://www.slate.fr/story/152174/toujours-voulu-etre-ecrivain-pas-ecrivaine.

The recent law to ban gender-inclusive language in official documents and statements has been supported by the French Senate and President Emmanuel Macron, sparking concern among some individuals and feminists.[29]

While Abnousse Shalmani has received considerable attention from the French and international public for her active involvement in journalism and the media, her literary publications have not been subject to the same critical focus. The overarching objective of this dissertation is to redress this imbalance and to explore the various themes and questions central to the negotiation of identity in the diasporic context by examining Shalmani's autobiographical essays *Khomeiny, Sade et moi* (2014) and *Éloge du Métèque* (2019), and her novel *Les exilés meurent aussi d'amour* (2018). The analysis of *Khomeiny, Sade et moi* and *Les exilés meurent aussi d'amour* across Chapters 1, 2, and 3, provide insights on Shalmani's contextualization of her own life experiences as an exiled subject, thereby lending the narrator of her novel a form of narrative authority. The exploration of the autobiographical elements in her first two literary publications and the dynamic ways fiction and evidentiary modes of narration are mediated in her literary corpus to propose mechanisms of healing and reconciliation with one's hybrid, liminal identity, culminates in tracing the development of her treatment of questions relating to displacement and migration with reference to her more recent work *Éloge du Métèque* (2019), which will be discussed in the final chapter of this dissertation. Although the three publications are not bound by a teleological progression, I argue that the essay revisits and responds to the questions surrounding the development of migrant identities that Shalmani explores in her first two literary works. *Éloge du Métèque* yields interesting insights into the various ways in which foreigners are perceived and marginalized by the receiving community as a result of their hybrid

[29] Op. cit., Dartford, "France Moves Closer to Banning Gender-Inclusive Language."

and liminal identities. Shalmani unpacks these issues through an innovative mechanism according to which the foreigner's plural identity is divided into seven distinct categories: temperament, ambition, aesthetic, transgression, sensuality, misunderstanding, and fiction. These universal concepts reconceptualize the position of the Other by deconstructing the mythicized experience of the foreigner, "qui ne vit pas là où il est né, il n'est pas enraciné, le sang de ses ancêtres n'a pas coulé sur la terre où il vit " (who does not live where he is born, who is not rooted, and whose ancestors' blood has not flown on the earth where he lives).[30] To this end, Shalmani's literary corpus exhibits characteristics for which critical categories such as hybridity and liminality become pertinent, terms developed by Homi K. Bhabha, Arnold van Gennep, Victor Turner, among other contemporary scholars. While Shalmani does not explicitly use the terms "hybridity" nor "liminality" to describe the foreigner's subjectivity, the aforementioned concepts nevertheless capture the continuous negotiation involved given that a foreigner is "non seulement en rupture avec le pays natal, mais aussi avec sa communauté. […] [Par conséquent, l'étranger] ne peut pas se résumer à un visage, il est tous les visages qu'il croise et toutes les cultures qu'il côtoie" (not only at odds with the native country, but also with his community. […] [Therefore, he] cannot be reduced to a face, he is all the faces he meets and all the cultures he encounters).[31] *Éloge du Métèque* thus provides a dynamic theoretical framework that is in meaningful dialogue with the transcultural and transnational context I am exploring, while simultaneously allowing for an engagement with issues relating to gender, identity, and migration. The interpretive grid Shalmani offers enables an approach to migration and migrants, in which agency in respective communities is considered as they negotiate their subjectivity within binary geographical and cultural locales. Often, these experiences are complicated by the

[30] Op. cit., Shalmani, *Éloge du Métèque*, 20.

[31] Ibid, 130 and 37-38.

question of belonging – *appartenance* – in French, and by an overwhelming sense of un-belonging and otherness within the new national community in which they now reside. The ontological complexities and tensions arising from the experience of cultural, geographical, and psychological displacement explored through autobiographical and fictionalized trajectories of migration within the first two publications underpin the resolutions Shalmani proposes in *Éloge du Métèque*, and when considering notions of autonomy and positionality, support her position as a female writer and an exiled subject to defend the claims she presents.

Shalmani in *Éloge du Métèque* not only reveals the failures of multicultural and multiethnic societies in their treatment of minority populations but also offers pragmatic approaches to embracing and reconciling with one's alterity. In Chapter 4, I argue that her mediation can have a considerable impact on both individuals and their societies in the way that they heal, create cross-cultural solidarity, and take action through measures of political and social intervention so that all individuals, irrespective of their ethnicity, race, gender, or socio-economic status may live in a more ethical and equitable society. The essay's theoretical formulations on the development of displaced identities thus provide a holistic paradigm for reading migrant literature, which may encompass different time periods, geographical regions, and historical contexts. *Éloge du Métèque*'s date of publication reflects the contemporaneity of the issues she considers, while drawing attention to the widespread sentiment that France has quite simply not done enough to ensure that its immigrant populations feel a sense of belonging and inclusion. To this end, the significance of the literary publications under investigation here is underscored by Shalmani's autobiographical testimony and in its recognition of the marginalization and generalized "othering" of immigrants as foreign subjects under the aegis of the French Republic. The question of assimilation and integration remains an important one in France, and a highly

polarized debate means that the subject remains a source of tension, all the more so in light of laicism and republican universalism, in which the "principle of the assimilation of citizens as individuals" aims to promote a cohesive national identity.[32] While Shalmani does *not* reject French republicanism, and in fact *encourages* immigrants to embrace its principles and values in order to successfully integrate into French culture and society, her literary corpus problematizes France's perspectives on multiculturalism and highlights the extent to which essentialist notions of identity promoted by far-right politicians such as Charles Maurras and Jean-Marie Le Pen continue to shape contemporary French policy and public discourse on immigration and pose a threat to an immigrant's sense of inclusivity.

The objective Shalmani ascribes to her literary enterprise is twofold: (1) to challenge extremist ideologies and political systems propagated by nation-states and authoritative figures and regimes, and (2) to foster dialogue among communities of diverse cultural, ethnic, social, political, and religious backgrounds. Shalmani demonstrates that there is a lacuna between culture, education, and History, and more importantly, identifies the absence of women's participation in these three domains of society. In order to reconcile these gaps, Shalmani avers that it is essential to place "la femme au centre du débats politique et non dans une optique naturaliste qui n'est que son éternel purgatoire" (women at the center of political debate and not in a naturalistic perspective which is only their eternal purgatory): "la perception du corps de la femme est représentatif de l'état des lois, de l'égalité, de l'éducation. Chaque corps de femme porte l'histoire du son pays" (the perception of the woman's body is representative of the state of laws, equality, education. Each woman's body carries the history of her country).[33] Thus,

[32] Jean-Loup Amselle, *Affirmative Exclusion: Cultural Pluralism and the Rule of Custom in France* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2003), 1.

[33] Abnousse Shalmani, *Khomeiny, Sade et moi* (Paris: Éditions Grasset & Fasquelle, 2014), 159 and 24.

Shalmani not only implores cultural, political, religious, and social institutions to make amends but simultaneously calls upon all individuals to critically reflect upon the issues at stake and identify the ways in which they could enact personal and socio-political change, while also engaging intellectually and philosophically in a dynamic process that would challenge the very institutions in which they participate. To understand how and why Shalmani supports such measures, informed as they are by both past and present politics and history, it will be important to return to her first two literary works as their coherence in thought and order of publication hold cumulative significance.

Chapter 1: Displacements of Exile in Abnousse Shalmani's *Khomeiny, Sade et moi* and *Les exilés meurent aussi d'amour*

> When historical visibility has faded, when the present tense of testimony loses its power to arrest, then the displacements of memory and the indirections of art offer us the image of our psychic survival. To live in the unhomely world, to find its ambivalences and ambiguities enacted in the house of fiction, or its sundering and splitting performed in the work of art, is also to affirm a profound desire for social solidarity.
>
> — Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*

> As the family goes, so goes the nation, and so goes the whole world in which we live.
>
> — John Paul II

Abnousse Shalmani's autobiographical essay *Khomeiny, Sade et moi* (2014) precedes the publication of her novel *Les exilés meurent aussi d'amour* (2019). The two texts are by no means serialized publications, and while they do not share many stylistic commonalities, particularly in terms of Shalmani's choice of genre, a connecting link emerges across both publications when they are read in tandem. The fundamental framework of both works, as it relates to content and form, is grounded in intertextuality – namely, allusive references Shalmani makes to personal anecdotes, historical and political events, as well as cultural productions. Given that Shalmani situates her literary enterprise within specific historical and political contexts, and that authorial intent remains at the forefront of her literary publications, it is crucial to historicize the novel – an objective that can be achieved by closely investigating her autobiographical essay. While the element of intertextuality is more direct in *Khomeiny, Sade et moi*, the novel invites the reader to critically engage with its multilayered cultural and historical references, which are embedded allusively throughout the text and enrich its nuanced plot. This dissertation will therefore explore the various ways in which the intertextual nature of Shalmani's publications, as it relates to content and form, are culturally determined. To set the groundwork for a formal analysis of these

questions through textual references in the remaining chapters, it will be important to begin by briefly historicizing *Les exilés meurent aussi d'amour* and to shift the focus back to *Khomeiny, Sade et moi*, an essayistic testimony that unearths previously untold truths. Shalmani's style of storytelling, particularly the dynamic interplay between fiction and evidentiary modes of narration, asserts agency, given that the book, through its hybrid narrative form, testifies to censorship in its various manifestations, namely, the suppression of the female body, freedom of expression, and freedom of speech.

Locating History in *Les exilés meurent aussi d'amour*

Les exilés meurent aussi d'amour is, in many ways, a coming-of-age novel that explores from a female perspective the challenges of cultural assimilation and identity formation through the convoluted relationship between Shirin and her family. Shalmani juxtaposes two narratives: the trajectory of Shirin's integration in France is interwoven with her family's disintegration, which stems from the failure to maintain their familial ties throughout the years in exile and their reluctance to immerse in the adoptive country. These circumstances lead to the protagonist's symbolic departure from her Iranian community, complicating her connection to the cultural heritage of her native country. Contextualized by a panoply of implicit references to historical and political events in 1980s France and Iran, the novel presents a fictionalized account of a young girl's experience of displacement as she navigates the ebb and flow of life abroad. The novel's historical and political implications thus allow for an exploration of the various ways in which the exilic condition can serve as an opportunity for displaced subjects to reorient themselves within new cultural and ideological spaces given that, as Salman Rushdie writes in

his memoir *Joseph Anton*, "[t]he act of migration […] puts into crisis everything about the individual or group, everything about identity and selfhood and culture and belief."[34]

Les exilés meurent aussi d'amour explores what Rushdie describes as a "crisis" through the vicissitudes of the novel's plot and the dialectical relationship between Shirin and the various characters of the novel, which allow her to challenge familial, political, and religious power dynamics. Shirin's introspective contemplations and doubts are contrasted with harrowing scenes of incest, patricide, and rape, all of which occur within the confines of the Hedayat family's home. Accordingly, the various traumatic events and existential struggles experienced by the protagonists depict the condition of exile as a complex process that subversively deconstructs the belief and value systems of displaced subjects while challenging their connection to the past, both personal and historical. Shirin's naïve yet evocative narrative voice plays a central role in unpacking the universal hardships of the exilic condition. Her perception and rationalization of the events that take place offers a counter-narrative, one that reflects the inherent innocence of a child experiencing the reality of everyday life as it unfolds. This narrative framework thus calls into question the cultural and political ideals of the adult protagonists, which hinder their progress in France and lead to the eventual demise of the Hedayat family ensuing from antagonism, conflict, and intolerance in the face of cultural, geographical, and psychological displacement.

As Shirin exposes and rejects the authoritarian, condescending, and intransigent convictions of her communist aunts and uncles by virtue of her democratic and tolerant father's guidance, she seeks to be the one in charge of her life's trajectory. Shirin speculates: "pouvais-je échapper au destin familial? Le déterminisme allait-il m'entraîner dans la reproduction éternelle

[34] Salman Rushdie, *Joseph Anton: A Memoir* (New York: Random House, 2012), 72.
In *Éloge du Métèque*, Shalmani alludes to this particular citation, which aligns with her own experience and philosophy on emigration. See p. 106.

des crimes familiaux?" (could I escape family destiny? Was determinism going to lead me into the eternal reproduction of family crimes?).[35] To these self-reflections, she responds:

> Je ne voulais pas être réduite, je ne voulais pas de drapeau, pas de chemin unique et étroit. J'étais claustrophobe. Et puis, je n'avais pas la gueule de l'emploi: ni celle de ma famille, ni celle de la France. Trop occidentale pour l'Iran, pas assez typée pour la France. Il y avait quelque chose de métèque en moi qui persistait et que je ne voulais pas effacer. Quelque chose me disait que la boue où j'avais grandi était la bonne matière à travailler pour trouver mon vrai visage.[36]
>
> I did not want to be reduced, I did not want a flag, no single, narrow path. I was claustrophobic. And also, I did not fit the part: neither that of my family, nor that of France. Too Western for Iran, not typical enough for France. There was something foreign in me that persisted and that I did not want to erase. Something told me that the mud where I grew up was the right material to work with to find my true face.

Shirin's reflections resonate with Salman Rushdie's concept of "double-unbelonging," as alluded to in "The Harmony of the Spheres," a sense of "two otherness" and disorientation arising from the "plurality" of one's cultural and social identity.[37] The feeling of "otherness" that Shalmani's fictional counterpart, Shirin, experiences both inside and outside the confines of her home, along with the irreconcilable ideological differences she observes within her household, compels her to explore her familial past in order to understand her family's resistance to integration into the host country.

The Hedayat family's arrival in Paris occurs during a period in which intense division between rightist and leftist socio-political ideologies and government policies exacerbated tensions around national cohesion. These factors underpin the relational tensions among the Hedayat family members and provide the socio-political context in which Shalmani situates the novel. The 1980s, which witnessed various global and domestic terrorist attacks as well as

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[35] Op. cit., Shalmani, *Les exilés meurent aussi d'amour*, 267.

[36] Ibid, 265.

[37] Op. cit., Rushdie, *East, West*, 141.

numerous anti-capitalist, anti-colonial, and anti-imperialist movements (namely, the Israel-Palestine conflict, to which Shalmani refers in the novel), were marked by efforts to suppress authoritarian regimes and to end the cultural, economic, and political hegemony of Western powers. Both directly and indirectly, these developments influenced the political climate of France and its geopolitics in the world arena. Marked by the rise of the French far-right National Front (recently renamed the National Rally) and numerous terrorist attacks and bombings in Paris by France's far-left militant group Action Directe and Iran's state-sponsored terrorism, which involved the participation of Hezbollah and the Committee for Solidarity With Arab and Middle Eastern Political Prisoners (CSPPA), the 1980s in France was an extremely turbulent period.[38]

In *Terrorism Revisited: Islamism, Political Violence and State-Sponsorship*, Mosa Zahed analyzes the various forms of global terrorism and assassinations launched by Khomeini's regime, which were offset by the killing of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's nephew Shahriar Shafiq in 1979, Paris.[39] The Pahlavi family had been sentenced to death in absentia by Ayatollah Khalkhali, Ruhollah Khomeni's appointed head of Islamic Revolution Courts. The book alludes

[38] Hezbollah is a Shia Muslim militant organization and political party. The group originated from Lebanon around the time of the 1982 Lebanon War.
As Alain Bauer notes in "Hybridization of Conflict," the CSPPA claimed responsibility for terrorist activities that were taking place from 1985-1986. According to *Patterns of Global Terrorism: 1986*, a report provided by the United States Department of State, the various groups involved with CSPPA were Armenian (ASALA) and Palestinian liberation fighters and Lebanese Marxists that had different political interests for their participation in terrorism on French soil. The report indicates that the wave of attacks from 1985-1986 by CSPPA were initially claimed to have taken place for the liberation of Anis Naqqash (affiliate of Ruhollah Khomeini and the Islamic Revolution), Georges Ibrahim Abdallah (LARF), and Varoujan Garbedian (ASALA), who were at the time imprisoned in France. Without naming the groups nor a particular incident, Shalmani begins *Les exilés meurent aussi d'amour* with a general reference to terrorist bombings in Paris associated with CSPPA, Hezbollah, and Action Directe. See p. 24 of *Les exilés meurent aussi d'amour*.
See also: Alain Bauer, "Hybridization of Conflicts," *Prism* 4, no. 4 (2014): 58.
See also: United States Department of State, *Patterns of Global Terrorism: 1986* (National Memorial Institute for the Prevention of Terrorism, January 1988), 15, https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/Digitization/125318NCJRS.pdf.

[39] Mosa Zahed, "The Evolution and Ascension of Iran's Terror Apparatus," in *Terrorism Revisited: Islamism, Political Violence and State-Sponsorship*, edited by Paulo Casaca and Siegfried O. Wolf, Springer, 2017, 74.

to a jarring statement made by Khalkhali: "'if we cannot arrest them, we will assassinate them', exemplifying what was awaiting those who went into exile in the hope to escape the claws of the Islamic Republic."[40] Consequently, assassinations, persecutions, and terrorist activities were carried out abroad with the help of Iran's government ministries, such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Intelligence.[41] Mathew Levitt further explores Iran's involvement in terrorism occurring in France during that period. In *Hezbollah: The Global Footprint of Lebanon's Party of God*, Levitt argues that Hezbollah's attack on France "resulted from a convergence of interests between [them] and Iran. Hezbollah sought the release of its imprisoned members, while Iran desired to make France pay for its support of Iraq and other anti-Iranian policies."[42] Jeremy Shapiro and Bénédicte Suzan in the article "The French Experience of Counter-Terrorism" also shed light on the advent of terrorism in the 1980s on French soil, which they identify with three prominent groups. The first "groups that espoused a radical leftist philosophy… [were] ideologically committed to the overthrow of the capitalist system and to the downfall of American-led 'imperialism'," one of which was Action Directe (1979-1987).[43] The second group was composed of regional separatists, who "advocated independence or autonomy for specific regions of France, primarily the Basque Country, Brittany and in particular, Corsica."[44] Lastly, the third group consisted of international terrorists, "overwhelmingly of Middle Eastern origin, [whom] French authorities had little experience with."[45]

[40] Ibid, 74-75.

[41] Ibid, 75.

[42] Matthew Levitt, *Hezbollah: The Global Footprint of Lebanon's Party of God* (London: C. Hurst and Company, 2013), 61.

[43] Jeremy Shapiro and Bénédicte Suzan, "The French Experience of Counter-Terrorism," *Survival* 45, no. 1 (2003): 68, https://doi.org/10.1093/survival/45.1.67.

[44] Ibid, 69.

[45] Ibid, 69.

Apart from the looming threat of terrorism, another important factor reflecting the dynamic socio-political climate of the time was France's first cohabitation period in the 1980s, during François Mitterrand's presidency when Jacques Chirac, from the opposing political party, was elected as Prime Minister of the Republic. Chirac's success in the Legislative election of 1986 during a period in French history that experienced an influx of immigration resulted in the implementation of right-wing policies that were unfavorable for immigrants. It is within this historical context and political tensions that the novel is situated, which reflect the relational dynamics of the Hedayat family.

The book opens with a group of Iranian exiles fleeing the daily bombings in Tehran to find refuge in Paris. Shirin's trajectory of exile begins with a vague reference to a series of unnamed terrorist attacks in Parisian public establishments a month after their emigration, thus converging the historical events of the Iranian Revolution and the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) with the terrorist bombings in France, to which I have alluded earlier.[46] Newfound panic and fear for survival invigorate the Hedayat family's desire to preserve their revolutionary ambitions and to participate in clandestine activities for the advancement of their communist ideals, the very oppositional context that led to their persecution and forced exile from Iran following the establishment of Ayatollah Khomeini's Islamic regime. Incapable of renouncing their convictions and communist affiliations during their years in exile, the Hedayat family fails to pursue a new trajectory unencumbered by conflict and terror. While the Hedayat sisters are fervent Marxists with connections to London's far-left internationalist groups, who eventually become involved in terrorist activities with the help of Amir, an international revolutionary, Shirin's father Siamak is a communist himself, yet he is politically and ideologically inclined toward democracy. Siakam

[46] See footnote 38.

"était issu de la toute petite bourgeoisie, d'une famille aimante, cultivée mais pas brillante, sociable mais pas mondaine, traditionnelle mais pas bigote, soudée mais pas fermée, intéressée par le monde mais non politisée. […] Une petite famille sans ambition, sans rancœur et surtout – c'était en fait sa première singularité – les femmes y travaillaient autant que les hommes" (was from the petite bourgeoisie, from a loving, cultured but not brilliant family, sociable but not worldly, traditional but not bigoted, close-knit but not closed off, interested in the world but not politicized. […] A small family without ambition, without resentment, and above all – which was actually its first uniqueness – women worked as much as men).[47] As Chapter 3 will explore, Siamak's solemn nature and his profound respect for humanity serve as a guiding force in Shirin's life.

The familial conflicts and ideological divisions within the Hedayat family are indexically alluded to through the context of cohabitation. Their anxieties as exiles stem from their fear of having a right-wing politician (Chirac) take the lead in the elections as this may threaten their sense of safety and belonging, and as Tala claims, "renvoyer tous les réfugiés politique se faire tirer une balle dans la tête à l'abri des caves des dictatures fascistes" (send all political refugees back to be shot in the head in the safety of fascist dictatorship cellars).[48] Gathered around the television, the family awaits for the electoral results:

> […] l'inquiétude se lisait sur tous les visages, sauf bien sûr, celui de mon père. Les insultes fusaient chaque fois que la droite prenait la parole. Les résultats furent annoncés: la droite l'emportait. […] Pour Tala, il s'agissait du début d'une terrible cohabitation qui détruirait le peu qu'avaient accompli ces traîtres de socialistes (très facile à comprendre, la cohabitation: c'étaient mon père et Mitra obligés de dîner ensemble tous les soirs et de se retrouver tous les matins face à face sans utiliser les couteaux pour autre chose que tartiner le beurre), et il ne faisait aucun doute que le grand raciste élégant, qui n'aimait ni le bruit ni les odeurs, serait nommé Premier ministre. Raciste: ce mot barbare qui irritait la gorge marquait la frontière entre ceux qui nous aimaient, et les autres. C'est un mot de

[47] Op. cit., Shalmani, *Les exilés meurent aussi d'amour*, 239.

[48] Ibid, 109.

> l'exil, raciste. Je n'ai pas souvenir d'avoir entendu ce mot à Téhéran, mais il devait exister puisque ma famille n'aimait pas grand monde et encore moins ceux qui étaient différents (ils détestaient les Arabes et n'aimaient pas les Kurdes, ils le disaient à haute voix mais comme tous les Iraniens en faisaient autant, je croyais que c'était normal).[49]
>
> […] the anxiety was visible on everyone's faces, except of course, my father's. Insults flew every time the right-wing spoke. The results were announced: the right-wing prevailed. […] For Tala, it marked the beginning of a terrible cohabitation that would destroy what little the traitorous socialists had accomplished (very easy to understand, cohabitation: it meant my father and Mitra obliged to dine together every evening and to face each other every morning without using knives for anything other than spreading butter), and there was no doubt that the elegant, great racist, who disliked noise and smells, would be appointed Prime Minister.[50] Racist: this barbaric word that irritated the throat marked the boundary between those who loved us, and the others.[51] It's a word of exile, racist. I don't remember hearing this word in Tehran, but it must have existed because my family didn't like many people, and even less those who were different (they hated Arabs and didn't like Kurds, they said it out loud but since all Iranians did the same, I thought it was normal).

As Shirin discovers her family's ignorance and prejudices, and grapples with nostalgia and the yearning for love and true connection within her household – feelings that she attempts to suppress throughout the years in exile – she brings to light the repercussions of intolerance, immutable adherence to customs, and attachment to the past. Shirin's quest for a sense of self within a family that exhibits characteristics of anti-Semitism, homophobia, racism, sexism, and xenophobia leads to her gradual alienation from her familial milieu and cultural heritage. Before returning to these questions in Chapter 3 through a textual analysis of the novel, analyzing the autobiographical elements of *Khomeiny, Sade et moi* in Chapters 1 and 2 will enhance our understanding of the various ways in which Shalmani's personal experiences have informed her

[49] Ibid, 118-119.

[50] The "racist" to whom Shirin is referring is former Prime Minister and President Jacques Chirac.

[51] In the novel, the role of language functions in various important ways. The French "r" is a guttural sound that makes a rather harsh sound when pronounced correctly and is usually considered difficult to pronounce by non-native speakers. At the time of the elections, Shirin is still new to the French language. Her initial exposure to the language, particularly the French enunciation of the letter "r" which "irritates the throat," is linked to her early encounter with the notion of racism as it relates to immigrants in France. This experience, in turn, evokes memories of her Iranian past, and thus triggers her to reflect on her family's own racist tendencies toward those they deem as the "Other."

literary works, as the essay alternates the topography between Iran and France to narrate a rich tapestry of personal anecdotes and historical events that have shaped the multifaceted nature of her plural identity. This investigation will, in turn, examine the dynamic interplay between fiction and autobiographical/essayistic testimony as a narrative mode that challenges the hegemony of patriarchal, religious, and political forces of oppression.

Between Memoir and Manifesto: The Aesthetics of Dissent in *Khomeiny, Sade et moi*

The story of Shirin's exodus to France and her search for a sense of belonging amidst cultural dislocation draws inspiration from Abnousse Shalmani's own life events. The narrator's observations of character traits, family dynamics, and their shared experiences are, to some extent, informed by Shalmani's personal life and introspections. As I shall argue, these parallels lend Shalmani and her fictional counterpart Shirin a form of narrative authority – a crucial element to consider in situating her literary enterprise within its broader socio-political and historical context. These postulations could be drawn from her 2014 publication *Khomeiny, Sade et moi*, an autobiographical essay in which she provides an account of her family's relocation to Europe six years after the Iranian Revolution and offers some clues as to why she elected to structure *Les exilés meurent aussi d'amour* in the way she did.

Khomeiny, Sade et moi resists easy classification within a single literary genre. In an interview with *Asymptote* magazine, Shalmani is asked to elaborate on her stylistic choices and the possible reasons for which the English translation of her essay is categorized as a "fictionalized memoir" and "part novel, part manifesto." She responds, "I have always liked blurry lines, ambiguities, in-between-ness. I wrote *Khomeini, Sade and Me* as part-story,

part-pamphlet. It is my first book and it is a long cry punctuated with bursts of laughter."[52] Enriched by personal anecdotes as well as cultural, cinematic, historical, and literary references, the text weaves a rich tapestry of reflections on the diverse socio-political consequences of the Iranian Revolution and, more specifically, Ruhollah Khomeini's insurgency, which she avers destabilized her native country and, in turn, forced her family to emigrate to France as political refugees. The intertextual connections are integrated with a series of intimate memories relating to her childhood in Iran and her life in France after emigration, as well as various global historical events that have influenced her as a female émigrée[53] and writer.[54] The articulation of these historical and personal accounts – many of which have been subject to varying degrees of censorship – and the dialogical connections she forms between them, are predicated on Shalmani's cultural hybridity, innovative feminist thought, and unwavering commitment to the art of writing. To this end, her literary enterprise serves as a means through which she thwarts the Islamic regime's ongoing efforts to silence dissent, while also bearing witness to the socio-political transformations the Islamic Republic of Iran underwent during her childhood, a period when everyone, of all ages, "disappeared" at once: "tous noyés dans la foule inquiétante

[52] Op.cit., Sparling, "In Conversation: Abnousse Shalmani on the Politics of the Female Body."

[53] Apart from her literary works, Shalmani has frequently discussed in various interviews her experience of exile and its impact on her identity, both as a woman and an immigrant.

[54] Shalmani focuses primarily on French and Iranian historical events, along with other significant global developments that occurred between the 1980s and 2013, the year in which she began writing the autobiography. The first person to whom she references is Aliaa Elmahdy, an Egyptian woman's rights activist who gained popularity and violent backlash for posting a nude photo of herself on the internet. In the introductory pages of the autobiography, Shalmani notes that she came across the picture a few months prior to the start of her writing the book, an event which guided her throughout the writing process. She begins the autobiography by alluding to her own innocent act of nudity when she was a child in order to express her desire to be free after being forced to wear the mandatory veil by the Iranian regime. The politics of the female body, and the pursuit of physical and intellectual freedom achieved primarily through the liberation of the body, are therefore important themes that run across both of her publications. Other political and social events that she references are the Iran-Iraq War, the Rushdie Affair, the 1998 French victory in the World Cup, the 2002 French presidential elections and the April manifestation that followed, the Tunisian and Egyptian Revolutions occurring throughout *Arab Spring*, the September 11 terrorist attacks, the 2011 *SlutWalk* in Toronto, and the 2004-2005 bombing in Madrid and London.

et anonyme qui ne devait plus être qu'un cri, qu'un peuple, qu'une seule foi. […] Si j'ose dire le *nous*, c'est que nous avons toutes disparu en même temps" (all drowned in the disturbing and anonymous crowd which was to be nothing more than a cry, a people, a single faith. […] If I dare say we, it is because we all disappeared at the same time).[55] Before delving into a textual analysis of Shalmani's engagement with the question of censorship, in both the Iranian and French contexts, it is important to first analyze the various paratextual and aesthetic elements of the essay – namely, the significance of the title selected by Shalmani, the essay's hybrid narrative framework, and her use of humor. Given the inherently political nature of the essay's thematic content, the materiality of the book, through its aesthetic elements, carries a subversive force that, in Shalmani's words, has the potential to provoke, "la même réaction démesurée et pathologique" (the same disproportionate and pathological reaction) as a "weapon."[56]

The title of the book thus warrants attention, as it enigmatically references her involvement in the collective Iranian experience "of drown[ing] in the disturbing and anonymous crowd" that marked a significant cultural and political shift between pre- and post-revolutionary Iran. The title introduces two distinct and antithetical historical figures from different time periods and positions them in direct relation to the author herself – *Khomeini, Sade and Me* (Shalmani), prompting readers to draw associations between two antagonistic and paradoxical worldviews. The *décalage* (disorienting shift/discrepancy) prevails before the reader engages with the content of the book, compelling them to question how, why, and through which intersecting connections Shalmani is juxtaposed with Ayatollah Khomeini, the former theocratic Islamic leader responsible for overthrowing the Shah of the Imperial State of Iran, and the Marquis de Sade, an eighteenth-century French libertine author whose transgressive writings and

[55] Op.cit., Shalmani, *Khomeiny, Sade et moi*, 20-21.

[56] Ibid, 125.

philosophy challenged the monarchy during the period of the French Revolution. The historical past and the present thus converge through two apparently oppositional figures.

The narrative structure of the essay further supports these observations. The autobiography begins with a memory from Tehran in 1983 and alternates between recollections from France and Iran across various stages of Shalmani's life. These memories are interjected into the specific context in which she wrote the book, namely, the Paris of 2013, allowing readers to form a complex network of connections through the narrative framework. Shalmani's personal and intellectual trajectory, which culminates in the production of her autobiography, thus enables the reading of the text as a process of establishing links between the French and Iranian Revolutions – a subject to which I shall return in Chapter 2. By way of such dialogical connections, Shalmani juxtaposes two seemingly disparate historical events and time periods. The title of the essay provokingly establishes these abstract links, which gradually converge as she narrates her personal story of liberating herself from the restrictive fabrics of the mandatory veil to shed light on the human experience of revolution, war, and cultural displacement. Shalmani writes:

> Il existe une vraie relation entre Khomeiny et moi. Il matérialise tout ce qui est en rapport avec ma féminité. J'ai nourri Khomeiny avec mes lectures et mes choix de vie: je l'ai gardé près de moi pour ne jamais oublier qu'un matin de février 1979 un "vieux en noir & blanc" a renversé la donne de ma vie; je sais qu'il est mon meilleur ennemi. Des années plus tard, Khomeiny est encore là. Avec ses tissus, son turban noir, son apartheid sexuel. Khomeiny est en embuscade dans des sourires, dans un sein dévoilé comme dans le tissu sinistre des voiles.[57]
>
> There is a real relationship between Khomeini and I. He materializes everything related to my femininity. I nourished Khomeini with my readings and my life choices: I kept him close to me so as never to forget that one morning in February 1979 an "old man in black & white" turned the tide of my life; I know he is my best enemy. Years later, Khomeini is still there. With his fabrics, his black turban, his sexual apartheid. Khomeini is hidden in smiles, in a revealed breast as well as in the sinister fabric of veils.

[57] Ibid, 22-23.

From an early age, Shalmani cultivated a love for literature and cinema and demonstrated a keen interest in history and politics, eventually resorting to the art of writing as a form of resistance against Khomeini – a practice that provided her with a discursive and literary space through which to explore the multidimensional facets of her identity, exilic condition, and position as an author and journalist whose political views remain the subject of fierce debate. Writing and literature thus provided an avenue for gaining new insights into her former refugee status, while also allowing her to remain engaged with diverse historical developments and contemporary political debates related to assimilation, integration, and the status of women. In the 2016 interview with *Asymptote* magazine, Shalmani reaffirms her faith in the possibilities of art and literature:

> I am a big reader, and if I'm influenced by libertine literature that knows no boundaries, I am just as nourished by the magical realism found in the likes of Gabriel García Márquez or Salman Rushdie. The mixture of genres allows a break from ever-stifling reality. For me, literature is the place of absolute freedom. And this is why, in literature, I can gather all my contradictions, my two cultures, the Orient and the Occident; they marry, they overlap. Literature allows me the coherence that all exiles search for.[58]

In addition to the invaluable contribution of literature that Shalmani elaborates on in *Khomeiny, Sade et moi*, she also explores the various ways in which the French language enabled her to find a sense of belonging in the adoptive community. While learning French was and continues to be mandatory under French law for school-age children residing in France (a crucial element in the integration apparatus), it had a supplemental role in her personal life and integration trajectory. Acquiring proficiency in the French language, which quickly replaced her mother tongue, was instrumental in Shalmani's rupture with Khomeini – a step that was necessary to overcome trauma associated with her Iranian childhood, particularly the surveillance and restrictions imposed by Khomeini's regime on women's physical appearance

[58] Op.cit., Sparling, "In Conversation: Abnousse Shalmani on the Politics of the Female Body."

and social behavior. In the autobiography, Shalmani states that as a young girl she was more traumatized by the Islamic regime's mandatory veil and Iranian standards of physical and moral propriety and conduct than by the bombs that were terrorizing Tehrani civilians during the Iran-Iraq War.[59] Since Persian was a direct link to Khomeini and the trauma of revolution and a bloody war, she lost her mother tongue early in her integration process:[60] "Le persan était trop lié à Téhéran et aux barbus, et mes parents ne cessaient de me répéter – pour se convaincre – que nous n'allions plus jamais rentrer à Téhéran et qu'il fallait que j'apprenne la France par cœur" (The Persian language was too closely associated with Tehran and the bearded, and my parents kept repeating to me – to convince themselves – that we would never return to Tehran again and that I needed to learn France by heart).[61] Accordingly, the French language and literature functioned as a solution for reconciling with both the past and present, and the isolation that accompanied displacement, while also serving as the ultimate mechanism for integration since "[l]e seul moyen – accessible à tous – d'apprendre à vivre dans un nouveau pays, dans une nouvelle culture, c'est de s'approprier ses mots" ([t]he only means – accessible to everyone – of learning to live in a new country, in a new culture, is to make its words one's own).[62]

The process of learning and reading French began with her father's guidance. This was in reality an arduous challenge given that they started to read Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* on the day of their arrival in France and together translated the text word for word.[63] Her father, who

[59] Op. cit., Shalmani, *Khomeiny, Sade et moi*, 83-84.

[60] Shalmani mentions in the autobiography that it took her some time to rebuild the connection that she had lost with the Persian language. She currently can speak it but cannot read nor write in Persian.

[61] Op. cit., Shalmani, *Khomeiny, Sade et moi*, 102.

[62] Ibid, 102.

[63] Ibid, 101.

was a man of letters, instilled in her the intellectual curiosity and love for reading literature and watching films from a young age: "Si j'ai vite aimé les livres, c'était à force d'observer mon père. Depuis que j'ai des souvenirs, j'ai toujours vu mon père avec des livres près de lui. J'ai voulu l'imiter" (If I quickly came to love books, it was from watching my father. Since I have memories, I have always seen my father with books near him. I wanted to imitate him).[64] And thus, her path to integration was facilitated early on through her immersion in the French language and exposure to literary works of French authors, particularly those emblematic of the intellectual, philosophical, and political currents of the French Revolution and the

[64] Ibid, 68.
Her father, to whom she refers as "Haute-Tolérance" (High Tolerance), was the reason for her enduring desire to be independent and to become a writer. Shalmani describes her father as someone who tolerates "toutes les petitesses et les faiblesses, toutes les larmes, tous les cris. Il a toujours appliqué à la lettre, dans sa vie, à l'égard de tout le monde […] sa compréhension des médiocrités de la vie, et sans faire de discours, sans annoncer comme tant d'autres. […] Il écoutait, il proposait, il mettait en débat, mais jamais aucune décision n'était définitive, aucune logique n'était imposée. Il nous laissait non pas la liberté de faire ce qu'on voulait, mais la liberté de *réfléchir* à ce qu'on voulait" (all the pettiness and weaknesses, all the tears, all the cries. He always applied to the letter, in his life, toward everyone […] his understanding of the mediocrities of life, and without making speeches, without announcing like so many others. […] He listened, he proposed, he put things up for debate, but no decision was ever definitive, no logic was imposed. He left us not the freedom to do what we wanted, but the freedom to *reflect on* what we wanted). Shalmani states that her father's liberalism stemmed from his own father's tolerance, who was a highly respected Sufi. When Shalmani's father had announced to his practicing father his atheism, the father responded in acceptance: "'Ta croix ne sera ni plus ni moins facile à porter que la mienne'" (Your cross will be neither more nor less easy to bear than mine). Shalmani admires her grandfather's deep-seated faith in God and her reverence for him is all the more profound because of his openness toward humanity, a fundamental quality that she believes is absent in religious extremists. Due to this lack of respect for difference, she wonders what has become of true faith in the contemporary world – "[c]elle qui n'impose rien à personne mais tout à soi, qui dialogue avec Dieu dans un rapport spirituel et sain" (the one that imposes nothing on anyone but everything on oneself, that engages in dialogue with God through a spiritual and healthy relationship). See p. 68 and 251 of *Khomeiny, Sade et moi*.
It is also interesting to note here that Shalmani's family of readers were victims of both Khomeini's and Mohammad Pahlavi's censorship. A very painful memory she has retained from her Iranian childhood is of her father burning prohibited books that he owned to protect himself from persecution by the Islamic regime after a raid incident by the morality police, who were called to their home by a cousin of the family. This transitional period in Iranian history is generally characterized by a zeitgeist of fear and suspicion, during which security and trust were eroded, extending even to close family members and friends who could denounce anyone to the authorities for what was deemed treacherous or unlawful conduct. While the Shah was still in power, Shalmani's maternal uncle, a militant communist and executive of the political party, faced similar adversities as her father. Under the Pahlavi regime, he was imprisoned for his affiliation with the banned party and was physically tortured for trafficking books. The change in government did release him from imprisonment, as was the case for other communists who had been previously incarcerated. However, the persecution of communists resumed once the Islamic theocracy was consolidated. Shalmani's maternal aunts were also educated and managed to study in London and Paris while their brother was imprisoned. Her mother, too, shared an admiration for literature. Although they pursued academic studies, their efforts were met with rebuke by their strict brother, who imposed restrictions on their areas of study. It was due to his imprisonment that her aunts were able to study abroad. See p. 57 of *Khomeiny, Sade et moi*.

Enlightenment, namely, the Marquis de Sade, Victor Hugo, and Pierre Louÿs. As a voracious reader of the European literary canon, with which she quickly became enamored, Shalmani found the tools with which to question obscurantism, totalitarianism, and dogmatic political and religious customs and ideologies, particularly those propagated by the Iranian administrative leaders from her past, whom she refers to in her autobiography as the "barbus" and the "corbeaux." The French words *barbus* and *corbeaux* in their plural form translate respectively into English as *bearded* and *crows*. Shalmani uses these terms to allude to bearded Iranian men, especially those in connection with Khomeini's regime, namely, mullahs and Iranian women clad in all-black chadors. The people to whom she initially refers when using these terms are school personnel, militant Islamists, government officials, or what she calls "the morality police."[65] The usage of these labels is suggestive of her comical tone, while simultaneously expressing her contempt for those who adhere to Khomeini's government, the politicization of Islam, and the Iranian Revolution. As the narrative progresses, Shalmani elaborates on the additional meanings that she ascribes to these labels, which are informed by her experience of living in France.

The comedic element in *Khomeiny, Sade et moi* is a distinctive feature of Shalmani's literary style, which captures the emotional complexities of a life marked by revolution, war, and cultural displacement. The autobiography's earnest yet occasionally humorous tone and its crossing of genres – fictionalized memoir, novel, manifesto – reflect the dynamic ways in which Shalmani's stylistic choices are culturally determined. The book is, in the words of Shalmani, "punctuated with bursts of laughter," while it concomitantly encapsulates the shifting emotional tensions that characterize the exilic condition.[66] Shalmani's use of humor as a stylistic device in

[65] The morality police, known as Gasht-e Ershad (Guidance Patrol) in Iran, is the law enforcement responsible for monitoring Islamic vestimentary codes and moral conduct that aligns with Sharia law. It was established in 2005.

[66] Op.cit., Sparling, "In Conversation: Abnousse Shalmani on the Politics of the Female Body."

her literary writings raises important questions about the function of laughter as an emotional and cultural response to trauma and a means through which to subvert power structures and moral codes. In *Khomeiny, Sade et moi*, she elaborates on the subversive role of laughter in two important ways: (1) to explore Iranian social perceptions of laughter, primarily with regard to propriety and moral conduct enforced by the regime; and (2) as a transgressive mechanism to counteract state-sanctioned censorship, operating as both a physical and literary form of resistance against restrictions placed on emotional and artistic expression. While her commentary on *le rire* (laughter) is interspersed throughout *Khomeiny, Sade et moi*, Shalmani devotes an entire section to this subject in *Éloge du métèque*, her 2019 publication, which I will revisit in the final chapter of this dissertation.

Shalmani considers laughter a liberating aspect of human nature, and, as such, an expression of what can be interpreted as a "subversive" and "impious" emotion, which the Iranian regime has actively sought to suppress in everyday life. Accordingly, in *Khomeiny, Sade et moi*, Shalmani emphasizes the importance of laughter not only as a healthy and natural expression of human emotion, but primarily as a primordial act of resistance, insofar as it is an instinctual and powerful physiological response to fear, which she claims made the Revolution possible. Shalmani argues that the regime's "mécanisme de la peur ultra-contagieuse" (mechanism of ultra-contagious fear) facilitated the revolution by undermining rational thought since individuals governed by fear often fail to rationalize the world and become increasingly susceptible to obedience, obscurantism, and superstitions.[67] It is this deep-seated fear within the

[67] Op.cit., Shalmani, *Khomeiny, Sade et moi*, 15.
Immanuel Kant's conception of enlightenment is particularly insightful when considered in relation to Shalmani's observations on the widespread failure of the Iranian people to rise up against the religious and political hegemony of Khomeini and the Islamic regime's strategic use of fear-mongering to enforce compliance in public spaces. Kant defines enlightenment as "the human being's emancipation from its self-incurred immaturity. *Immaturity* is the inability to make use of one's intellect without the direction of another. This immaturity is *self-incurred* when its cause does not lie in a lack of intellect, but rather in a lack of resolve and courage to make use of one's intellect

collective Iranian psyche that Shalmani avers has created a stark rupture between pre- and post-revolutionary Iran. As mentioned in an earlier footnote, this transitional period in Iranian history is characterized by a zeitgeist of fear and suspicion, during which trust was eroded, even among family members and friends who could be compelled to denounce anyone to the authorities for what was deemed "treacherous," "unlawful," or "immoral" behavior.

The Iranian regime's institutionalized policies on behavioral and moral conduct, which are fundamentally based on "Islamic criteria," and its surveillance and control of women's bodies – or rather, "absence of bodies" in public spaces – has led women to be excluded, othered, and *literally* concealed in what Shalmani describes as anonymity: "[t]out comme le voile couvrait la tête, le paraître couvrait l'être" (just as the veil covered the head, appearances covered the being).[68] The autobiography thus investigates the various ways in which the Islamic faith has been instrumentalized to fearmonger as a means to control and suppress diversity in thought, behavior, and physical appearance across all domains of Iranian way of life. When Khomeini took power and legitimized his role as the Supreme Leader during the Iran-Iraq War, strict religious mandates were enforced by the law:

> L'inspection du corps avant de sortir était un rituel indispensable. 'Tu es complètement folle! Tu ne peux pas sortir *comme ça*!' était la phrase de rigueur avant d'affronter l'extérieur. Car la police des mœurs et ses gardiens de la Révolution veillaient au grain, à chaque coin du rue. Ils regardaient passer les hommes et les femmes en les observant

without the direction of another." Shalmani's critique of the Iranian people's propensity to conform to the regime's religious mandates in public life aligns with Kant's notion of self-incurred immaturity – a condition that must be overcome in order to liberate oneself from oppressive forces and attain enlightenment. In the Iranian context, this "immaturity," or failure to reason and act independently – without the religious authority and dictates of the Supreme Leader – does not stem from "a lack of intellect" but precisely from what Kant identifies as "idleness and cowardice." To this end, it is essential to investigate the various ways in which state-driven fear tactics and, more broadly, censorship can be effectively undermined at both the individual and collective levels. See: Immanuel Kant, "*An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?*" (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 17.

[68] Op.cit., Shalmani, *Khomeiny, Sade et moi*, 15 and 47.
Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 1989, https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Iran_1989.

> avec une attention malsaine, un voyeurisme assumé, un 'reluquage' dans les règles de l'art, traquant le moindre bout de peau échappé à la vigilance familiale.[69]
>
> The inspection of the body before going out was an essential ritual. 'You're completely crazy! You can't go out *like that*!' was the obligatory phrase before facing the outside world. Because the morality police and their Revolutionary Guards were keeping a close eye on every corner of the street. They watched men and women pass by, observing them with unhealthy attention, an assumed voyeurism, an ogling by the book, tracking down the slightest piece of skin that escaped family vigilance.

While there was unequivocally a daunting sense of "voyeurism" and a "pathological" focus on physical appearance, especially when leaving the private space of the home, behavioral conduct was placed under equal scrutiny. Shalmani's experience of attending school during her Iranian childhood attests to the extent to which everyone, of all ages, became subject to oppressive restrictions:

> L'école que j'ai connue durant deux ans à Téhéran n'était pas une école qui se raconte avec des rires d'enfants, c'était trop ordonné, trop silencieux, trop disciplinaire et trop anonyme pour des enfants. Et ce n'était pas 'zéro de conduite' non plus. Car le carcan n'était pas seulement à l'école, il était dans la rue, sur l'écran de télévision, dans les conversations des adultes. Il ne suffisait pas d'ouvrir les fenêtres des salles de classe pour respirer. L'air était tout aussi malsain à l'extérieur. Ce n'était pas encore la fin de la Révolution que c'était déjà la guerre, et les enfants sont aussi sensibles que les autres à l'environnement. Il y avait danger et c'était l'occasion pour les mollahs de s'imposer un peu plus. Les dictateurs se maintiennent dès la crèche. Et le rire, franc, contagieux, libérateur, est toujours le premier des ennemis.[70]
>
> The school I knew for two years in Tehran wasn't a school that could be described with children's laughter, it was too orderly, too quiet, too disciplinary, and too anonymous for children. And it wasn't 'zero for conduct' either. Because the constraint wasn't just at school, it was in the street, on the television screen, in the conversations of adults. It wasn't enough to open the classroom windows to breathe. The air was just as unhealthy outside. The Revolution wasn't yet over, and war was already raging, and children are as sensitive to their environment as anyone else. There was danger, and it was an opportunity for the mullahs to assert themselves a little more. Dictators maintain their hold from the cradle. And laughter, frank, contagious, liberating, is always the first enemy.

[69] Op.cit., Shalmani, *Khomeiny, Sade et moi*, 13.

[70] Ibid, 76-77.

The increasingly volatile political circumstances and social tensions strengthened not only Khomeini's political agendas but usurped the collective consciousness of Iranians, facilitating a troubling level of subservience to the rules and regulations of the Islamic regime.

In Shalmani's milieu, a hyperawareness of surveillance and conformity manifested in various crippling ways, notably through an excessive and fearful preoccupation with the "gaze" of the Other, which she describes as a "traumatisme intérieur qui vous emprisonne. Pour se défendre, il faut s'en prendre à une autre, à une qui est plus visible, dont l'attitude est plus ostentatoire" (inner trauma that imprisons you. To defend yourself, you have to attack someone else, someone who is more visible, whose attitude is more ostentatious).[71] The escalating socio-political anxieties stemming from the Revolution and the Iran-Iraq War, which hindered social interactions due to the widespread sense of fear and danger, contributed to a heightened belief in the superstition of the "evil eye" – "l'oeil de l'envie, l'oeil de la méchanceté [qui] était partout et il fallait s'en prémunir tout le temps. Le combat contre l'œil [qui] était permanent" (the eye of envy, the eye of malice [which] was everywhere and had to be guarded against all the time. The fight against the eye [which] was permanent).[72] To explore this socio-cultural phenomenon in relation to Iran's transformation into a theocratic regime in 1979, Shalmani traces the origins of this myth back to the beginnings of Islam:

> Être repéré tout de suite, c'est contrôler le regard (gaze) de l'autre, s'en prémunir, le détourner, tout cela vient beaucoup plus loin, d'une tradition antérieure au Coran et qui pourrit les rapports sociaux. Étymologiquement, la *'awra*, c'est l'acte de *crever l'œil*. En islam, la *'awra* désigne tout ce qui est obscène et doit être recouvert. La *'awra* c'est tout ce qui doit être couvert par pudeur. […] L'œil devient l'ennemi numéro un. Le mauvais

[71] Ibid, 55.

[72] Ibid, 47.

> œil est dans tous les yeux. La *'awra* peut aussi tuer. Il est cet œil qui crève – au sens propre – les impudiques.[73]
>
> To be immediately noticed is to control the gaze (gaze) of the other, to protect oneself from it, to divert it, all this comes much further, from a tradition that predates the Quran and which rots social relations. Etymologically, the *'awra* is the act of gouging out the eye. In Islam, the *'awra* designates everything that is obscene and must be covered. The *'awra* is everything that must be covered out of modesty. […] The eye becomes the number one enemy. The evil eye is in all eyes. The *'awra* can also kill. It is this eye that gouges out – in the literal sense – the immodest.

The excerpt suggests that the representation of one's physical appearance, behavior, and temperament is inextricably tied to perceptions of one's ethical and moral standing, which also had paramount legal ramifications during that period. Thus, to evade legal charges, "sin," and potential social ostracism, individuals bore the responsibility of adhering to strict standards of modest conduct in accordance with Islamic law.

The aesthetic elements of Shalmani's essay, one of which is her use of humor, gesture toward a deliberate subversion of these external and self-internalized restrictions and codes. Shalmani's first encounter with the Marquis de Sade's literature in 1997 played a pivotal role in her rejection of these fear-based socio-cultural and religious myths and regulations, which in Shalmani's words, "rot social interactions." Her reading of Sade proved precisely useful not only in drawing connections between the rigid binaries of "intérieur/extérieur [et] privé/public" (interior/exterior and private/public) in post-revolutionary Iran, but also for understanding the ways in which comedic literary techniques such as satire and caricature can potentially undermine political and religious systems that operate through tactics of fear.[74] To shed light on these issues, Shalmani alludes to Sade's brazen remarks in *La Philosophie dans le boudoir* (1795), a work of satire that offers socio-political commentary on post-revolutionary France:

[73] Ibid, 53.

[74] Ibid, 207.

"c'est que, quand on a peur, on cesse de raisonner; c'est qu'on leur a surtout recommandé de se défier de leur raison et que, quand la cervelle est troublée, on croit tout et n'examine rien. L'ignorance et la peur, leur direz-vous encore, voilà les deux bases de toutes les religions" (it is that when one is afraid, one stops reasoning; it is that they have been especially advised to distrust their reason and that, when the brain is troubled, one believes everything and examines nothing. Ignorance and fear, you will tell them again, are the two bases of all religions).[75] Having personally lived through the censorship of Khomeini's theocratic regime, reading Sade was a liberating experience for Shalmani since "le corps chez Sade, c'est la société tout entière, ses ambiguïtés et ses injustices. Le corps prend toute la place, déborde, souffre, grandit" (the body for Sade is society as a whole, its ambiguities and its injustices. The body takes up all the space, overflows, suffers, grows).[76] While the vulgarity of Sade's pornographic works and his unflinching appeal to barbarism undoubtedly expose the darkest vices of human nature, it is his "humor and extremism" that, according to Shalmani, render the experience of reading Sade "tolerable" and which *humanize* the fundamental issues that he critiques.[77] The association between these paradoxical qualities sparked Shalmani's fascination with Sade's compelling manner of storytelling, characterizing him as a "[…] penseur radical, ce qui rend ses écrits étrangement poétique, donc, parfaitement recevables. Mais il y a aussi dans cet appel aux armes, dans cette volonté de lever les citoyens en masse contre la tyrannie, le désir de Sade d'être accepté" (radical thinker, which makes his writings strangely poetic, and therefore, perfectly acceptable. But there is also in this call to arms, in this will to raise citizens en masse against

[75] Ibid, 203.

[76] Ibid, 213.

[77] Ibid, 204.

tyranny, Sade's desire to be accepted).[78] Despite decades of physical incarceration, Sade retained the ability to express himself through his satirical writings. In this capacity, his literary works bridge the seemingly intractable rifts of Shalmani's Iranian childhood, allowing for laughter to override the traumatic memories of bodily confinement and to enable the possibility of experiencing a sense of empowerment. In a humorous tone that undermines both the symbolic authority and political standing of the "bearded" men, Shalmani writes, "Sade enfermé, l'imagination se déploie jusqu'à ses limites et le corps devient impossible. […] L'imagination qui peut encore lui soutirer un sourire du fin fond de sa cellule. L'imagination qui est le seul compagnon fidèle du vrai révolutionnaire. Après Sade, il me suffit de croiser un barbu pour lui sourire avec mépris" (Sade locked up, his imagination spreads out to its limits and the body becomes impossible. […] The imagination that can still coax a smile from him from the depths of his cell. The imagination that is the only faithful companion of the true revolutionary. After Sade, I only have to meet a bearded man to smile at him with contempt).[79]

Upon discovering Sade's literary legacy, Shalmani becomes convinced that laughter possesses a transformative and unifying power, as it has the potential to break "les frontières en transgressant la morale. Rire des mêmes situations et des mêmes blagues rapproche" (boundaries by transgressing morality. Laughing at the same situations and the same jokes brings people closer together).[80] In its capacity to unite, transcending differences through the shared experience of levity, laughter concurrently wields the power to disrupt social order – the very force necessary to embolden individuals to rise up against injustice and oppression: "Le rire est

[78] Ibid, 204.

[79] Ibid, 214.

[80] Op. cit., Shalmani, *Éloge du métèque*, 126.

libérateur, là où la haine est une prison où se raréfient goutte à goutte. […] Rire est une politesse, une pudeur et une libération. C'est surtout la plus instantanée et directe des transgressions. La défaite des tyrans, la chute des empires germent dans la satire et la caricature, elles se propagent par le rire, se transforment en contestation, finissent en liberté" (Laughter is liberating, where hatred is a prison in which it dries up drop by drop. […] Laughter is politeness, modesty, and liberation. Above all, it is the most instantaneous and direct of transgressions. The defeat of tyrants, the fall of empires germinate in satire and caricature, they spread through laughter, transform into protest, and end in freedom).[81]

In the Iranian context, Shalmani regards humor as a subversive literary mode of expression, which can serve as a "passeport pour passer la frontière des mœurs et rétablir les *vrais* us et coutumes des Iraniens, hors de l'habit dessiné par les guerres, les diplomaties, les intérêts, l'Autre, l'Occident" (passport to cross the border of morals and reestablish the true customs and traditions of the Iranians, outside the habit drawn by wars, diplomacy, interests, the Other, the West).[82] One satirical cultural production, in particular, holds this promise – *Mon oncle Napoléon* (1973) – Iraj Pezeshkzad's literary representation of "l'Iran avant 1979, l'Iran d'avant la révolution, la guerre et l'exil" (Iran before 1979, Iran before the revolution, war and exile).[83] In 1976, Nasser Taghvai adapted *Mon oncle Napoléon* into a television series. Dubbed by Shalmani as an "institution, un rite de passage, l'apogée de l'*humour iranien*" (institution, a rite of passage, the apogee of *Iranian humor*), the book encapsulates, through its interspersed moments of laughter, "la jeunesse de [ses] parents, la saveur d'un album de famille, la nostalgie

[81] Ibid, 129-130.

[82] Ibid, 126.

[83] Ibid, 126.

d'un paradis perdu, le quotidien d'avant le départ sans retour" (the youth of [her] parents, the flavor of a family album, the nostalgia for a lost paradise, the daily life before the departure of no return).[84] Set in the early 1940s, during Iran's occupation by the Allied powers, the story recounts the saga of an Iranian family from the perspective of a thirteen-year-old narrator who falls in love with his cousin Layli, the daughter of Uncle Napoléon.[85] Censored and burned by the "mollahs" – who forced Pezeshkzad into exile in Paris – the book went from being a "classique populaire de la littérature persane" (popular classic of Persian literature) to a "classique populaire *mythique* de la littérature (tout court) après la révolution" (*mythical* popular classic of literature (tout court) after the revolution).[86] Shalmani in her essay *Éloge du métèque* characterizes the cultural legacy of *Mon oncle Napoléon* as having the capacity to not only unite all Iranians but to also "dérider les xénophobes. De jeter un pont, de démontrer l'absurdité de leur peur, le ridicule de leur haine, le non-sens de leurs frontières" (cheer up xenophobes. To build a bridge, to demonstrate the absurdity of their fear, the ridiculousness of their hatred, the meaninglessness of their borders).[87] The book and television series are described by Shalmani as cultural reference points in which every Iranian can recognize themselves. With its translation into French in 2011, the book became accessible to Shalmani and offered her "la possibilité de [s]'en sentir comme arme défensive contre les stéréotypes qui [l]'emprisonnent dans un Iran préfabriqué" (the possibility of perceiving it as a defensive weapon against the stereotypes that imprison [her] in a prefabricated Iran).[88]

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[84] Ibid, 126.

[85] Ibid, 124.

[86] Ibid, 124.

[87] Ibid, 126.

[88] Another important and internationally acclaimed cultural production that was censored and banned in Iran is Marjane Satriapi and Vincent Paronnaud's *Persepolis* (2007). Although Shalmani acknowledges the powerful impact of humor in literature and art on social and historical developments, she finds it absurd that an animation

Accordingly, overcoming the trauma of physical and cultural displacement and ridding themselves of past memories of Khomeini's restrictions were realized through humor and shared moments of laughter. Shalmani writes, "Le rire contient toujours une part d'irrévérence, un relativisme dangereux pour la foi, un péché de joie. Mes parents ont *imposé* le rire dès les premiers jours de l'exil; le rire s'annonçait toujours suivi d'une blague" (Laughter always contains a part of irreverence, a relativism dangerous for faith, a sin of joy. My parents imposed laughter from the first days of exile; laughter was always announced followed by a joke).[89] Like Iraj Pezeshkzad, whose fate led to his eventual exile, Shalmani's family found refuge in the solidarity that books and laughter provided:

> Nous avons surmonté bien des épreuves en nageant contre-courant du tragique. C'est devenu un langage propre à notre intimité, et un lien qui a colmaté bien des brèches nées des difficultés que connaît la filiation, affaiblie et interrogée, dans l'exil. Le rire nous permet de nous souvenir davantage de nos réactions comiques, des bons mots, des gestes incongrus, des mots grossiers, des solutions farfelues, que des drames qui les ont fait naître. Nous, les enfants, avons pris le pli, nous avons ri, et ri de tout. Sans culpabilité, ni censure. C'est devenu notre manière à nous de faire la nique aux mollahs. Et de nous protéger, tout en nous défendant. Le rire est devenu une arme défensive dans l'exil.[90]
>
> We overcame many challenges by swimming against the current of tragedy. It became a language specific to our intimacy, and a bond that filled many breaches born of the difficulties that filiation, weakened and questioned, faces in exile. Laughter allows us to remember our comic reactions, the witticisms, the incongruous gestures, the rude words, the far-fetched solutions, more than the dramas that gave rise to them. We, the children, got into the habit, we laughed, and laughed at everything. Without guilt or censorship. It became our way of thumbing our noses at the mullahs. And of protecting ourselves, while defending ourselves. Laughter became a defensive weapon in exile.

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could provoke such rage "sous prétexte que Dieu y est représenté d'après les yeux d'une enfant" (under the pretext that God is represented in it through the eyes of a child). She continues to assert that, indeed, "la culture peut tout changer, […] la culture peut renverser les pires tyrans et […] un dessin animé peut autant – voire plus – qu'une arme de destruction massive aussi performante soit-elle" ([…] culture can change everything, […] culture can overthrow the worst tyrants and […] a cartoon can do as much – or even more – than a weapon of mass destruction, however powerful it may be). See p. 299 of *Khomeiny, Sade et moi*.

[89] Op. cit., Shalmani, *Éloge du métèque*, 127.

[90] Ibid, 128.

Although Khomeini's censorship and religious extremism directly impacted Iranian society and politics, the ideological influence of his regime extended well beyond Iran and the Middle East. Various socio-political events occurring in the West and the Middle East from the time of Shalmani's arrival in France up until the publication of her book created tensions both between and within the East and West. These developments raised global issues pertaining to censorship, Islamophobia, and xenophobia. Shalmani is initially confronted by these issues as an adolescent while living in France around the time of the Rushdie Affair, also known as *The Satanic Verses* Controversy. Following the publication of Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* in February of 1989, Ruhollah Khomeini issued a *fatwa* against Rushdie, an Islamic legal ruling that granted Muslims the right to kill him because of what they claimed were the novel's blasphemous reference to the Satanic verses, an "incident, known in the Islamic literature as the qissat al-ghardniq (Story of the Cranes), given to the occasion on which the Prophet Muhammad is reported to have mistaken words of Satanic suggestion for Divine Intervention."[91] The physical violence and socio-political tensions that ensued from the Rushdie Affair sparked global debates on censorship, freedom of speech and expression, and Islamism. The hostile public backlash of religious extremists, driven by their disapproval of the book, fostered a pervasive sentiment of animosity toward its supporters and anyone involved in its publication and distribution.[92] While

[91] Shahab Ahmed, "Ibn Taymiyyah and the Satanic Verses," *Studia Islamica* no. 87 (1998): 69, https://doi.org/10.2307/1595926.

[92] The Rushdie Affair is an ongoing controversy that ensued from Rushie's publication of *The Satanic Verses*, which led to the persecution of anyone involved in the novel's enterprise ever since its inception. Rushdie was last physically attacked and nearly stabbed to death in New York on August 12, 2022, during his speech at the Chautauqua Institution. After the publication of the book, which led to Rushdie's disappearance from the public eye for several years, others associated with its publication and distribution, as well as those involved in the subsequent worldwide protests, have been victims of violent attacks, legal prosecution for the sale of the novel, terrorist bombings, and even death. Contrary to these hostilities, in 2007, Rushdie was awarded a knighthood by Queen Elizabeth for his literary contributions, and in 2023, he won the annual Pen/Pinter Prize for his relentless support of freedom of speech despite receiving multiple death threats. See Reuter's article "Events following Iran's fatwa against author Salman Rushdie" for a detailed chronological list compiled by John Stonestreet of the events in connection with the Rushdie Affair.
John Stonestreet, "Events following Iran's fatwa against author Salman Rushdie," *Reuters*, August 12, 2022,

the West faced criticism within these debates for its liberal stance on religion and freedom of expression, Islamophobia emerged as a serious issue in communities all around the world.

For Shalmani's family, the violent developments of the Rushdie Affair were not merely a distant political event. Although Khomeini passed away a few months after issuing the *fatwa* against Rushdie in 1989, his legacy grew increasingly impactful across the globe, fostering identity and gender-based stereotypes and creating hostilities between Muslims and the Western communities in which they lived. These social transformations, which, for instance, blurred the distinction between the Islamic faith and Islamism, manifested in pernicious ways on both a global and personal level throughout Shalmani's adolescence – a subject I will examine in greater depth in the subsequent chapter. The year 1989 initiated difficult circumstances for Shalmani and her family who were in the midst of adapting to the social and economic demands of life in exile. The following excerpt encapsulates the tensions within their family dynamic amidst an increasingly polarized international political climate:

> Il ne s'était passé que dix ans depuis la descente d'avion du "vieux en noir & blanc" et il était d'autant plus présent que je constatais ce qu'il avait fait – avec la dextérité d'un magicien noir – à ma famille. Dans l'exil, ma famille a disparu, car il n'y eut plus jamais de famille dans le sens d'un refuge. Il n'y eut plus jamais de solidarité, de générosité, et encore moins d'amour. Il ne s'agissait plus de préserver ce qui avait été péniblement sauvé – l'argent et un peu d'amour – mais de tout faire pour empocher le tout au détriment des autres. Des clans se sont formés, des mots affreux furent dits, des cris furent définitifs et l'oncle chéri, qui était presque le grand-père, regarda mon père dans les yeux, me montra du doigt – alors que j'étais devant la porte en partance pour l'école – et jura sur ma vie de lui apporter son chèque le lendemain. Mon père, qui avait encore du cœur et préférait la littérature au gain, signa. Il ne revit son argent que dix ans plus tard. Sans que jamais personne y fasse référence. Mon père attendait. Ma famille fuyait. Entre-temps nous avons eu faim et personne n'est venu à notre secours. Et mes parents furent déchirés, se déchirèrent, se déchirent encore et ont payé au prix fort cette guerre à domicile fomentée par Khomeiny en personne.[93]

https://www.reuters.com/world/events-following-irans-fatwa-against-author-salman-rushdie-2022-08-12/.

[93] Op. cit., Shalmani, *Khomeiny, Sade et moi*, 121-122.

> It had only been ten years since the "old man in black & white" got off the plane and he was all the more present as I noticed what he had done – with the dexterity of a black magician – to my family. In exile, my family disappeared, because there was never again a family in the sense of a refuge. There was never again any solidarity, generosity, and even less love. It was no longer a question of preserving what had been painfully saved – money and a little love – but of doing everything possible to pocket it all to the detriment of others. Clans were formed, terrible words were said, screams were permanent and the beloved uncle, who was almost the grandfather, looked my father in the eyes, pointed at me – while I was in front of the door leaving for school – and swore on my life to bring him his check the next day. My father, who still had a heart and preferred literature to money, approved. He did not see his money again until ten years later. Without anyone ever referring to it. My father was waiting. My family was fleeing. In the meantime we were hungry and no one came to our aid. And my parents were torn, had been torn, were torn again and paid a high price for this war at home instigated by Khomeini himself.

Physical displacement had resulted in familial dislocation, and they now found themselves once again confronted with the consequences of Khomeini's actions in a foreign country. Because of the Rushdie Affair, they were to face the impending backlash of Khomeini's censorship and the antagonism Shalmani would receive by the adolescents in her social circle for having read the book. While the Iran-Iraq War, which was taking place during the Rushdie Affair had become an event that the family monitored on television from overseas, the news of the *fatwa* insinuated threat to the sense of ease and security the family sought abroad, especially since, as atheists, they had renounced their Islamic faith. France had been the family's chosen destination for political asylum in light of its secularism, yet these social divisions owing to identity politics were revealing a different reality. To her mother's dismay and per her request, moving forward, they were to claim Armenian origins should anyone inquire of their background.[94] Shalmani, on the other hand, "continuai[t] d'être iranienne d'origine pour bien faire comprendre qu'[elle] étai[t] la plus légitime et la plus grande ennemie vivante de Khomeiny" (continued to be of

[94] Shalmani states in the autobiography that her mother continued her "exil en Arménie" (exile in Armenia) until she felt that Iranians were held in higher regard by her acquaintances, which occurred when George Clooney, in the film *Syriana*, spoke a few words in Persian to insult an Arab for being unfamiliar with the language. She expresses her gratitude to George Clooney, Marjane Satrapi and Vincent Paronnaud's *Persepolis*, Shirin Ebadi, *Lire Lolita à Teheran*, and *Une séparation* for restoring her mother's rightful origins. See p. 123 of *Khomeiny, Sade et moi*.

Iranian origin to make it clear that [she] was the most legitimate and greatest living enemy of Khomeini).[95] The Supreme Leader's unfaltering hegemony once again permeated their private lives, but this time, it would introduce her to the literary works of Salman Rushdie.

Despite Shalmani's young age and difficulty comprehending the novel's "vocabulary and intellectual baggage" during her initial reading of *The Satanic Verses*, she understood the problem at stake following her father's explication of the text.[96] The two protagonists of Indian origin interrogate:

> l'exil et l'identité et traversent leurs vies avec des questions plein la tête et des rencontres qui démontrent la diversité des sentiments et la force des émotions comme du préjugé et de la tradition. […] Et au cœur de ce récit, il y a une question, un trait d'imagination, une folle supposition, qui a rendu tous les barbus et une grande majorité de non-barbus complètement dingos. La question interroge les *vrais* versets sataniques.[97]
>
> exile and identity and go through their lives with questions in their heads and encounters which demonstrate the diversity of feelings and the strength of emotions as well as of prejudice and tradition. […] And at the heart of this story, there is a question, a stroke of imagination, a crazy supposition, which made all bearded people and a large majority of non-bearded people completely crazy. The question interrogates the *real* satanic verses.

Like all fiction, Rushdie used the power of imagination to question and explore the "what ifs," to rewrite "l'histoire, interroger toutes les variations d'une même action, faire défiler tous les temoins et découvrir mille versions possibles" (history, examine all the variations of the same action, scroll through all the witnesses and discover a thousand possible versions).[98] Shalmani's interpretation of the public's reception of the novel reaffirms the profound impact of Rushdie's manner of storytelling and the symbolic role of the pen. She continues:

> Le crime absolu de Rushdie est donc d'imaginer et de faire œuvre de fiction. Ce qui n'a rien de religieux: ce n'est pas un traité théologique. Il n'est rien insultant dans une œuvre

[95] Ibid, 123.

[96] Ibid, 124.

[97] Ibid, 124.

[98] Ibid, 124-125.

> de fiction qui n'est qu'un mirage de la réalité: le monde des *et si*. Mais ce n'était pas cela qui rendait malades les barbus et les corbeaux. C'était la parole qui les avait bouleversés. Prendre la parole. Dire. A haute voix. Brr… C'était écrit. D'ouvrir. Il n'avait pas le droit d'écrire, de prendre la parole, de changer l'histoire, de s'amuser avec, de tordre la logique. Salman Rushdie a ouvert sa gueule. Il me paraît logique que je l'aie adoré, tout de suite. J'y étais préparée depuis mon enfance. Il faisait comme je voulais faire pour le restant de mes jours. Je voulais ouvrir des portes, en claquer d'autres, débusquer l'absurde sous le voile de la logique, m'amuser des vérités qui ne sont que des vérités du préjugé, passer par la fenêtre, montrer mon cul aux curés. […] La censure allait sévir un peu partout et je souffrirais avec lui, comme j'avais souffert avec mon père brûlant les livres qu'il aimait pour échapper à la prison. L'objet livre, l'action d'écrire, la patience de lire allaient devenir mes armes.[99]
>
> Rushdie's absolute crime is therefore to imagine and create a work of fiction. Which has nothing religious: it is not a theological treatise. There is nothing insulting in a work of fiction which is only a mirage of reality: the world of what ifs. But that was not what made the bearded men and the crows sick. It was the words that had upset them. To speak. To Say. Out loud. Brr… It was written. To open. Salman Rushdie had opened his mouth. He had no right to write, to speak, to change history, to have fun with it, to twist logic. It seems logical to me that I loved him, straight away. I was prepared for this since my childhood. He was doing what I wanted to do for the rest of my life. I wanted to open doors, slam others, flush out the absurd under the veil of logic, have fun with truths that are only truths of prejudice, go through the window, show my ass to the priests. […] Censorship was going to be rampant everywhere and I would suffer with it, as I had suffered with my father burning the books he loved to escape prison. The book as the object, the action of writing, the patience of reading would become my weapons.

The close relationship that Shalmani established with Khomeini – the person who had first challenged her sense of physical, intellectual, and spiritual freedom – she now shared with Rushdie himself, the author who would pave the way to infinite creative possibilities for her. But before that materialized, the polemical turn of events associated with the Rushdie Affair, the legacy of which continue to haunt the contemporary context, complicated her sense of belonging in France and reinforced the notion that much work remained to be done against the hegemony of religious and political forces of oppression, which categorically erode the universal human right "to freedom of opinion and expression."[100] Accordingly, the *barbus* came to symbolize a

[99] Ibid, 124-125.

[100] The preamble of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* proclaims, "the highest aspiration of the common people" as the human being's right "to enjoy freedom of speech and belief and freedom from fear and want." Adopted in Paris on December 10, 1948, the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* is a document drafted by

broader manifestation of xenophobia and an aversion to pluralism in thought and identity, often propagated by militant religious zealots and political leaders. Apart from the xenophobic and gender-based discrimination that arose from religious differences in Shalmani's community, certain individuals in her social circle exhibited similar sentiments due to divergent political orientations, including her Trotskyist boyfriend and his entourage, who expressed hostility toward women and despised their femininity because of what they perceived as "cachée derrière [sa] féminité qui n'était qu'un signe de [son] appartenance à une bourgeoisie qui affamait le peuple et s'en mettait plein les poches (hidden behind her femininity was a sign of [her] belonging to a bourgeoisie which starved the people and lined their pockets with it).[101] Encountering these condescending attitudes and remarks in France served as a reminder of her gender and the subordinate position women, in general, occupy in public and private domains across Western and Eastern contexts. It was apparent that women were perpetually being criticized, objectified, and negated. By the time Shalmani reached early adulthood, it became evident that her gender would continue to influence her everyday experiences, even while living in France.

Since the tumultuous experiences of Shalmani's Iranian childhood structured the present, she determined that she needed to search in the past for her current circumstances. This conviction was reaffirmed years later, as she set out to write *Khomeiny, Sade et moi*, attempting, in retrospect, to shed light on the ontological questions concerning memory, identity, and

representatives of the United Nations General Assembly, which consists of 30 Articles that lay out "fundamental human rights to be universally protected." Article 19 reads: "Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers."
United Nations General Assembly, Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Resolution 217 (III), Paris, 1948, https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights.

[101] Ibid, 266.

belonging, which continued to haunt the present. Shalmani's philosophical reflections probe whether knowledge and historical understanding can reconcile the polarizations inherent in political and societal discord:

> Que faire avec le passé qui vous colle à la peau? […] Il ne sera plus les dates-couteaux, les *avant* et les *après*. Il sera apprivoisé par la force du savoir. […] Mais l'ironie qui pimente le rapport de force, cette obsession du passé est aussi l'apanage des barbus. Dans leur volonté d'imposer leurs préjugés millénaires, il y a cette volonté de revenir en arrière, de retourner aux premiers temps, aux temps du prophète et de ses victoires, aux temps des conquêtes et de l'islam qui était un empire. Ils veulent retourner en arrière, reprendre le cours de l'Histoire là où ils pensent le maîtriser. Nous sommes là, les barbus et moi, face à face, à nous quereller pour un bout de mémoire, pour une référence historique, pour gagner du temps. Peut-être que la différence entre nous, c'est moi qui cherche de quoi comprendre et eux qui cherchent de quoi imiter. Peut-être qu'ils sont coincés dans un passé qu'ils pensent rassurant et ainsi ils reculent la rupture. Car – et c'est certain – un jour, la modernité vaincra. En attendant, il faut aider tous ceux qui le désirent à creuser des niches de modernité dans le labyrinthe des préjugés, et c'est au passé, et pas forcément à celui de l'islam, qu'il faut faire appel. Il faut donner des clefs qui cassent le schéma, qui ouvrent des voies, qui tirent la langue aux barbus. Et je pense posséder une de ces clefs, je l'ai découverte dans le passé, au cœur de l'Histoire. Il fallait bien que la Révolution française eût un cœur.[102]
>
> What one ought to do with the past that sticks to your skin? […] It will no longer be the dagger-dates, the *before* and *afters*. It will be tamed by the force of knowledge. […] But the irony that spices up the power struggle, this obsession with the past is also the prerogative of the bearded. In their desire to impose their age-old prejudices, there is this longing to go back, to return to the early days, to the time of the prophet and his victories, to the time of conquests and Islam as an empire. They want to go back, to resume the course of History there where they believe they can control. Here we are, the bearded and I, face to face, quarreling over a piece of memory, over a historical reference, to gain time. Maybe the difference between us is that I seek to understand, while they seek to imitate. Perhaps they are stuck in a past they find reassuring, and thus they delay the rupture. Because – and it's certain – one day, modernity will prevail. In the meantime, we must help all those who desire it to dig niches of modernity in the labyrinth of prejudices, and it is to the past, and not necessarily to that of Islam, that we must appeal. We must provide keys that break the pattern, that open paths, that stick out their tongues to the bearded. And I think I possess one of these keys, I discovered it in the past, at the heart of History. The French Revolution had to have a heart after all.

Seeking an improved understanding of the historical past thus became Shalmani's primary objective since she was convinced that this gesture would be the most powerful weapon with

[102] Ibid, 30-32.

which to combat "tous les Khomeiny du monde" (all the Khomeinis of the world).[103] This initiative traces back to the early days of her family's exile, a time when she began to study French history by virtue of her inquisitiveness and her father's desire to discipline her through art and literature.

In *Khomeiny, Sade et moi*, Shalmani also analyzes the centrality of the past from a broader perspective when describing the exile's instinctive urge for recollection as an attempt to build continuity between the past and present. More specifically, this involves characterizing the role of the past as a survival mechanism within the migrant experience. Shalmani writes:

> L'exilé possède la clef vers hier car il est hermétique au futur, victime d'un mouvement quasi divin qui le dépasse, il se révèle incapable d'imaginer un avenir. […] je me suis toujours sentie proche du passé car je peux facilement m'y faufiler. Le présent ayant ses limites, seul le passé permet d'ouvrir les vannes de l'espoir afin de s'accrocher à quelque chose qui soit plus solide que le réel. Et rien de plus solide que le passé historique. Certains l'appellent l'identité, d'autres l'intégration, d'autres la perte de soi.[104]
>
> The exile has the key to yesterday because he is hermetic to the future, victim of an almost divine movement which surpasses him, he proves incapable of imagining a future. […] I have always felt close to the past because I can easily weave in and out of it. The present has its limits, only the past allows us to open the floodgates of hope in order to cling to something that is more solid than reality. And nothing is more solid than the historical past. Some call it identity, others integration, others loss of self.

Precariousness is inextricably linked to status as "exile," navigating an unfamiliar country, and finding increasingly that the compass of the past is no longer reliable. These circumstances are compounded by an unforeseeable future, a dimension Shalmani fastens upon in the opening pages of *Les exilés meurent aussi d'amour* – a scene to which I have alluded at the beginning of this chapter. The emotional and psychological attachment to one's former life or homeland often

[103] Ibid, 32.

[104] Ibid, 27.

takes the form of recurrent nostalgia for a bygone past. This phenomenon is extensively analyzed in Shalmani's literary and journalistic publications, arguably, most compellingly in her novel.

In *Les exilés meurent aussi d'amour*, Shirin's confrontation with her familial and cultural past instigates the interconnections between "identity, integration, and loss of self" in relation to the exilic condition. Shalmani's literary representation of exile is characterized as a "sublime et permanent décalage" (sublime and permanent shift) while nostalgia, "le problème insoluble de tous ceux qui brisent les liens familiaux: ils traînent malgré eux les chaînes qui les lient à leur naissance" (the insoluble problem for all those who break family ties: they unwittingly drag along the chains that bind them to their birth).[105] While Shalmani's fictional counterpart, Shirin, does not yearn to physically return to or emotionally reestablish a connection with her birthplace, moments of extreme nostalgia which she suppresses arise during several instances of coming into contact with her aunts after many years of familial estrangement. Discovering that what she felt was indeed nostalgia, she describes the experience as evoking "le sentiment d'avoir vieilli d'un coup" (the feeling of having aged suddenly).[106] Despite the many years of emotional and physical detachment from her family, Iran, and cultural heritage, Shirin confesses to the complexity of her neglected emotions: "Je n'ai jamais pu […] revoir [mes tantes] sans sentir ma gorge se serrer douloureusement, sans avoir envie de courir me réfugier dans des bras dont je me rappelais encore la chaleur, quand je n'étais qu'une enfant" (I could never again see [my aunts] without feeling my throat tighten painfully, without wanting to run and seek refuge in arms whose warmth I still remembered from when I was just a child).[107] Another such instance occurs while in the company of their Jewish-Iranian family friend Omid, when Shirin, by chance, hears

[105] Op.cit., Shalmani, *Les exilés meurent aussi d'amour*, 305 and 301.

[106] Ibid, 375.

[107] Ibid, 301.

the captivating melody of Sima Bina, an Iranian musician and artist who is presented in the novel as a family acquaintance. After thirteen years of not listening to Sima Bina's songs since her first year in exile, a flood of emotions and memories rushes in when Omid turns on the music:

> […] soudain l'Iran, mon enfance, ma famille, l'angoisse de ma mère, le silence de mon père et la vengeance du tout petit frère me prirent à la gorge. Ni Soutine, ni mes carnets, ni mes désirs, rien de ce que j'avais bâti pour me protéger, pas même Omid, ne put retenir ce qui m'envahit alors.[108] Ce que j'avais refusé le soir de Norouz dans le restaurant iranien de Montparnasse, revenait soudain dans la voix de Sima Bina: la nostalgie. Cette putain de nostalgie, ce sentiment enfoui depuis treize ans en moi, ce sentiment qui était celui de ma famille, me revenait en plein coeur. […] La voix de Sima Bina, la voix de mon enfance dispersait tous les morceaux dont j'étais faite. Rien ne tenait face aux rires de l'enfance. […] Omid abandonna l'idée de me voir m'épancher, et il me consola de ce qu'il ne savait pas, me laissant le temps de reprendre mon souffle, de retrouver la cohérence du langage, de faire fuir les fantômes qui me paralysaient. Ce n'était pas encore le petit matin et la voix de Sima Bina continuait de marteler ce qui ne serait jamais plus. Il est impossible de pleurer la nostalgie, c'est l'hymne national de l'exil. […] Il devenait impossible d'écouter une chanson de Sima Bina sans pleurer les chaudes larmes de l'enfance. Téhéran était encore là. Pire: il n'avait jamais disparu, il s'était dissimulé derrière Soutine.[109]
>
> […] suddenly Iran, my childhood, my family, my mother's anxiety, my father's silence, and my little brother's revenge grabbed me by the throat. Neither Soutine, nor my notebooks, nor my desires, nothing I had built to protect myself, not even Omid, could hold back what overwhelmed me then. What I had refused on the evening of Nowruz in the Iranian restaurant in Montparnasse suddenly returned in the voice of Sima Bina: nostalgia. That damn nostalgia, that feeling buried for thirteen years in me, that feeling which belonged to my family, came back full force. […] Sima Bina's voice, the voice of my childhood, scattered all the pieces I was made of. Nothing could withstand the

[108] Throughout the novel, Shirin expresses her admiration for the French painter Chaïm Soutine, who was of Belarusian and Jewish descent. In this particular instance, she is referring to the symbolic importance of his art, which provided her refuge. Omid admired the art of Chagall while she, Soutine's. Shalmani writes, "Moi je préférais Soutine et je repris son expression à mon goût: 'Soutine, c'est moi.' Sans dieux, il nous fallait de quoi nous relier au monde et Chagall tout comme Soutine nous y aidaient. Ils nous légitimaient. Ils étaient des métèques et ils avaient fait la France, ils étaient venus, morts de faim, chercher des toiles vierges à couvrir de leurs fantômes. Quand nous buvions à en perdre la mémoire, nous étions Soutine et Modigliani qui oublient où ils habitent; quand après l'amour, je prenais un carnet pour écrire ce qui deviendrait mon premier roman. […] Nous jouions à nous retrouver dans la généalogie que nous nous étions choisie" (As for me, I preferred Soutine and adopted his expression to my liking: 'Soutine, is me.' Without gods, we needed something to connect us to the world, and both Chagall and Soutine helped us in that regard. They legitimized us. They were metics and they had made France; they had come, starving, looking for blank canvases to cover with their ghosts. When we drank to the point of losing our memory, we were Soutine and Modigliani, who forgot where they lived; when, after making love, I took a notebook to write, what would become my first novel. […] We pretended to find ourselves in the genealogy we had chosen for ourselves). See p. 370 of *Les exilés meurent aussi d'amour*.

[109] Op.cit., Shalmani, *Les exilés meurent aussi d'amour*, 373-374.

> laughter of childhood. […] Omid gave up on seeing me open up, and he comforted me for what he did not know, giving me time to catch my breath, to regain the coherence of language, to chase away the ghosts that paralyzed me. It wasn't yet dawn and Sima Bina's voice continued to hammer home what would never be again. It is impossible to cry for nostalgia, it is the national anthem of exile. […] It became impossible to listen to a song by Sima Bina without shedding the warm tears of childhood. Tehran was still there. Worse: it had never disappeared, it had hidden behind Soutine.

As Shirin confronts the ambivalent emotions that rush in upon hearing the bittersweet tune of her Iranian childhood, she attests to the profound impact of art and its capacity to blur the boundaries between past and present, compelling her to reconcile the scattered and indelible remnants of the past.

Shalmani's representation of nostalgia and the exilic condition echoes Edward Said's own understanding of exile, "a condition of terminal loss" that has become the "motif of modern culture" and the modern era, which we have come to regard as "spiritually orphaned and alienated, the age of anxiety and estrangement" born out of "modern warfare, imperialism, and the quasi-theological ambitions of totalitarian rulers."[110] Said's philosophical contemplations in "Reflections on Exile" offer a dynamic paradigm with which to investigate the potential of literary testimony when navigating the crushing social and political realities of the contemporary world. This essay is precisely useful in unpacking the socio-political issues and ontological questions that Shalmani addresses in her autobiographical essay, as both authors situate their inquiries within similar historical developments, namely, the rise of religious and political extremism of modern-day nation-states and "totalitarian rulers."

In the essay, Said examines the various reasons for which literature of exile has come to dominate Modern Western culture, which he claims is "in large part the work of exiles, émigrés, [and] refugees," whose displacement stems from the global refugee crises and the acceleration of

[110] Op. cit., Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Literary and Cultural Essays*, 180.

immigration.[111] While he contends that exile defeats understanding and adequate representation, since it "is neither aesthetically nor humanistically comprehensible," he considers exile's artistic and literary manifestations, in its many forms, as valid attempts to "lend dignity to a condition legislated to deny dignity—to deny an identity to people."[112] In addition, Said argues that "to concentrate on exile as a contemporary political punishment, [one] must therefore map territories of experience beyond those mapped by the literature of exile itself."[113] Accordingly, he emphasizes the importance of thinking beyond the scope of literature to ensure a proper and holistic representation of the modern-day experience of displacement in its various manifestations. He continues: "you must leave the modest refuge provided by subjectivity and resort instead to the abstractions of mass politics."[114] In the autobiographical essay, Shalmani envisions this process as one that compliments the study of History with a capital H since she contends that politics is inextricably linked to the three fundamental domains of society, namely, culture, education, and History. Shalmani writes: "Si l'étude de la grande Histoire est indispensable, l'étude des mœurs et l'appréhension de l'intime éclairent la grande Histoire. Posséder la connaissance de l'organisation sociale, du rapport à la mort comme du rapport au corps, savoir comment les hommes voient les femmes et comment les femmes envisagent les hommes, c'est ne jamais tomber dans la ritournelle des préjugés. […] Il faut accepter que l'histoire des mœurs soit intimement liée à l'histoire politique" (If the study of History with a capital H is indispensable, the study of morals and the understanding of the intimate illuminate it. To possess knowledge of social organization, of the relationship to death as well as the

[111] Ibid, 180.

[112] Ibid, 181 and 182.

[113] Ibid, 182.

[114] Ibid, 182.

relationship to the body, to know how men see women and how women envisage men, is to never fall into the refrain of prejudices. […] We must accept that the history of morals is intimately linked to political history).[115] In Chapter 2, I will unpack Shalmani's argument through a textual analysis of *Khomeiny, Sade et moi*.

A topic that is of equal interest to our current discussion is nationalism and its relation to exile, which Said asserts "in [its] early stages develop[s] from a condition of estrangement."[116] Both Said and Shalmani recognize the inherent tensions and possible dangers of nationalism provided that it entails the inclusion of some and exclusion of others. Since "nationalism is an assertion of belonging in and to a place, a people, a heritage, [i]t affirms the home created by a community of language, culture, and customs; and by so doing, it fends of exile, fights to prevent its ravages."[117] To this end, "successful nationalisms consign truth exclusively to themselves and relegate falsehood and inferiority to outsiders. [A]nd just beyond the frontier between 'us' and the 'outsiders' is the perilous territory of not-belonging."[118] Accordingly, nationalism and exile confront each other, perhaps because they are "simply two conflicting varieties of paranoia […and] [b]ecause both terms include everything from the most collective of collective sentiments to the most private of private emotions."[119] The literature and art produced from these competing tensions that arise from exile, a condition in which "*nothing* is secure" because exile "is fundamentally a discontinuous state of being," may guarantee a space and community of

[115] Op. cit., Shalmani, *Khomeiny, Sade et moi*, 32 and 33.

[116] Op. cit., Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Literary and Cultural Essays*, 182.

[117] Ibid, 182.

[118] Ibid, 183.

[119] Ibid, 183.

inclusion and solidarity for those who "are cut off from their roots, their land, their past."[120] In exile, the bygone "homeland" is replaced by these "artificial" transitory territories of belonging, in which the displaced subject becomes autonomous. Said continues:

> [e]xiles feel, therefore, an urgent need to reconstitute their broken lives usually by choosing to see themselves as part of a triumphant ideology or a restored people. […] [E]xiles are always eccentrics who *feel* their difference (even if they frequently exploit it) as a kind of orphanhood. […] The exile knows that in a secular and contingent world, homes are always provisional. Borders and barriers, which enclose within the safety of familiar territory, can also become prisoners, and are often defended beyond reason or necessity. Exiles cross borders, break barriers of thought and experience. [Consequently,] much of the exile's life is taken up with compensating for disorienting loss by creating a new world to rule. […] The exile's new world, logically enough, is unnatural and its unreality resembles fiction. […] There is the sheer fact of isolation and displacement, which produces the kind of narcissistic masochism that resists all efforts at amelioration, acculturation, and community. At this extreme the exile can make a fetish of exile, a practice that distances him or her from all connections and commitments. […] The exile is offered a new set of affiliations and develops new loyalties.[121]

Such detachments, which lead to a renewed sense of independence, Said claims are achieved by "working through attachments, not by rejecting them."[122]

In both the autobiography and in the novel, Shalmani, in a similar light, problematizes the fetishization of the past as a kind of survival mechanism for the exilic condition. As the various textual examples referenced in this chapter demonstrate, nostalgia contains a desire for holding onto the past with the aim of deferring its rupture. Thus, Shalmani proposes a cosmopolitan shift in perspective: rather than seeking comfort in a romanticized past of the *homeland* through its recollection, she speculates on how it may instead be used as a tool with which to negotiate the past and the present in order to successfully integrate into the host community so as to assert a renewed sense of agency. The following excerpt encapsulates this argument put forth by

[120] Ibid, 184 and 183.

[121] Ibid, 183-190, 187, and 189.

[122] Ibid, 191.

Shalmani: “j’ai trouvé dans l’étude du passé la meilleure voie pour comprendre mon enfance et partager une mémoire commune avec le pays qui m’a recueillie après l’exil” (I found in the study of the past the best way to understand my childhood and share a common memory with the country that welcomed me after exile).[123] Accordingly, the evocation of the past, encompassing both the historical and personal, does not simply function as an intrinsic means of grappling with the condition of exile in order to prevent the “erasure” or “loss” of a former national or cultural identity, but rather as a means to challenge prejudices and restrictions that may potentially hinder progress in the future. As such, this return operates as an integration mechanism that offers agency and the opportunity to claim belonging in the host community, while simultaneously allowing for, as Said avers, a new way of seeing the world. In turn, this also contains the position of a rightful participant in collective memory. Echoing Said’s perspectives on the process of working through attachments, Shalmani asserts that the past must neither be denied nor actively sought, but rather confronted.[124]

[123] Op. cit., Shalmani, *Khomeiny, Sade et moi*, 27.

[124] Ibid, 30.

Chapter 2:

(Un)veiling Exile: 'The Politics of the Female Body' in *Khomeiny, Sade et moi*

> Dis-moi ce que tu fais du corps et je te dirai de quoi tu as peur.
>
> — Abnousse Shalmani, *Khomeiny, Sade et moi*

> Qu'est devenue la vraie foi? Celle qui n'impose rien à personne mais tout à soi, qui dialogue avec Dieu dans un rapport spirituel et sain?
>
> — Abnousse Shalmani, *Khomeiny, Sade et moi*

In *Khomeiny, Sade et moi*, Shalmani challenges the Islamic theocratic regime established by Ayatollah Khomeini from a female perspective, focusing primarily on its dress code policies and the ways in which bodily restrictions reflect broader limitations imposed on Iranian women's agency. The autobiographical essay addresses these issues by providing extensive commentary on Khomeini's imposition of "sexual apartheid" through the enforcement of the hijab – "la frontière privée/public portée à son paroxysme" (the private/public boundary taken to its climax).[125] Shalmani claims that such restrictive policies have created an irreconcilable divide between private life at home and public life: "ll y a une schizophrénie réelle en Iran. Vous avez la vie intime et la vie publique. La vie intime se passe à l'intérieur, dans les appartements où on trouve de l'alcool, de la drogue, où les gens dansent, chantent. Dès que vous revêtez la tenue traditionnelle et que vous sortez, tout s'arrête" (There is a real schizophrenia in Iran. You have an intimate life and a public life. The intimate life takes place indoors, in apartments where you find alcohol, drugs, where people dance, sing. As soon as you put on traditional attire and go outside, everything stops).[126] This private/public dichotomy is described by Shalmani as the "vitrine de la

[125] Abnousse Shalmani, *Khomeiny, Sade et moi* (Paris: Éditions Grasset & Fasquelle, 2014), 23 and 44.

[126] Abnousse Shalmani, "Abnousse Shalmani, au nom de la République," *Radio France*, April 29, 2024, https://www.radiofrance.fr/franceculture/podcasts/france-culture-va-plus-loin-l-invite-e-des-matins/abnousse-shalmani-au-nom-de-la-republique-9041430.

mollahrchie officielle" (official vitrine of the mullahcracy), a regime "qui soumet la femme – et l'homme – à la dictature de l'œil" (which subjects women – and men – to the dictatorship of the gaze).[127] As discussed in the previous chapter of this dissertation, Shalmani maintains that the *politicization* of Islam and the institutionalization of gender discrimination under Khomeini's regime, enforced through measures such as the mandatory wearing of the hijab, represent a fundamental mechanism of state control over women since "les barbus et les corbeaux […] voient dans toutes les petites filles des femmes dangereuses en puissance" (the bearded men and the crows […] see in all little girls the potential to become dangerous women).[128] The implications of the obligatory veil, characterized by Shalmani as an "interior prison," has consequently limited women's freedom to express individuality and deprived them of the right to participate in public life on equal terms with men.[129] Shalmani makes these claims from her personal experience of being required to adhere to the Iranian regime's customary dress codes as a young child, which she asserts hindered her ability to express her personal identity, giving way to a sense of invisibility in the presence of other females clad in identical uniforms.

In the Iranian context, Shalmani therefore views the compulsory nature of the veil, which has shifted the intimacy of religion into the realm of politics, as a symbol of oppressive and violent state control. This has resulted in the conflation of "le cultuel et le culturel," "la politique et la religion," "le prosélytisme et la foi" (the cult and the cultural, politics and religion, proselytism and faith).[130] Accordingly, in her essay, Shalmani does not frame the question of the

[127] *Mollahrchie* is the French neologism for mullahcracy, referring to a political/government system in which leadership is held by Islamic religious figures such as mullahs.
Op.cit., "Abnousse Shalmani, au nom de la République."
Op. cit., Shalmani, *Khomeiny, Sade et moi*, 33.

[128] Ibid, 33.

[129] Ibid, 33.

[130] Ibid, 131.

veil exclusively as a religious issue but primarily as one that is political. She proceeds to maintain that the solution to this sexual apartheid lies in ensuring "l'égalité devant la loi et la mixité" (equality before the law and diversity).[131] As such, any form of agency and freedom, be it intellectual, moral, physical, or spiritual, can be attained once women are granted the *choice* to renounce the veil. The following argument is predicated on the idea that "there cannot be freedom beneath the veil [and] [t]here cannot be individual freedom under a religious regime":[132]

> to cover the female body with a veil, a *burqa*, a *hijab*, a burkini, is to accept that said body is a site of desire and only that. […] A veiled woman is not a free woman. She is a woman who considers her body a taboo. A woman's body is not a taboo; it is equal to that of a man. It should possess the same rights and exercise the same duties. To cover is to separate the sexes. It is to return to the time of the *ancien régime*. All religions restrain the female body.[133]

The removal of religious attire thus symbolically equates to an act of resistance and an expression of political freedom in a country that Shalmani contends is "gangrénés par l'idéologie de la haine" (corrupted by the ideology of hate), where the imposition of religious obligations on all women infringes upon their right to self-determination.[134]

As I have discussed in the introductory pages of this dissertation, Shalmani has positioned herself as an incontrovertible interlocutor on global debates concerning the advancement of women's rights and freedom while remaining committed to these thorny issues through the many outlets of her voice – both within the context of contemporary Iranian politics and as they relate to Islam in France. Chapter 2 of this dissertation explores the various reasons for which Shalmani's rejection of the veil and her participation in these polemical public debates have rendered her a contentious figure in the West. Through a close reading of Shalmani's

[131] Op. cit., Shalmani, "Les enfants de Spinoza et de Sade," 65.

[132] Op. cit., Sparling, "In Conversation: Abnousse Shalmani on the Politics of the Female Body."

[133] Ibid.

[134] Op. cit., Shalmani, *Laïcité, j'écris ton nom!*, 17.

essayistic commentary on the "politics" of the veil in *Khomeiny, Sade et moi*, I will further examine the various ways in which her refusal to wear the hijab at an early age has served as a productive means of claiming autonomy by challenging authoritarian traditions and political ideologies. This initial act served as a pivotal step in publicly rejecting Iran's autocratic and patriarchal system, characterized by the regime's persistence in silencing dissent through draconian civil and legal persecution.[135] The uprisings in 2022 following the arrest and death of Mahsa Amini by Iranian officials for violating Iran's dress code highlight the urgency of issues pertaining to women's rights, which have gained global attention through such slogans as "Woman, Life, Freedom" popularized after Amini's death. Cultural, political, and social issues therefore provide the contextual framework for Shalmani's literary writing and have added a poignant perspective to her trajectory of integration in the West and, ultimately, to her polemical stance on the veil – a subject that will be the primary focus of this chapter.

In France, perspectives on the veil in public debates are oftentimes more nuanced.[136] While some, motivated by political considerations, view it as a symbol of oppression, whether through state control or patriarchal systems, others perceive the right to wear the veil as an expression of freedom that is part and parcel of one's (religious) identity. The controversial opinions on France's ban of conspicuous religious symbols in public spaces remain a subject of discussion in contemporary France since the 1989 "affaire du foulard" (headscarf affair) and

[135] A year after Mahsa Amini's death in 2022 and the civil unrest which followed, Iran's parliament passed a bill in support of further strengthening the dress code violation penalties. Failure to wear or enforce the hijab could now amount to 10 years of imprisonment and exorbitant monetary fines.
Mitchell McCluskey and Chris Lau, "'Gender Apartheid': UN Experts Denounce Iran's Proposed Hijab Law," CNN, September 2, 2023,
https://www.cnn.com/2023/09/01/middleeast/united-nations-calls-iran-hijab-gender-apartheid-intl-hnk/index.html.

[136] For further perspectives on the complex issues and debates in France regarding Muslim attire and the question of integration, see: Caitlin Killian's article "The Other Side of the Veil: North African Women in France Respond to the Headscarf Affair" and Elsa Dorlin's "The Great Strip Show: Feminism, Nationalism, and the Burqa in France."

"affaire du voile" (veil affair). These affairs launched a series of divisive public debates when three adolescent girls of North African descent were refused entry to school in Creil in September of 1989 and subsequently suspended for wearing a headscarf.[137] The developments in Creil immediately prompted a response from Lionel Jospin, who was serving as the Minister of Education at the time:

> In an effort of appeasement, […] Lionel Jospin, seized the *Conseil d'Etat*, which is in French law, the final arbiter of conflicts between citizens and public institutions. At the end of 1989, the *Conseil d'Etat* issued a statement against a general ban of Islamic veils at schools. According to the *Conseil*, such a prohibition would go against students' freedom of conscience and their right to express their religious beliefs. The *Conseil* stated that banning veils at school was only possible on a case-by-case basis and under particular circumstances, when wearing a veil threatens the smooth running of courses […]. In the same year, the Minister published a circular in which he rephrased the *Conseil's* statement, by calling educational teams to judge case by case the problems raised by the wearing of veils in their schools. Following the Conseil's statement and the Ministerial circular, the expulsions in the city of Creil were canceled and the three girls went back to school.[138]

The directive issued by the *Conseil* did not appease the tense situation nor "avoid the proliferation of local disputes in the coming years. In the early 1990s, many teachers and principals started to complain about not having clear instructions on what to do when Muslim students wear a veil in school."[139] While unresolved administrative and social issues persisted within communities, the academic and political spheres reflected similar tensions. Published in *Le Nouvel Observateur* on November 2, 1989, an open letter written by intellectuals Elisabeth Badinter, Alain Finkielkraut, Régis Debray, Elisabeth de Fontenay, and Catherine Kintzler, expressed contempt for Jospin's ambiguous and "lenient" stance on the veil. In one of her latest publications entitled *Laïcité, j'écris ton nom!* (2024), Shalmani alludes to the claims raised in the

[137] Caitlin Killian, "The Other Side of the Veil: North African Women in France Respond to the Headscarf Affair," *Gender & Society* 17, no. 4 (2003): 567.

[138] Eric Maurin and Nicolás Navarrete, "The Inequality Turn in Public Policy," Paris School of Economics, September 2021, 6, https://www.parisschoolofeconomics.eu/docs/maurin-eric/sept_2021-22_09.pdf.

[139] Ibid, 7.

letter to articulate her position on the veil and its relationship to integration, and, most importantly, to express her support for French laicism (*laïcité*), a principle that originated during the French Revolution – officially adopted by the Republic in 1905 – to ensure the separation between religion and the state.[140] The excerpt from the letter reads:

> Il faut que les élèves aient le plaisir d'oublier leur communauté d'origine et de penser à autre chose que ce qu'ils sont pour pouvoir penser par eux-mêmes. Si l'on veut que les professeurs puissent les y aider, et l'école rester ce qu'elle est – un lieu d'émancipation –, les appartenances ne doivent pas faire la loi à l'école. Le droit à la différence qui vous est si cher n'est une liberté que si elle est assortie du droit d'être différent de sa différence. Dans le cas contraire, c'est un piège, voire un esclavage. Neutralité n'est pas passivité, ni liberté simple tolérance La laïcité a toujours été un rapport de force.[141]

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[140] For an analysis of Iran's own aspirations of laicism, which trace back to the early twentieth century, see: Esfaindyar Daneshvar, *La littérature transculturelle franco-persane: Une évolution littéraire depuis les années 80* (Leiden: Brill, 2019).
Daneshvar writes, "[L]a Révolution constitutionnelle de 1906 marque un tournant primordial dans l'histoire du pays. Pour la première fois dans son histoire, l'Iran sort de sa torpeur politique et sociale traditionnelle et reconnaît la modernité occidentale. […] La modernité comme avènement de la raison, émerge avec le progrès de l'esprit critique et une mise en cause du système politique et ecclésiastique en Iran. Le modèle est donc directement inspiré de l'Occident. […] L'un des catalyseurs majeurs du mouvement d'autocritique intellectuel et culturel [des intellectuels persans], qui transforma profondément leur discours et leur vision du monde, fut sans doute la découverte de la modernité du XX^{e} siècle. La modernité a été une référence aussi bien dans le domaine de la critique sociopolitique et infrastructurelle que sur le plan littéraire et elle atteignit surtout l'esprit des intellectuels en contact avec l'Europe. Influencée par la France et la Belgique, l'intelligentsia iranienne introduit la notion de la laïcité comme fondement premier d'une société moderne, démocratique et parlementaire. Selon le sociologue franco-iranien Farhad Khosrokhavar, cette nouvelle catégorie d'intellectuels voit pour une grande partie dans la religion un obstacle à l'évolution et au progrès. […] [L]a vision vision moderniste et laïque à l'occidentale disparaîtra graduellement, puis complètement à la veille de la révolution de 1979, puisque dans cette période l'islam et les traditions socioculturelles islamiques se combineront avec d'autres idéologies comme le nationalisme et le marxisme-léninisme" ([T]he Constitutional Revolution of 1906 marked a crucial turning point in the country's history. For the first time in its history, Iran emerged from its traditional political and social torpor and recognized Western modernity. […] Modernity, as the advent of reason, emerged with the progress of critical thinking and a questioning of the political and ecclesiastical system in Iran. The model was therefore directly inspired by the West. […] One of the major catalysts of the movement of intellectual and cultural self-criticism [of Persian intellectuals], which profoundly transformed their discourse and their vision of the world, was undoubtedly the discovery of twentieth century modernity. Modernity was a reference both in the field of sociopolitical and infrastructural criticism and on the literary level, and it especially reached the minds of intellectuals in contact with Europe. Influenced by France and Belgium, the Iranian intelligentsia introduced the notion of secularism as the primary foundation of a modern, democratic, and parliamentary society. According to the French-Iranian sociologist Farhad Khosrokhavar, this new category of intellectuals largely sees religion as an obstacle to evolution and progress. […] [T]he modernist and secular Western vision will gradually disappear, then completely on the eve of the 1979 revolution, since in this period Islam and Islamic socio-cultural traditions will combine with other ideologies such as nationalism and Marxism-Leninism).
Esfaindyar Daneshvar, *La littérature transculturelle franco-persane: Une évolution littéraire depuis les années 80* (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 30-35.

[141] Op. cit., Shalmani, *Laïcité, j'écris ton nom!*, 12-13.

> It is necessary for students to take pleasure in forgetting their community of origin and to think about something other than what they are in order to think for themselves. If we want teachers to be able to help them in this and for school to remain what it is – a place of emancipation –, then affiliations should not rule in school. The right to the difference that you hold dear is only a freedom if it includes the right to be different from one's difference. Otherwise, it's a trap, even a slavery. Neutrality is not passivity, nor is freedom mere tolerance. Laicism has always been a balance of power.

The various laws and policies (1989, 1994, 2004, 2011) enacted in response to the thorny debates initially sparked by the veil affairs in Creil, and the subsequent conflicts which arose predominantly within Muslim communities, have brought to light the complex ethical and social challenges at the heart of this issue. As a secular state, France's prohibition of conspicuous religious symbols in public establishments aims to assure the equality of all citizens and to foster a sense of belonging by eliminating exterior markers of difference. On the other hand, these laws have raised ethical concerns, as prohibiting religious practices implies an infringement on one's freedom to express personal and religious identity. Requiring a practicing individual to relinquish their religious obligations could thus potentially engender serious challenges within their household and religious community.

In the French context, Shalmani's personal insights frame the question of the veil as one that erodes one of the foundational constitutional principles of the French Republic – *la laïcité* – which, as Esfaindyar Daneshvar points out in *La littérature transculturelle franco-persane: Une évolution littéraire depuis les années 80*, was a framework that Iranian intelligentsia in the early twentieth century sought to integrate into its modernization efforts.[142] Article I of the Constitution of the Fifth Republic of 1958 reads: "France shall be an indivisible, secular, democratic and social Republic. It shall ensure the equality of all citizens before the law, without distinction of origin, race or religion. It shall respect all beliefs. It shall be organised on a

[142] Laïcité is often regarded as the French equivalent of American secularism, though the two principles differ in various significant ways.

decentralised basis. Statutes shall promote equal access by women and men to elective offices and posts as well as to position of professional and social responsibility."[143]

In *Laïcité, j'écris ton nom!*, Shalmani reflects on the various ways in which she, as an exiled subject, was personally affected by the events that ensued from the "veil affairs":

> […] je me souviens encore de ma colère et de mon inquiétude lorsque avait éclaté l'affaire de Creil, parce que je n'avais que douze ans, exilée en France depuis quatre ans et que j'étais heureuse d'avoir échappée à la 'mollahrchie' qui réduisait les hommes et les femmes à la soumission et à l'arbitraire de mon pays d'origine. Parce que trois foulards sur des cheveux d'adolescentes allaient durablement m'ancrer dans la certitude qu'il fallait défendre la laïcité, garante de ma liberté d'être, de penser, de dire, d'écrire.[144]

> […] I still remember my anger and my anxiety when the Creil affair broke out, because I was only twelve years old, exiled in France for four years and happy to have escaped the 'mullahcracy' that reduced men and women to submission and the arbitrariness of my country of origin. Because three headscarves on the heads of teenage girls would permanently anchor me in the certainty that laicism must be defended, as it guarantees my freedom to be, to think, to speak, to write.

According to a statement made in 1905 by Jean Jaurès, a French socialist politician, historian, and journalist, France's institutionalization of laicism marked "'la fin des réprouvés'" (the end of the outcasts) – a claim, which Shalmani contends, has proven true for her. [145] Jaurès' remark is grounded on the notion that all individuals, regardless of their background or affiliations, ought to be seen as equals. Shalmani further substantiates Jaurès' claim by alluding to former French politician Robert Badinter's commentary on Jaurès' statement: "'Là s'inscrit le sens premier de la laïcité: je te respecte au-delà de nos différences de religion ou d'opinion comme de sexe, de race ou d'orientation sexuelle parce que tu es comme moi un être humain, tu es mon frère ou ma sœur en humanité'" (This is where the primary meaning of laicism lies: I respect you beyond our differences in religion or opinion, as well as in gender, race, or sexual orientation, because you

[143] Constitution of October 4, 1958, https://www.conseil-constitutionnel.fr/sites/default/files/as/root/bank_mm/anglais/constiution_anglais_oct2009.pdf.

[144] Op. cit., Shalmani, *Laïcité, j'écris ton nom!*, 17-18.

[145] Ibid, 18.

are like me, a human being, you are my brother or sister in humanity).[146] Inspired by her speech as president of the jury for Le Prix de la laïcité, Shalmani's most recent essay, *Laïcité, j'écris ton nom!*, addresses the socio-political tensions surrounding the ongoing debates on laicism, during a moment in which she, along with its advocates, have been compelled to defend "la liberté et la laïcité, […] réduits à [se] défendre d'être racistes, colonialistes ou 'islamophobes' […]" (freedom and laicism, […] reduced to defending [themselves] against accusations of being racists, colonialists, or 'Islamophobes'):[147]

> Laïcité, c'est étrange comme ce mot résonne aujourd'hui. Ce mot qui devrait être un refuge pour tous, parce qu'il garantit la liberté pour chacun de vivre sa foi ou son athéisme au grand jour, sans crainte d'arrestation, de torture, de mort. Ce mot qui autorise l'expression de n'importe quelle idée blasphématoire dans les limites du droit. Ce mot qui fait l'honneur de la France et qui, dans la guerre culturelle mondiale, devient un fardeau. Ce mot qu'on doit dorénavant défendre alors qu'il nous défendait jusqu'à il n'y a pas si longtemps, qu'il nous protégeait, nous consolait, nous rassurait. Ce mot qui était un phare pour tous les métèques. Laïcité, ce mot qui se retourne en une insulte dans la bouche des ennemis de la liberté et de la France. Sans ce mot, je ne serais pas devant vous aujourd'hui. Sans ce mot, mes parents n'auraient pas fait le choix de la France.[148]
>
> Laicism, it's strange how this word resonates today. This word that should be a refuge for all, because it guarantees freedom for each person to live their faith or atheism openly, without fear of arrest, torture, or death. This word, that allows the expression of any blasphemous idea within the limits of the law. This word that honors France and that, in the global cultural war, becomes a burden. This word that we must now defend, whereas it protected us not so long ago, comforting and reassuring us. This word that was a beacon for all metics. Laicism, this word that turns into an insult in the mouths of enemies of freedom and of France. Without this word, my parents would not have chosen France.

Shalmani's argument rests on the notion that "la République est en danger lorsque la laïcité est remise en cause, la démocratie est en péril lorsque la laïcité est conspuée par ceux qui voudraient réduire la France à un puzzle communautaire amnésique de son passé" (the Republic is in danger when laicism is called into question; democracy is in peril when laicism is denounced by those

[146] Ibid, 18-19.

[147] Ibid, 37.

[148] Ibid, 21-22.

who would like to reduce France to a community-based patchwork that is forgetful of its past).[149] Essentialist conceptions of identity and communitarian forms of belonging, which confine "l'homme à sa naissance" (man to his birth), stand in stark opposition to France's views on the universality of human rights and the Republic's founding principles of universalism, "cette idée révolutionnaire qui place l'humain au-dessus de Dieu, mais aussi des sexes, des races, des religions" (this revolutionary idea, which places humans above God, as well as above genders, races, and religions).[150] French universalism as a principle grants "la possibilité de l'émancipation et de l'autonomie" (the possibility of emancipation and autonomy), enabling an individual to make "un choix, son choix, qu'il ne soit pas réduit à être la suite sans imagination de son ascendance" (a choice, his choice, so that he is not reduced to being the unimaginative continuation of his ancestry).[151] The trajectory of Shalmani's integration serves as an example of this claim.

It is fitting now to note that in *Khomeiny, Sade et moi*, Shalmani emphasizes the objectives of her critique of the veil, asserting that her perspectives are not intended as an attack on the Islamic faith or its adherents but rather as a challenge to the exploitation of religion for purposes of political and gender-based domination, which in the Iranian context categorically infringes upon women's autonomy. While this position may hold for the Iranian case, the argument becomes increasingly fraught in the French context. To advance her stance further, Shalmani indicates that the practice of women wearing a veil is not exclusive to Islam but is one that is observed in other Abrahamic religions. The said issue therefore lies *not* in the Islamic faith but in the *politicization* of Islam, which, in the twenty-first century, has taken global

[149] Ibid, 18.

[150] Ibid, 52 and 67.

[151] Ibid, 53.

precedence. Despite the accusations Shalmani continues to face for her overt criticism of political Islam – a "strong ideology present all over the world" that the West has been "confronted by" since the Iranian Revolution[152] – she has upheld her commitment to challenging the political agenda of Iran's theocratic regime and its global impact by resorting to the principles of laicism and republican universalism, which "l'idéologie islamiste combat férocement: refus de la démocratie, de l'autonomie, de l'esprit critique, de l'égalité entre les sexes, du politique, de l'expression artistique, de la spéculation intellectuelle" (Islamist ideology fiercely combats: rejection of democracy, autonomy, critical thinking, gender equality, politics, artistic expression, and intellectual speculation).[153] The denial of the freedom to express one's individuality and to engage in speculation, Shalmani contends, "c'est le réduire à un néant politique, donc à son infantilisation" (is to reduce one to a political nonentity, thus to one's infantilization).[154] Such forms of hegemony are sustained by restricting individuals, primarily women, from participating freely in public spaces and intellectual domains, particularly within authoritarian regimes beneath the yoke of political Islam:

> Un environnement limité est le terreau idéal des préjugés. Les régimes les plus autoritaires, les tyrannies les plus sanglantes se maintiennent en limitant au maximum le libre arbitre et l'imagination de leurs sujets. […] C'est le talent des islamistes: proposer une vie à la carte. Du matin au soir, de la première à la dernière prière. Quoi manger, quand et à quelle heure, qui aimer et comment, que lire, que maudire, qui tuer. Le sujet devient objet, il est encerclé. Soumis. Il n'existe plus comme individu. Ses faits et gestes sont sous le regard assassin de la communauté. Sa parole n'est pas la sienne, ses choix sont dictés, son âme dans l'obscurité, son corps prisonnier des coutumes. La première cruauté de l'islamisme tient à sa destruction systématique et inévitable de toute autonomie. Le doute a disparu. C'est la fin de la poésie.[155]

[152] Op. cit., Sparling, "In Conversation: Abnousse Shalmani on the Politics of the Female Body."

[153] Op. cit., Shalmani, "Les enfants de Spinoza et de Sade," 62.

[154] Ibid, 63.

[155] Ibid, 63.

> A limited environment is the ideal breeding ground for prejudice. The most authoritarian regimes, the bloodiest tyrannies are maintained by limiting the free will and imagination of their subjects as much as possible. […] This is the talent of Islamists: to offer a life à la carte. From morning to night, from the first to the last prayer. What to eat, when and at what time, who to love and how, what to read, what to curse, who to kill. The subject becomes an object, it is surrounded. Submissive. It no longer exists as an individual. Its actions are under the murderous gaze of the community. Its word is not its own, its choices are dictated, its soul in the dark, its body a prisoner of customs. The first cruelty of Islamism lies in its systematic and inevitable destruction of all autonomy. Doubt has disappeared. It is the end of poetry.

In the Iranian context, Shalmani identifies the unequal treatment of women's bodies and the perceptions directed toward them as among the most pernicious prejudices. She describes the rationale behind Iran's compulsory veil as predicated on the notion that the female body is perceived as a site of sin – a source that incites male sexual desire. Following this line of reasoning, the female body must be concealed, as the male, presumed incapable of restraining his temptations, can lose agency and fall victim to the provocations of the female body. By adhering to such conceptions of an inherent lack of agency, which go as far as "to imagine that an ankle can provoke concupiscence in men[, one] accept[s] the idea that women's bodies are dangerous for men and thus cannot move freely through public space uncovered."[156] Through bodily restrictions, enforced in the name of "religion," theocratic governments succeed in curtailing women's intellectual pursuits and social interactions. In "Les enfants de Spinoza et de Sade," Shalmani reinforces these arguments: "L'avènement de l'islam politique ne sera pas la fin d'une civilisation ou d'une nation mais la fin de la pensée. Ce qui nous interroge ici est la question de l'islamisme, de l'islam politique. Cela ne dédouane pas les autres religions de préjugés, d'obscurantisme et de terreur. Toutes les religions sont coupables d'asservir l'homme et d'inférioriser la femme. Toutes combattant l'autonomie et la libre-pensée" (The advent of political Islam will not mark the end of a civilization or a nation but the end of thought. What

[156] Op.cit., Sparling, "In Conversation: Abnousse Shalmani on the Politics of the Female Body."

concerns us here is the issue of Islamism, of political Islam. This does not absolve other religions of prejudice, obscurantism, and terror. All religions are guilty of enslaving men and inferiorizing women. All combat autonomy and free thought).[157]

Shalmani argues that Islamism, which has engulfed the Islamic faith in a "crisis" arose as a "conséquence de son refus de se réformer, de se penser, de se réfléchir au miroir de la modernité" (consequence of its refusal to reform itself, to think of itself, to reflect on itself in the mirror of modernity).[158] To support this claim, she references Edward Said's remarks in his preface to *Orientalism* concerning the Islamic legal practice of *ijtihad*, which experienced a decline from the beginning of the eleventh-century and has now "dropped out of sight."[159] In *Laïcité, j'écris ton nom!*, Shalmani alludes to Said's statement: "'La disparition progressive de la tradition islamique de l'*ijtihad* ou d'interprétation personnelle a été un des désastres culturels majeurs de notre époque, qui a entraîné la disparition de toute pensée critique et de toutes confrontation individuelle avec les questions posées par le monde contemporain'" (The gradual disappearance of the Islamic tradition of *ijtihad*, or personal interpretation, has been one of the major cultural disasters of our time, leading to the disappearance of all critical thought and individual engagement with the questions posed by the contemporary world).[160] In his preface to the twenty-fifth anniversary edition of *Orientalism*, Said addresses another equally important subject that is pertinent to our current discussion on Islamism.

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[157] Op. cit., Shalmani, "Les enfants de Spinoza et de Sade," 62-63.

[158] Op. cit., Shalmani, *Laïcité, j'écris ton nom!*, 43 and 46.

[159] The following definition of *ijtihad* is provided by Britannica: "ijtihād, in Islamic law, the independent or original interpretation of problems not precisely covered by the Qurʾān, Hadith (traditions concerning the Prophet Muhammad's life and utterances), and *ijmāʿ* (scholarly consensus). In the early Muslim community every adequately qualified jurist had the right to exercise such original thinking, mainly in the form of *raʾy* (personal judgment) and *qiyās* (analogical reasoning), and those who did so were termed *mujtahid*s."
Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, 25th anniversary ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 2003), xxviii.

[160] Op. cit., Shalmani, *Laïcité, j'écris ton nom!*, 46.

In light of the ongoing socio-political tensions between the U.S. and the Middle East during the period in which Said wrote the preface, namely, the America of post-9/11, he highlights the importance of acknowledging and finding dynamic ways for addressing the detrimental outcomes of essentializing and reductive categories and labels in contemporary history, which "herd people under falsely unifying rubrics like 'America,' 'the West,' or 'Islam.'"[161] As a "humanist whose field is literature,[162] […] who by force of circumstance actually live[d] the pluri-cultural life as it entails Islam and the West," Said, like those in a similar predicament, has "long felt that a special intellectual and moral responsibility attaches to what [they] do as scholars and intellectuals," and that it is "incumbent upon [them] to complicate and/or dismantle the reductive formulae and the abstract but potent kind of thought that leads the mind away from concrete human history and experience and into the realms of ideological fiction, metaphysical confrontation, and collective passion."[163] This academic, ethical, and philosophical project that is grounded in impartial analysis and reflection is important to bear in mind when discussing "issues of injustice and suffering," which must be carried out "within a context that is amply situated in history, culture, and socioeconomic reality."[164] Said proposes "alternative models to the reductively simplifying and confining ones [that are] based on mutual hostility," and his book *Orientalism* stands as one example of such an enterprise which aims to achieve this end.[165] In his monumental book, Said calls for adopting a "humanistic critique to open up the fields of struggle, to introduce a longer sequence of thought and analysis to replace

[161] Op. cit., Said, *Orientalism*, xxviii.

[162] Ibid, xxiv.

[163] Ibid, xxiii.

[164] Ibid, xxiii.

[165] Ibid, xxiv.

the short bursts of polemical, thought-stopping fury that so imprison us in labels and antagonistic debate whose goal is a belligerent collective identity rather than understanding and intellectual exchange."[166] Such mutual and dialogical negotiations, grounded in the aforementioned principles, are essential to the study of culture and the engagement with broader contemporary socio-political discourses, which may not readily yield universal consensus. The different outcomes of these endeavors do, however, depend on whether the underlying *intent* is to *acquire* knowledge. Said's explanation of this project is as follows:

> […] there is a difference between knowledge of other peoples and other times that is the result of understanding, compassion, careful study and analysis for their own sakes, and on the other hand knowledge— if that is what it is—that is part of an overall campaign of self-affirmation, belligerency, and outright war. There is, after all, a profound difference between the will to understand for purposes of coexistence and humanistic enlargement of horizons, and the will to dominate for the purposes of control and external domination.[167]

One may therefore argue that socio-political conflicts and cultural wars arise when there is a lack of, or a failure to understand, these distinctions – as reflected in Shalmani's personal experience of being labeled a "racist" and an "Islamophobe." Tensions of this nature, which prevail in both the West and in Arab and Muslim "societies where secular ideas about human history and development have been overtaken by failure and frustration, as well as an Islamism built out of rote learning" as Said claims, may be redressed through the adoption of humanism – "the only and […] the final resistance we have against the unhuman practices and injustices that disfigure human history."[168] Said's proposition is precisely important to our discussion because it not only enables agency and dialogue but, more importantly, is rooted in the notion that "history is made

[166] Ibid, xxii.

[167] Ibid, xix.

[168] Ibid, xxviii and xxix.

by men and women, just as it can also be unmade and rewrite, always with various silences and elisions, always with shapes imposed and disfigurements tolerated."[169] He continues:

> We still have at our disposal the rational interpretive skills that are the legacy of humanistic education, not as a sentimental piety enjoining us to return to traditional values or the classics but as the active practice of worldly secular discourse. The secular world is the world of history as made by human beings. Human agency is subject to investigation and analysis, which it is the mission of understanding to apprehend, criticize, influence, and judge. Above all, critical thought does not submit to state power or to commands to join in the ranks marching against one or another approved enemy. Rather than the manufactured clash of civilizations, we need to concentrate on the slow working together of cultures that overlap, borrow from each other, and live together in far more interesting ways than any abridged or inauthentic mode of understanding can allow. But for that kind of wider perception we need time and patient and skeptical inquiry, supported by faith in communities of interpretation that are difficult to sustain in a world demanding instant action and reaction. Humanism is centered upon the agency of human individuality and subjective intuition, rather than on received ideas and approved authority. Texts have to be read as texts that were produced and live on in the historical realm in all sorts of what I have called worldly ways.[170]

It is now appropriate to return to Shalmani's own perspectives on the study of History, which she argues prompts a broader discussion on the history of morals and the "intimate," since it is inextricably linked to History with a capital "H."[171] Shalmani writes, "l'Histoire a à voir avec l'intime: comment on fait l'amour, comment on mange, comment on ferme sa porte ou non, comment on prie, comment on se drogue, comment on lit, comment on fantasme, comment on se couche" (History has to do with the intimate: how we make love, how we eat, how we close our door or not, how we pray, how we take drugs, how we read, how we fantasize, how we go to bed).[172] By understanding how historical processes structure social organization, "du rapport à la mort comme du rapport au corps" (from the relationship to death as well as the relationship to the body), she argues that one may prevent oneself from falling "dans la ritournelle des préjugés"

[169] Ibid, xviii.

[170] Ibid, xxix.

[171] Op. cit., Shalmani, *Khomeiny, Sade et moi*, 33.

[172] Ibid, 33.

(in the refrain of prejudices).[173] Shalmani identifies this undertaking as a crucial step in challenging the *mollahrchie* because it facilitates a nuanced understanding of the links between History, culture, politics, and the social condition of women. Such critically informed initiatives mitigate the risk of harboring prejudice against Islam and being dismissed as an Islamophobe since "il est possible d'être […] contre l'islam politique sans être xénophobe. Il faut pour cela savoir de quoi on parle et savoir exactement quoi combattre" (it is possible to be […] against political Islam without being xenophobic. For that, one must know what they are talking about and know exactly what to fight against).[174]

By establishing a connection between History, culture, and politics, Shalmani reframes the question of the veil beyond the parameter of religion, extending the discussion to its social and political implications. Taking into consideration the element of the "intimate" is therefore crucial to elucidating how and why Khomeini's hegemony and ideologies, which preside over Iran's government to this day, have gained precedence and continue to resonate so strongly in the psyche of Iranians.[175] In doing so, one may potentially "éviter qu'il se réincarne à l'infini" (prevent him from reincarnating endlessly).[176] Shalmani writes: "L'intime, c'est ce qui manque à tous les intellectuels qui pensent au-dessus des hommes qu'ils ne connaissent pas. L'intime, c'est comment les femmes sont incapable de retirer leurs voiles sans briser la dictature des pères. Et des mères" (The intimate, that's what all intellectuals, who think above the men they don't know, lack. The intimate, it's how women are unable to remove their veils without breaking the

[173] Ibid, 32.

[174] Ibid, 32.

[175] Ibid, 33.

[176] Ibid, 33.

dictatorship of fathers. And of mothers).[177] In this statement, Shalmani is referring to the support Khomeini's revolution received from French historian and philosopher Michel Foucault, for whom the "Shah était trop méchant" (Shah was too cruel).[178] Foucault's unwarranted advocacy for Khomeini, aimed at supporting the emancipation of the "masses contre la mainmise occidentale et l'acculturation qu'elle entraîne" (masses against Western dominance and the acculturation it brings about), was lacking critical understanding and perspective of "ce qu'était la société iranienne et pourquoi il ne fallait pas lui mettre Khomeiny dans les pattes" (what Iranian society was like and why Khomeini should not have been thrown into the mix).[179] Shalmani's criticism of Foucault underscores the notion that it is imperative to engage with History not merely from the detached perspective of an intellectual or a bystander, but through a critical lens that considers how historical developments fundamentally structure society and everyday lives of individuals. Shalmani's autobiographical essay is therefore especially insightful on these questions, infusing her testimony with personal experiences from her childhood in the Islamic Republic of Iran, where she was obliged to comply with its compulsory religious laws.

The following section examines Shalmani's childhood memories as referenced in her autobiographical essay to explore the various ways in which her personal experiences in Iran and France have informed her perspectives on the veil. The opening pages of *Khomeiny, Sade et moi* allude to her first rebellious initiative, which, from an early age, consisted in challenging Iran's former Supreme Leader's censorship, particularly the regime's religious dress code policies, and its enforcement and surveillance of behavioral and moral conduct. Six-year-old Shalmani, who

[177] Ibid, 33.

[178] Ibid, 32.

[179] Ibid, 32.

was hesitant to wear the hijab because she deemed it unappealing, one day decides to provoke the female school administrators. At the time of dismissal from class, she removes her clothing and runs to the school exit in her undergarment. While she successfully makes it into the parked car after steering clear of women dressed in black chadors, Shalmani rejoices. She writes: "La nudité guerrière de mon enfance m'a formée, a forgé ma personnalité et fait le lit de mes passions. Ma nudité enfantine qui s'opposerait pour toujours au voile, au corps féminin nié, caché, exclu, allait m'obséder jusqu'à aujourd'hui. Il existe ainsi une vraie relation entre Khomeiny et moi" (The bellicose nudity of my childhood shaped me, forged my personality, and laid the groundwork for my passions. My childish nudity, which would forever oppose the veil, the denied, hidden, excluded female body, was going to obsess me until today. There is thus a real relationship between Khomeiny and I).[180] This intrepid gesture at such a young age expressed Shalmani's desire to be free from societal and religious restrictions, and this manifested itself in an ultimate rebellion against what she saw as an authoritarian government in what was then a newly-formed Islamic Republic. Her defiance was therefore an initial attempt to oppose what she identified as an injustice and in the form of a prohibition, and would later become a defining moment in her trajectory as a writer. Shalmani's decision to remove her veil underscored her commitment to an act of disobedience, one that had additional meaning given that it also served to highlight the broader absence of Iranian women's action in the face of this issue. Her article "Les enfants de Spinoza et de Sade" provides an explanation for the inherent lack of women's resistance:

> Lorsque l'on est soumis dès l'enfance à un système de valeurs fermé, même les pratiques les plus douces imposent l'idée d'une frontière entre soi et les autres. Entre le licite et l'illicite. Entre le halal et le *haram*. L'interdit devient boussole, le corps des femmes l'interdit absolu. […] [L]a première mesure que prennent les barbus parvenus au pouvoir

[180] Ibid, 22.

> concerne les femmes et leurs cheveux. Les islamistes se justifient en comparant la femme à une perle précieuse qu'il convient de préserver dans son coquillage. […] Je ne veux pas être une perle. Je veux des droits! Ce qui prime dans un État de droit, ce n'est ni mon sexe ni sa naissance ni ma culture mais mon statut juridique, qui m'offre la possibilité du choix et l'égalité. […] Il est impossible de libérer l'esprit sans libérer le corps. C'est lorsque le corps est entravé que l'esprit se fige, c'est quand la parole est confisquée que le corps devient le lieu des superstitions et de la violence. […] Les islamistes sont en guerre contre le corps. C'est l'existence terrestre et charnelle du corps qui les irrite, les remet en cause, les détruit.[181]
>
> When one is subjected to a closed system of values from childhood, even the gentlest practices impose the idea of a boundary between oneself and others. Between the permissible and the forbidden. Between halal and *haram*. The forbidden becomes a compass, with women's bodies being the absolute taboo. […] [T]he first measure taken by the bearded men who come to power concerns women and their hair. The Islamists justify this by comparing a woman to a precious pearl that must be preserved in its shell. […] I don't want to be a pearl. I want rights! What matters in a state governed by law is neither my sex nor its birth nor my culture but my legal status, which gives me the possibility of choice and equality. […] It is impossible to liberate the mind without liberating the body. It is when the body is constrained that the mind becomes paralyzed. It is when speech is confiscated that the body becomes the site of superstitions and violence. […] The Islamists are at war with the body. It is the earthly and carnal existence of the body that irritates them, challenges them, and destroys them.

Even at the age of six, Shalmani acted accordingly, with a strong conviction that liberating the body from its physical restrictions would be a precursor to achieving independence and dispelling myths and taboos associated with women.

In the autobiography, Shalmani recalls a memory from her childhood in Iran to further corroborate her viewpoints on this issue. Central to her contemplation of this subject is her reflection on the influence of religious mythologies, which she argues have the potential to engender interpretations that ultimately exclude women and place them in a subordinate position. While in grade school, she brazenly questions her religion teacher on the reasons for which Iranian girls and women must wear the veil. The laconic explanation she receives elicits a response which Shalmani claims to paradoxically demonstrate the powerful nature of females:

[181] Op. cit., Shalmani, "Les enfants de Spinoza et de Sade," 64-65.

> Ce professeur "lavage de mains" alors que j'avais huit ans, avait répondu à mon insistante question sur le pourquoi du voile par un lapidaire: 'Parce que vous êtes, vous les femmes, des objets dangereux.' C'était méprisant et salvateur. Sa voix résonne encore à mes oreilles. Sa voix me rappelle à la vigilance lorsqu'on naît femme.[182]
>
> This "hand-washing" teacher, when I was eight years old, had responded to my insistent question about the veil with a lapidary: "Because you women, you are dangerous objects." It was disdainful and salvatory. His voice still echoes in my ears. His voice reminds me to be vigilant when one is born a woman.

Shalmani further suggests that the response, which has continued to resonate throughout her life, could, in turn, offer compelling insights on female Quranic figures. She maintains that the teacher's thought process revealed his insecurities as a male since women evoked fear in him, but more importantly, his statement insinuates the powerful nature of the women in the Quran, despite their limited presence in the holy book. Shalmani's observation is substantiated by her reference to the story of the Egyptian slave Hagar.[183] Hagar, who birthed Ishmael, the son of Abraham from whom Muslims have descended, was the only person to name God and thereby, through her divine connection and capabilities, to engage in a dialogue. Consequently, Hagar is able to save her cast-off son with God's grace amidst deplorable conditions in the desert after being banished by Abraham with the insistence of his wife Sarah. Shalmani contends that paradoxically, it is her privileged ability to communicate with God that consigns her to oblivion and whose legacy is omitted in entirety from the holy book. By framing her arguments within this interpretation, which she suggests may reveal the religious origins of the erasure and marginalization faced by Iranian women under a theocratic regime, she underscores the importance of challenging ideologies that impel women to accept subordination in order for men to maintain a higher position of power. The unfounded logic defended by her professor has thus served as an unwavering affirmation of women's innate ability and power to evoke a sensibility

[182] Op.cit., Shalmani, *Khomeiny, Sade et moi*, 78.

[183] Ibid, 138.

in men that challenges their emotional and intellectual foundations. The "danger" that women embody represents what Shalmani describes as a "super-power"– a trait she adopts to contradict the erroneous representations of women propagated by religious and political institutions.[184]

In *Khomeiny, Sade et moi*, Shalmani also unpacks other reasons for which her family was forced to emigrate from Iran. The autobiography provides evidence of the inextricable link between the Revolution and her family's decision to pursue a new life in France in order to evade death, war, and persecution by the state. The turbulent economic, social, and political climate of Iran in the early 1980s triggered by the collapse of the Pahlavi dynasty and then ensuing Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) brought forth unfavorable conditions for the family. Shalmani grew up in an atheist household that embraced communism. While her father himself was a communist yet a fervent advocate of democracy, her maternal uncle and aunts were hard-line Stalinists. Shalmani states in the autobiography that at the start of the Iran-Iraq War, communists who had been initially imprisoned by Mohammad Pahlavi's government and subsequently liberated by the Iranian Revolution were once again arrested, exiled, and, in some instances, executed.[185] Since her family's political and religious convictions contravened with those of the Islamic Republic, Shalmani was repeatedly warned by her parents to be vigilant, and to be especially cautious when speaking in order to protect her family from the imminent danger they faced. Given these tenuous circumstances, much of her family's daily activities and festivities were carried out in secrecy. The war between Iran and Iraq aimed to legitimize and reinforce Khomeini's hegemony in the region, and the systematic oppression experienced by the family due to the strict standards of Iran's Islamic government became the eventual cause for her family

[184] See p. 80 of *Khomeiny, Sade et moi*.

[185] See pp. 48-49 of *Khomeiny, Sade et moi*.

to leave Iran and find refuge in France. This departure was motivated by their growing sense of un-belonging, one that eventually yielded a sense of being "clandestins dans leur propre pays" (illegals in their own country).[186]

During this period, in which Iranians faced economic, physical, and psychological hardships, the disappearance of family and friends exacerbated the loneliness and hostility associated with the war. Finding refuge in shelters and protecting oneself from potential accusations of treason ultimately gave way to panic. Upon enduring the ubiquitous fear and trauma of the Tehran bombings that endangered their safety throughout the war, and eventually realizing that the family was unable to integrate and conform to the demands of the theocratic society, they decided to emigrate to Europe. As a school-age child in Iran, Shalmani was hesitant to abide by the rules and regulations and resisted through small acts of rebellion. Two incidents provoked by the authorities were the catalysts for their definitive departure. One day, when Shalmani attended school with long nails, she was subjected to torture by having her nails cut until they bled. The female moral guardian in charge of this act was dismissed from work but was soon after rehired due to her connections with important government officials. The second incident involved her mother being wrongfully sent to a police station and ridiculed on multiple occasions. Her parents became further perturbed when Shalmani's mother was disrespected by a female moral guardian, as she hastily prepared to take her daughter for a doctor's visit. While carrying her sick child, her headdress revealed a small piece of her hair. When the female moral guardian took notice, Shalmani's mother was subjected to derogatory terms and was then brutally held by the arm and escorted to the police station by three men. The event culminated in her

[186] Op.cit., Shalmani, *Khomeiny, Sade et moi*, 51.

husband being summoned to the station by a male authority so that he could pick up his "pute de femme" (whore of a wife).[187]

In the section where Shalmani references these two scenes, she also recalls the last instance she encountered a female "corbeau," a moment that she claims marks the definitive rupture with her Iranian past. At the time of her family's departure, when they pretended to be headed for a vacation, a final incident involving a female soldier in charge of women in the facility left Shalmani unremorseful of her family's decision to leave their homeland.[188] Seeing the household depart evokes resentment in the soldier and provides an opportunity for her to insult them. When discovering the location to which they are headed, the lady warns Shalmani's mother of raising a "pute […] comme fille" (slut […] for a daughter) since she conceives of France as a land of "perdition."[189] Upon leaving the airport, Shalmani is relieved at the idea that she will no longer be confronted by the morality police:

> Et c'était peut-être la seule raison pour laquelle je quittais, sans une larme, sans un regret, le pays de ma naissance, mes grands-parents paternels et des cousins que j'aimais profondément. […] Je savais que quelque chose se perdait, ici, dans cet aéroport impersonnel, mais on me l'avait promis: il n'y aurait plus jamais de corbeaux pour me couvrir la tête.[190]
>
> And perhaps that was the only reason why I left, without a tear, without a regret, the country of my birth, my paternal grandparents, and cousins whom I loved deeply. […] I knew that something was being lost here, in this impersonal airport, but I had been promised: there would never again be crows to cover my head.

From the moment that Shalmani arrives in Paris, she is intrigued by the liberty that is granted to the female body, certainly from the "Iranian perspective" from which she sees and interprets her

[187] Ibid, 36.

[188] See p. 95 of *Khomeiny, Sade et moi*.

[189] Op.cit., Shalmani, *Khomeiny, Sade et moi*, 40.

[190] Ibid, 41.

surroundings. No longer to be hidden nor excluded from public spaces, the body could become a vessel for self-expression without the burden of shame nor inferiority. For this reason, she is inclined to welcome western society and to become enamored by France and the French language. The enforcement of the veil ends from the instant that she watches Madonna perform on television. The enticing spectacle arms eight-year-old Shalmani with strength and becomes her source of inspiration and pride.[191]

Although seeking asylum in France as "réfugiés politiques, des apatrides" (political refugees, stateless persons) alleviated the issue of wearing the veil, Shalmani faced an unanticipated reality shortly after her arrival in Europe that complicated her assimilation into the host community.[192] Upon seeing a woman voluntarily wearing a veil in a Parisian metro, she is confronted once again with the fear of being constrained by Iran's cultural and religious practices. Fearful of the idea that she too might be required to wear a headscarf, she experiences a renewed sense of confusion and distress, eventually leading her to conclude that the fight for women's freedom would need to persist even in the West. As referenced earlier in this chapter, the question of the veil posed new challenges, which complicated her sense of belonging and safety. For her exiled family, the principles in which French laicism is rooted were the security they needed to ensure that religion would not play a significant role in public life:

> Sans ce mot, il n'a plus de refuge nulle part pour les amoureux de la liberté, les persécutés de l'obscurantisme. Respirer l'atmosphère de la laïcité après les voiles noirs du fanatisme et les barbes touffues de la haine, retrouver la possibilité du choix, de la parole à voix haute, de la sécurité fut une nouvelle naissance pour moi, comme pour tant d'autres exilés au fil du temps. La France! Ce pays où il était moins grave d'avoir faim, car on y était assuré de trouver la liberté totale.[193]

[191] See p. 96 of *Khomeiny, Sade et moi*.

[192] Op.cit., Shalmani, *Khomeiny, Sade et moi*, 145.

[193] Op. cit., Shalmani, *Laïcité, j'écris ton nom!*, 22.

> Without this word, there is no longer any refuge anywhere for lovers of freedom, those persecuted by obscurantism. Breathing the atmosphere of laicism after the black veils of fanaticism and the bushy beards of hatred, finding the possibility of choice, of speaking out loud, of security was a new birth for me, as for so many other exiles over time. France! This country where it was less serious to be hungry, because one was assured of finding total freedom there.

I have alluded to several hardships Shalmani experienced during her childhood and in the transnational context of Iran and France. However, there were also other challenges which, together, heightened a growing sense of un-belonging and a profound malaise she attributed to her attempt to integrate into French society and its school system. Self-reflection became a powerful mechanism through which she was able to negotiate her complex identity, enabling her to assert her selfhood with greater assurance. Shalmani did not readily adopt or subscribe to socio-cultural dictates and norms that she observed around her, and therefore, the transition from life in Iran to the one in France was also marked by varying degrees of isolation and marginalization by both her French and Iranian peers. She was seen by those around her as a free spirit, and she was happy playing with all the other children irrespective of their gender. At times, she would get into fights because of her "robes si bourgeoises dans un quartier populaire" (dresses so bourgeois in a working-class neighborhood).[194] Irrespective of the family's financial situation, Shalmani's mother made sure her daughter was always well-dressed so as to leave a positive impression on others and to uphold a good reputation for Iranians. In France, Shalmani had to learn about different cultural practices, holidays such as Mother's Day were also signs that "[ils] n'[étaient] pas encore dedans" (they still were not immersed).[195] Seeing children at school present gifts to their mothers while she was empty-handed brought tears to her eyes. She was equally disappointed to find out from her father that it was a holiday instituted by Philippe Pétain

[194] Op. cit., Shalmani, *Khomeiny, Sade et moi*, 110.

[195] Ibid, 111-112.

during the Vichy regime, "l'ennemi du général de Gaulle, qui était [leur] héros" (the enemy of General de Gaulle, who was their hero).[196] With her rebellious spirit, the following day Shalmani stormed into the school and insulted her classmates: "fascistes! Traîtres! Assassins! Voilà comment on ne se fait pas d'amis, mais personne n'avait pensé à me le dire. Nous n'avons plus jamais fêté la fête des mères de Pétain, après que mes parents ont été convoqués pour la bagarre qui en avait résulté dans la cour de récréation" (fascists! Traitors! Murderers! Here is how to not make friends, but no one thought to tell me that. We never celebrated Pétain's Mother's Day again after my parents were called in because of the fight it caused in the playground).[197] These altercations that extended into the adolescent years were a source of great concern to her parents since she had a tremendous difficulty building friendships with girls of her age. Inviting Iranian friends to their house was also an unpleasant experience for Shalmani because there was the expectation of dressing and behaving "properly" and of adhering to certain standards so as to preserve her reputation in front of the Iranian community from which they gradually distanced themselves. Shalmani perplexingly expresses feelings of disappointment: "Que *ma* réputation *à Téhéran* puisse importer à ma mère à Paris, est une équation que je ne peux résoudre. L'œil ne connaît pas de frontières. C'est certainement dans cette bouillie de contradictions, qui couvre la nécessité de soutenir la réputation, qui se niche la maladie du voile qui n'est que la face visible d'une liberté rendu impossible" (That *my* reputation *in Tehran* might matter to my mother in Paris is an equation I cannot solve. The eye knows no boundaries. It is certainly in this mush of

[196] Ibid, 112.
Shalmani notes that her father shared with her his memories of Charles de Gaulle's arrival in Iran on October 10, 1963. Her father, 11 or 12 at the time, recalls seeing de Gaulle arrive for his diplomatic visit to Shah Pahlavi. He was among the students greeting de Gaulle, who was then serving as President of France (1959-1969). The diplomatic meeting aimed to strengthen the economic and political bilateral relations between the two countries and to secure France's influence in the Middle East. Visit the following link to see archival footage of the Shah's arrival made available through British Pathé, one of the world's first largest digital archive with a vast catalog of (newsreel) footage covering global events from 1896-1978: https://www.britishpathe.com/asset/191332/.

[197] Ibid, 112.

contradictions, which covers the necessity of upholding reputation, that lies the disease of the veil, which is only the visible face of an impossible freedom).[198] Her mother's internalized expectations and standards of women's decorum were sharply contrasted with the freedom she observed on French television: "J'en ai conclu que tout le monde était aussi perdu que moi et que le corps des femmes n'avait pas fini de m'obséder, de me chercher, de m'abandonner, de me motiver, de m'inspirer. Et tout cela ne m'a pas aidée à me faire des amis, ni à nous comprendre avec mes parents qui flottaient de plus en plus" (I concluded that everyone was as lost as I was, and that women's bodies had not finished obsessing me, searching for me, abandoning me, motivating me, inspiring me. And all of this did not help me make friends, nor understand each other with my parents who were increasingly drifting away).[199]

These feelings manifested in her desire to one day become a writer, but informing her friends of this longing was to be avoided. What was even worse was the children's parents' reactions when seeing revealing pictures of women hung on her walls, something she enjoyed doing as a child to express her admiration of women. Parents were subsequently reluctant to let their children spend time with her, their own prejudice expressing itself in the form of concern with what they saw as evidence of either homosexuality or trauma. Other instances that created a sense of un-belonging are exemplified through memories of her solitary summer vacations, a time when she remained in Paris reading books in the sole company of her father. Books were

[198] Op.cit., Shalmani, *Khomeiny, Sade et moi*, 100-101.
Shalmani is referring to the superstition of the "evil eye," the nefarious gaze of the Other, thought predominantly in (Middle) Eastern cultures to cause bad luck, physical harm, misfortune, or even death. Those who believe in the malevolent power of the evil eye may feel reluctant to openly share happy news or their fortunes to avoid attracting negative intentions, jealousy, or curses. Excessive self-consciousness, concealment, and privacy are concerns associated with individuals who live with the fear of the evil eye. Shalmani explores this subject extensively in *Les exilés meurent aussi d'amour*, particularly within the context of superstitions, and how they may hinder the process of assimilation as superstitions may breed a resistance to freedom and limit openness and trust in others – in this case, natives of the host country.

[199] Ibid, 113.

"tout ce qu'il y avait de solide, tout le reste était mal défini, mal foutu, pas réel" (everything that was solid, everything else was ill-defined, poorly put together, not real).[200] When returning to school, she became aware of the disparities between her and her wealthier classmates who, unlike Shalmani, enjoyed summer vacations away from Paris – a luxury her family could not afford given their economic status. The clear indication of the differences in their lives deepened her sense of displacement and created profound cleavages between her and the adolescent girls with whom she did not find common interests or topics of conversation. Some lacked passion and curiosity, others were too obsessed with talking about boys while she was more interested in politics.[201]

Shalmani's experience at home was also characterized by discomfort, strangeness, and tension, feelings which left her with the impression that she was "coupée du vrai monde" (cut off from the real world):[202]

> Ce n'était plus tout à fait l'Iran mais ce n'était pas encore la France. Il était évident que nous avions tout à apprendre et que nous étions seuls et que ma mère et ses sœurs n'allaient plus jamais s'aimer. Les éclats de voix allaient devenir quotidiens. Les membres de ma famille se parlaient de moins en moins et se criaient dessus de plus en plus. Je m'enfermais davantage mais je n'étais pas malheureuse. J'apprenais dans mon coin. Mais il est impossible de rester dans une bulle. Tout était trop brouillon depuis l'exil, tout était flottant. Ce fut le jour où mon grand-père maternel tenta de m'embrasser sur la bouche en me tenant le visage entre ses deux mains flétries. J'avais neuf ans et le réveil fut rapide, et toute mon éducation, toutes mes lectures, toutes mes peurs ont remonté le long de ma jambe, et mon genou a fini entre les siennes. Il est tombé vieillard pitoyable et désarticulé qui tenait son entrejambe entre ses mains tremblantes.[203]
>
> It was no longer quite Iran but it was not yet France. It was obvious that we had everything to learn and that we were alone and that my mother and her sisters would never love each other again. The shouting matches were going to become daily. The members of my family spoke to each other less and less and shouted at each other more

[200] Ibid, 113.

[201] See p. 144 in *Khomeiny, Sade et moi*.

[202] Op.cit., Shalmani, *Khomeiny, Sade et moi*, 113.

[203] Ibid, 113-114.

> and more. I withdrew more but I was not unhappy. I was learning in my corner. But it is impossible to stay in a bubble. Everything had been too messy since exile, everything was floating. It was the day my maternal grandfather tried to kiss me on the mouth while holding my face between his two withered hands. I was nine years old and I woke up quickly, and all my education, all my reading, all my fears went up my leg, and my knee ended up between his. The pitiful, disjointed old man fell holding his crotch in his trembling hands.

Shalmani's physical response to this perverse and traumatic experience that takes place in the intimate space of her home when left alone with her grandfather, is immediately followed by the urge to pick up a book. She writes, "Je ne sais pas d'où est venu ce réflexe, mais il m'a sauvée. Non seulement je ne me suis jamais sentie honteuse suite à l'accident, mais il n'a plus jamais cherché à croiser mon regard alors que je le toisais toujours de haut – c'était aussi habituellement une attitude de princesse en exil que j'avais adoptée" (I don't know where this reflex came from, but it saved me. Not only did I never feel ashamed after the accident, but he never tried to meet my gaze again while I still looked down on him – this was also usually the attitude of an exiled princess that I had adopted).[204] Shalmani felt that speaking up about the incident would be met with disbelief and would further complicate the tenuous dynamic of their household, a step she deemed not worthwhile given her grandfather's old age. She later learned from her father that after the death of the grandmother, Shirin's aunts had prevented their father from remarrying because "leur mère devait demeurer la seule à être passée dans son lit" (their mother had to remain the only one to have passed through his bed).[205] Although Shalmani refrained from discussing the incident until she made the decision to share it with her father at the age of 25, the experience significantly contributed to building her character and fostering the agency she always sought, even when she found herself in the most vulnerable of situations: "j'avais mis un homme à terre. Et grand-père ou pas, il n'existait plus de différence entre homme et femme.

[204] Ibid, 114.

[205] Ibid, 115.

L'égalité absolue. Tu m'attaques, homme ou pas, je te démonte, femme ou pas. Rien ne me ferait plus quitter cette certitude. C'était la mise en pratique de tout ce qui s'était déroulé dans ma vie jusqu'à ce jour de juin. Et j'avais en plus l'impression de venger ma mère et ses sœurs" (I had brought a man down. And whether he was my grandfather or not, there was no longer any difference between man and woman. Absolute equality. You attack me, man or not, I will take you down, woman or not. Nothing would make me abandon this certainty. It was putting into practice everything that had happened in my life up to that June day. And I also felt like I was avenging my mother and her sisters).[206] Even in Paris, the grandfather's hawkish presence "signifiait qu'elles allaient jouer aux prudes" (meant that they were going to act prudish).[207] Despite their adult age, his daughters were restrained from making decisions and acting according to their own preferences, principles, and standards: "L'œil parisien semblait les émouvoir autant que celui qui sévissait en Iran" (The Parisian gaze seemed to move them as much as the one that prevailed in Iran).[208] Shalmani continues,

> Mon genou dans ses couilles, c'était aussi pour venger ce *status quo* stupide, qui maintenait ma mère et ses sœur sous la domination morale d'un patriarche qui ne tournait plus rond dans sa tête depuis l'exil et qui avait pu imaginer qu'il pourrait assouvir un quelconque désir avec une petite fille de neuf ans. C'était l'Iran qui mourrait d'un coup avec lui. Écrit comme ça, les choses semblent simples. Mais c'était dur. Il n'y avait plus de repères, j'avais mis à terre mon grand-père et je n'étais même pas culpabilisée. Je découvrais que j'étais seule, mais pas vraiment: il n'y avait que les livres et les livres n'étaient pas capables de trahison.[209]
>
> My knee in his balls was also to avenge this stupid *status quo*, which kept my mother and her sisters under the moral domination of a patriarch who had been out of his mind since exile and who had been able to imagine that he could satisfy any desire with a nine-year-old girl. It was Iran that was suddenly dying with him. Written like that, things seem simple. But it was hard. There were no longer points of reference, I had knocked

[206] Ibid, 116.

[207] Ibid, 117.

[208] Ibid, 117.

[209] Ibid, 117-118.

> my grandfather to the ground and I didn't even feel guilty. I discovered that I was alone, but not really: there were only books and books were not capable of betrayal.

While Shalmani found relative peace and comfort in books during the early years of exile, a number of global events further complicated the process of integration and her experience at school.

Adolescence was tainted not only by the family's economic hardship and familial conflicts but also by global socio-political tensions. As discussed earlier in this chapter, the fall of 1989 coincided with France's political debates on the question of the headscarf, and this proved to be particularly challenging for Shalmani since she was constantly called upon to explain or justify her position on this issue. Her name disclosed her ethnic origins, and she was subjected to instances of discrimination and xenophobia. This experience stemmed from the faulty preconceptions some people had of her cultural and religious background, compelling them to impose their views and prejudice on Shalmani's socio-political convictions. These presumptions confined her within a binary space in which she felt obliged to identify with the religious denomination and political orientation of her native country, although paradoxically these factors were the very reasons for their emigration. Despite her desire to integrate, her reality was tinged with assumptions and labels, which ushered in pejorative comments among some individuals that targeted her as a "racist" since "être contre le voile, c'était être contre les musulmans et contre les Arabes" (to be against the veil, was tantamount to being against Muslims and Arabs).[210] Events such as the death of Khomeini in 1989, the Rushdie Affair, and the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 further complicated her sense of belonging within the French community. The terrorist attacks of 9/11 were an event that created a "vide relationnel, un doute malsain sur l'extrémisme des uns et des autres [qui] a creusé assez profondément un sillon

[210] Ibid, 129.

dans lequel les plus brutaux, les plus intolérants, les plus dangereux se sont engouffrés" (relational void, a malicious doubt about the extremism of some and others [which] dug a furrow quite deeply into which the most brutal, the most intolerant, the most dangerous have rushed).[211] These political tensions surrounding contemporary identity politics in the West, fueled by divergent public responses to the terrorist attacks, limited Shalmani's ability to freely express her views on terrorism and other socio-political issues: "c'était difficile de tenir tête à tous les extrémistes en même temps. Comme c'était dur de répondre à droite que non, le meurtre n'est pas inscrit génétiquement chez les musulmans et à gauche, non la colonisation n'est pas un passeport pour faire n'importe quoi" (it was hard to stand up to all the extremists at the same time. How hard it was to answer on the right that no, murder is not genetically inscribed in Muslims and on the left, no, colonization is not a passport to do anything).[212] While she anticipated a more impartial assessment of the terrorist attacks from her peers – an event she believed would finally reveal to Westerners the hardships her family experienced at the hands of other "bearded men" – their reactions only deepened her sense of un-belonging, "coincée qu['elle] étai[t] entre deux mondes" (cornered as she was between two worlds).[213] After 9/11, Shalmani was left with the impression that "c'en était fini des Français musulmans. Ils devenaient juste musulmans. Pas seulement aux yeux des autres mais avant tout à leurs propres yeux. C'était l'heure de la méfiance et l'heure de faire les comptes. L'heure de la déception et l'heure de la résistance" (it was the end of the French Muslims. They became just Muslims. Not

[211] Ibid, 246.

[212] Ibid, 247.
After witnessing the public's radical attitudes toward the terrorist attacks, Shalmani states in the autobiography that she became a "reformiste acharnée" (determined reformist) when previously she was a leftist. See p. 247 of *Khomeiny, Sade et moi.*

[213] Op. cit., Shalmani, *Khomeiny, Sade et moi*, 245.

only in the eyes of others but above all in their own eyes. It was the time of distrust and the time of settling accounts. The time of disappointment and the time of resistance).[214]

Shalmani's perspectives on this subject have been interpreted, by some (primarily on the Left), as Islamophobic and discriminatory because of what they perceived as her "manque de considération pour les musulmans" (lack of consideration for Muslims).[215] On the other hand, she has been dismissed by the far-right for being a "Muslim," out of pure ignorance and the assumption that her Iranian origins would be an indication of her Muslim faith, when in reality, she identified as an atheist. Due to these hardships, religious identity in France seemed to have become for Shalmani the primary marker of personal identity "[… qui] devenait essentiel, devenait plus important que tout. […] Tout ce qui touchait à la question de l'islam en France devenait problématique, dangereux à debattre, cause de discord" ([… which] became essential, became more important than anything. […] Everything related to the question of Islam in France became problematic, dangerous to debate, a cause of discord).[216] The series of protests in what became known as the *Arab Spring* between 2010 and 2012 further complicated her sense of double-unbelonging.[217] As a "racist Iranian political refugee," she was trapped between two worlds – "l'un qui ne voyait que la musulmane en [elle] et l'autre la Française" (one which saw only the Muslim in [her] and the other the French).[218] Consequently, any opposition to the

[214] Ibid, 251.

[215] Ibid, 293.

[216] Ibid, 254-255.

[217] Launched by the demonstrations that lead to the successful removal of the Tunisian president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali from power, a series of protests and revolutions arose in the Middle East and North Africa in 2010 in support of the democratization of dictatorial regimes to bring forth economic, political, and social reform. The impact and outcomes of these movements vary for each country.
See: Alfred Stepan and Juan J. Linz, "Democratization Theory and the 'Arab Spring,'" *Journal of Democracy* 24, no. 2 (2013): 15-30, https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2013.0032.

[218] Op. cit., Shalmani, *Khomeiny, Sade et moi*, 245.

religious allegiance of Iran categorized her as a traitor, yet identifying as French also remained impossible since she was not considered of *French stock*. This double-unbelonging, which prevented her from feeling a sense of inclusion thus made her "apatride, seule, malheureuse. En [lui] refusant d'être française, [elle était] renvoy[ée] dans les ténèbres des sans-mémoire. C'était cela qui était le plus blessant […]. Mémoire qui était la forme la plus évidente de [son] amour pour la France" (stateless, alone, miserable. By refusing [her] from being French, [she was] sent back in the darkness of those having no memory. That was what was most hurtful […]. Memory which was the most obvious form of her love for France).[219] However, erasing memory was simply not an option for Shalmani, as her remarks in the autobiography suggest: "j'ai besoin de me souvenir, j'ai besoin de ressasser ce qui a été vécu, il y a dix ans, il y a cent ans, il y a mille ans. Je ne peux pas être simple et insouciante. J'ai charge d'Histoire" (I need to remember, I need to keep bringing up what was experienced, ten years ago, a hundred years ago, a thousand years ago. I cannot be simple and carefree. I am in charge of History).[220]

Present Pasts: 'The Children of History'

As I have previously discussed in the first two chapters of this dissertation, Shalmani found refuge in books from an early age, and the camaraderie she developed with authors of the past helped her come to terms with her complex identity. The solitude she experienced compelled her to find harmony in her exilic condition through literature. Books therefore became indispensable for her cultural integration and libertine literature, in particular, emerged as a symbolic weapon through which she could defend herself in exile and liberate herself from the

[219] Ibid, 240.

[220] Ibid, 240.

various cultural, religious, and societal restrictions outlined in these two chapters.[221] The transgressive elements of this literary genre, in which certain philosophical novels adopt – "la femme [comme] la narratrice et l'héroïne" (the woman [as] the narrator and the heroine) – offered Shalmani a means of liberating her body, mind, and spirit.[222] Despite the works being predominantly authored by men, the female protagonists – who engage in intellectually and philosophically charged dialogue with their male counterparts – "détricotent patiemment tous les préjugés, qui revendiquent l'émancipation pour tous, qui désacralisent avec un humour corrosif toutes les figures de pouvoir" (le roi, la monarchie, la justice, le clergé)" (patiently unravel all prejudices, which demand emancipation for all, which desacralize with corrosive humor all figures of power (the king, the monarchy, the law, the clergy)).[223] By virtue of the power of literature and her ability to later testify to her personal experiences through her own literary works, Shalmani forged a new identity, one that resists conformity to rigid norms, systems of

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[221] This seventeenth to eighteenth-century literary genre features explicit themes of eroticism, hedonism, and sexual and philosophical libertinage, which sought to challenge the prevailing religious and political foundations of France at the time. Stéphane Van Damme, in the article "Subversive Freedom: Libertine Anthropology and the Geography of Knowledge in Seventeenth-Century France," explores the usage and definitions of the epithet "libertine." In its general usage, and specifically in the context of this literary genre, "[t]o refer to something or somewhere as 'libertine' is to designate an attitude that is both critical of religion and engaged in a wide range of pleasure-seeking practices; Didier Foucault defines 'libertinage' as 'toute acte ou toute idée qui transgresse les interdits moraux ou idéologiques du christianisme'. From a sociological point of view, the term covers not only the intellectual pursuits cultivated by elite society, which René Pintard calls 'erudite libertinage' in the context of the first half of the seventeenth-century, but also the much less elitist practices of blasphemy or 'crimes of speech'. With the advent of dictionaries and juridical treatises in the Enlightenment period, the meanings of 'libertinage' evolve further to the point where the term becomes essentially equivalent to an excessive or 'deviant' sexuality that threatens public order. The point to underline here is Jean-Pierre Cavaillé's observation that the category of the libertin is non-essentialist and supple, that it describes a posture rather than a socio-cultural identity, and that it refers to practices and intellectual operations rather than to any fixed doctrinal position."
Stéphane Van Damme, "Subversive Freedom: Libertine Anthropology and the Geography of Knowledge in Seventeenth-Century France," *Early Modern French Studies* 37, no. 2 (2015): 110, https://doi.org/10.1080/20563035.2015.1118248.

[222] Op. cit., Shalmani, "Les enfants de Spinoza et de Sade," 65.
Some of the libertine novels that inspired Shalmani include Andréa de Nerciat's *Le Doctorat impromptu*, Comte de Mirabeau's *Le Rideau levé ou l'Éducation de Laure*, and Jean-Baptiste de Boyer's *Thérèse philosophe*. Although these works are written by male authors, their narratives feature lead female characters who partake in sexually and intellectually provocative dialogue with men. See p. 190 of *Khomeiny, Sade et moi*.

[223] Op. cit., Shalmani, "Les enfants de Spinoza et de Sade," 65.

belief, and traditions. Accordingly, her renunciation of the need to "belong" became a means through which she reconciled her feelings of double-unbelonging.

In *Black France: Colonialism, Immigration, and Transnationalism*, Dominic Thomas explores the conflictual circumstances that many diasporic writers encounter when attempting to define their new identities as exiled subjects. He notes that "for many writers, exile itself constitutes the entry into writing, the 'coming to writing,' as one has said before."[224] This has proven to be the case for Shalmani as well, whose political status afforded her the necessary distance from her country of origin, enabling new configurations to emerge on cultural, historical, literary, and personal levels, in what Homi Bhabha has described as a "Third Space." By drawing upon Bhabha's understanding of bordered, hybrid identities, Dominic Thomas further examines this phenomenon through Jacques Chevrier's notion of "migritude," a neologism which emerges from a combination of "négritude" (as a cultural, philosophical, and political project) and "migration," as well as "hybridity and decentered lives […] that now characterize a kind of French-style 'world literature.'"[225] Although Shalmani writes from a different geohistorical context than the "migritude" authors from West Africa, she nevertheless deals with similar thematics as these writers who ended up living in France. Shalmani's own conceptualization of cultural hybridity also engages with Bhabha's concept of a "Third Space," a theoretical framework which allows for a consideration of the unique ways that identity formation occurs within the diasporic context and subjectivity asserted through difference. Bhabha's theoretical formulations thus inform my analysis of Shalmani's literary publications since she too challenges the logic of binaries – a central issue in her discussions of identity

[224] Dominic Thomas, *Black France: Colonialism, Immigration, and Transnationalism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), 5.

[225] Ibid, 5.

construction. In the section entitled "Border Lives: The Art of the Present" in the introduction to *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha begins by acknowledging the importance of deviating from the singularities of class or gender as primary conceptual and organizational categories. He claims that such a shift has led to an awareness of the subject positions of other identity markers such as "race, gender, generation, institutional location, geographical locale, sexual orientation,"[226] inherent to the claiming of one's subjectivity in the modern day. Bhabha continues:

> What is theoretically innovative and politically crucial is the need to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences. These 'in-between' spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular and communal – that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation in the act of defining the idea of society itself.[227]

The interstices that arise from difference, he argues, emerge as a common ground where interests, values, and a sense of national belonging could be renegotiated between individuals and their communities. While navigating within these "liminal" spaces could potentially be disorienting, it allows for agency and the possibility of creating new cultural and ideological meeting points between different populations irrespective of gender, race, and social status. Accordingly, Bhabha's conception of how alterity within identity could productively be reconceptualized in a cosmopolitan context to foster awareness, dialogue, and inclusion serves as a useful theoretical framework in this dissertation.

For Shalmani, this process was initiated as early as adolescence, a period when she began to perceive herself as an "enfant de l'Histoire [qui avait] un droit d'intervenir" (child of History [who had] the right to intervene).[228] Shalmani writes, "Je ne voulais pas être seulement une

[226] Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 2.

[227] Op. cit., Thomas, *Black France: Colonialism, Immigration, and Transnationalism*, 5.

[228] Op. cit., Shalmani, *Khomeiny, Sade et moi*, 195.

victime silencieuse de la Révolution, de la guerre et de l'exil. Je voulais être active, partie prenante et juge" (I did not want to simply be a silent victim of the Revolution, war, and exile. I wanted to be active, a stakeholder, and a judge).[229] Shalmani's refusal to be disengaged from the events of History, which were the direct cause of her physical displacement and later her sense of un-belonging in France, compelled her to find a space in which she could freely negotiate her identity and bear witness to these experiences from a female perspective:

> Cette mémoire colossale qui est la mienne ne me donne pas le choix. Je n'ai pas le droit d'oublier – ni la grande ni la petite histoire. L'histoire du monde et ma petite histoire. Je tiens à ce qui a été vécu, comme si ma raison mentale en dépendait. J'ai l'impression qu'oublier, c'est effacer. Et je ne veux rien laisser passer. Je ne veux pas être légère et avancer dans ma vie comme si hier n'avait été qu'un mirage. Ce ne serait pas juste. Pas seulement envers mon passé, pas seulement envers mes parents et ma famille tout entière qui suffoque dans le présent. Je sais que derrière tous ces mots et ces grandes théories, il y a les enfants de l'Histoire. La vérité de ceux qui n'ont pas choisi et qui subissent.[230]
>
> This colossal memory of mine leaves me no choice. I have no right to forget it – neither the grand nor the small history. The history of the world and my little story. I hold onto what has been experienced, as if my mental reason depends on it. Forgetting feels like erasing to me. And I don't want to let anything slip away. I don't want to move forward in my life as if yesterday was just a mirage. That wouldn't be fair. Not only to my past, not only to my parents and my entire family suffocating in the present. I know that behind all these words and grand theories, there are the children of History. The truth of those who did not choose and who suffer.

At the heart of this internalized conflict, which rejects victimhood by taking responsibility for the past in the present, lies the condition of being "unhomed," a "negating activity, [… an] intervention of the 'beyond' that establishes a boundary: a bridge, where 'presencing' begins because it captures something of the estranging sense of the relocation of the home and the world – the unhomeliness – that is the condition of extra-territorial and cross-cultural initiations."[231] Bhabha's conception of the interstices that emerge during the process of dislocation through

[229] Ibid, 195.

[230] Ibid, 239.

[231] Op. cit., Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 13.

which subjects form their personhood and build new cultural connections, is echoed in Shalmani's characterization of the various ways new spaces of belonging are created. She attributes this quest for a sense of self to an act of transgression, a process of cultural estrangement that questions and subverts prescribed systems of belief, extremist dogmas and ideologies, and oppressive systems – be they patriarchal, policial, or religious.

Shalmani expounds her thinking in the autobiography, in which she explores the dynamic connections that arise when certain ideological concepts of the French and Iranian Revolutions converge discursively. While these two distinct historical events do not at first glance appear to share points of commonality, Shalmani's dialogical exchange with her father as they are poised to land in Paris for the first time sparks within her the curiosity to interrogate the ideological foundations of these revolutions. It was when she had barely arrived in France and came across the famous prison that once represented the absolute tyranny of the French monarchy that "l'Histoire de France [lui] prenait par la main" (History of France took [her] by the hand) and would later inspire her to learn of the French Revolution.[232] As she converses with her father in a taxi on their route to the Bastille neighborhood, where "à chaque rue, à chaque tournant, une nouveauté, une mixité, des couleurs et des voix [… était] la preuve que tout le monde se foutait des barbus de chacun [… et] dans les rues où [elle] promenai[t], chaque mur, chaque pavé, racontait comment des hommes et des femmes avaient libéré les prisonniers et instauré l'Égalité" (on every street, at every turn, a new thing, a diversity, colors and voices [… was] proof that everyone didn't care about each other's bearded people [… and] in these streets where she walked, each wall, each paving stone, narrated how men and women had freed the prisoners and

[232] Op. cit., Shalmani, *Khomeiny, Sade et moi*, 180.

established Equality).[233] While this conversation about revolutions elicits the fear in Shalmani that "Révolution voulait dire barbus" (Révolution meant the bearded men), she shares how her father reassures her that "toutes les révolutions n'avaient ni le même but, ni les mêmes protagonistes. En France, la Révolution française, c'était "autre chose". Cette "autre chose" [l'avait] ainsi fascinée dès [son] premier jour parisien: qu'y avait cette "autre chose" qui la différenciait des barbus? C'était quoi la recette pour faire des révolutions sans tuer des femmes" (all revolutions didn't have the same goal nor the same protagonists. In France, the French Revolution was something else. This "something else" [had] fascinated [her] from her first day in Paris: what was there in this "something else" that differentiated it from the bearded men? What was the recipe for making revolutions without killing women).[234] Shalmani's autobiographical essay aims to provide a response to this question. Contrary to the late eighteenth-century French uprising, the Iranian Revolution lacked an effective resistance mechanism because there was no evolution of "les mentalités nées de la culture-prison" (mindsets born from the cultural prison) and not enough women who took "le pouvoir-livre […pour] éduquer leurs filles et leurs fils à la force de la Raison [et] détruire des siècles d'obscurantisme et de faire du pouvoir un lieu de débat, d'Égalité et de Raison" (the power of the book […] to educate their daughters and sons in the force of Reason [and] destroy centuries of obscurantism and to make power a place of debate, of Equality, and of Reason).[235]

Even though Shalmani was surprised to hear from her father that there were only seven prisoners in the Bastille at the time of its siege, "cela ne changeait pas l'ampleur de la révolte.

[233] Ibid, 181-182.

[234] Ibid, 180.

[235] Ibid, 197-198.

C'était cette prison et de sa censure et c'était cette prison qu'il fallait libérer avant les autres" (this did not change the scale of the revolt. It was the prison of the king and his censorship and it was this prison that had to be liberated before the others).[236] Although the French Revolution "is usually seen as overcoming the divine rights of kings, the actual execution of [K]ing [Louis XVI], the regicide, was not simply an ephemeral event but the masterpiece, the apex of two congruent social processes: the symbolic disincorporation of royal power and the consolidation of a new democratic community of experience."[237] For a child escaping the supreme authority and censorship of Khomeini, this was "la preuve que tout pouvait basculer d'un coup, comme s'il suffisait de ne plus croire dans le pouvoir du roi pour qu'il se fracasse. Comme s'il suffisait de ne plus croire que Khomeiny était le Mahdi"[238] (proof that everything could change at once, as if it was enough to no longer believe in the power of the king for it to collapse. As if it were enough to no longer believe that Khomeini was the Mahdi ["the Rightly Guided One"] for him to fall).[239]

The process of rejecting Khomeini's hegemony was materialized initially through Shalmani's intimate connection to a historical event and subsequently, through her exile and path to integration. April 1, 1979, the date which marked the referendum that placed the *barbus* in charge of the State, exactly two years after her birthday (April 1, 1977), became the "première date historique qu['elle] retien[t] [… qui] devint la litanie de [son] désespoir" (first historical

[236] Ibid, 182.

[237] Ágnes Horváth, et al., *Breaking Boundaries: Varieties of Liminality* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2015), 6.

[238] According to the Islamic faith, Mahdi was a descendant of Prophet Muhammed and is considered a messianic savior who "will reappear before the end of time to help usher in a new era of justice and righteousness across the world."
Jeffry R. Halverson, H.L.Goodall, and S.R., Corman, *Master Narratives of Islamist Extremism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 95.

[239] Op. cit., Shalmani, *Khomeiny, Sade et moi*, 182.

date that [she] retains [which] became the litany of her despair).[240] Moving forward, during each anniversary, a special day which calls for self-reflection and a celebration of one's unique identity, Shalmani would forcefully be reminded that she would have to "ressembler […] à toutes les autres" (resemble […] everyone else).[241]

From early childhood, the intimate links Shalmani drew between the events of her personal life and those of History, as they aligned by chance, have guided her trajectory of self-discovery – symbolic rites of passage that brought forth a rebirth of sorts on each occasion, as well as an awareness of her complex cultural identity that continues to evolve through the ongoing process of rejecting homogeneity. She writes, "Je suis née plusieurs fois. Une fois un jour d'avril, une autre fois en retirant mon voile et en imposant ma nudité, une troisième fois en foulant le sol français, une autre fois enfin en ouvrant un livre de Zola et en découvrant la littérature libertine du XVIII^{e} siècle français" (I was born several times. Once on a day in April, another time by removing my veil and asserting my nudity, a third time by stepping on French soil, and finally by opening a book by Zola and discovering the libertine literature of eighteenth-century France).[242] These multiple births, which represent the interaction between culture, history, and travel, aim to reveal and overcome the lack of agency and sense of isolation she endures at different stages of her life. The dynamic transformations of power structures that Shalmani attributes to the process of cultural and physical displacement find relevance in Thomas' elaboration on the identitarian postures of African immigrants amidst their interaction with Western culture and tradition. These African migrants, predominantly Congolese men, take on a "counter-hegemonic practice that operates symbiotically with the dictates of political

[240] Ibid, 26.

[241] Ibid, 26.

[242] Ibid, 27.

authority"[243] through the vestimentary practice of *La Sape*.[244] Thomas argues that "the migrant impulse is […] structured around a number of foundational principles: the dream/fascination […and] the search for recognition [… where] [g]iven the socio-political circumstances in the postcolony, dreaming and the imagination emerge as necessary mechanisms, for the confrontation of reality and fiction accordingly provides the opportunity to humanize experience."[245] These principles are explored within the context of postcolonial subject's search for identity upon their descent in Europe, a quest that "goes beyond the simple physical journey that transports the individual from one geographic space to another [but rather] locates the transportation of the individual in what is a quest for self, for the exploration of the individual – this is where the journey's impulse is actually enacted," and where these conclusions can be extended to the experience of other diasporan subjects in similar identitarian ponderings.[246] In a similar gesture aimed at reasserting power by means of manipulating physical appearance, Shalmani subverts Iranian cultural standards and Islamic dress codes through her refusal to wear the veil, and she undergoes an analogous process when navigating the experience of cultural and physical displacement.

Throughout her trajectory of integration, Shalmani resorts to the study of French history and libertine literature to gain new perspectives and to bring forth new personal transformations:

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[243] Op. cit., Thomas, *Black France*, 172.

[244] Originating from the Congos, *La Sape*, the acronym for Société des Ambianceurs et des Personnes Élégantes (Society of *Ambianceurs* and Persons of Elegance), is an aesthetic and cultural movement practiced primarily by men. As Thomas explains in *Black France*, "the *sapeurs* travel to France in order to acquire designer clothes as part of a border identitarian agenda associated with the shifting cultural, political, and social coordinates of the colony and post-colony as determined by hegemonic and counter-hegemonic practices."
Ibid, 156-157.

[245] Ibid, 171-172.

[246] Ibid, 172.

> La littérature libertine, c'est le mouvement. Le mouvement qui balaye, le mouvement qui libère, le mouvement qui détruit les vieux rois et les évêques poussiéreux. Le mouvement, c'est la respiration bruyante du peuple qui refuse – enfin – de s'en laisser conter par les représentants du pouvoir, qu'il soit séculaire ou divin, mais qui est toujours le pouvoir qui broie. Le mouvement, le souffle de la vie dans la mort, le refus d'accepter, l'impossibilité de se taire. Il faut écouter et accepter ce mouvement. Mais cela ne fut pas sans peine. Car c'était aussi accepter que la Révolution des barbus ait *aussi* été un 'NON' énergique et incontrôlable, contre le Shah et contre la misère, contre l'Occident qui se nourrissait du pétrole et de la fame, contre ce qu'ils pensaient être une décadence de la culture iranienne. Accepter que les 'NON' des barbus et des corbeaux avaient la même force et quasi la même origine que la Révolution française, et déplorer non pas la Révolution mais les choix absurdes et suicidaires de l'*après*. Mes barbus et mes corbeaux n'avaient pas eu tort de vouloir que tout change, ils avaient juste ruiné la possibilité de la démocratie en se réfugiant dans la barbe du "vieux en noir & blanc."[247]
>
> Libertine literature is movement. The movement which sweeps, the liberating movement, the movement that destroys old kings and dusty bishops. Movement, the noisy breath of the people who finally refuse to be told by representatives of power, whether secular or divine, but who are always the power that crushes. Movement, the breath of life in death, the refusal to accept, the impossibility of remaining silent. We must listen to and accept this movement. But this was not without difficulty. For it was also accepting that the Revolution of the bearded men was also an energetic and uncontrollable 'NO,' against the Shah and against misery, against the West that thrived on oil and fame, against what they thought was a decline of Iranian culture. Accepting that the 'NO' of the bearded men and the crows had the same force and almost the same origin as the French Revolution, and to deplore not the Revolution but the absurd and suicidal choices of what came *afterwards*. My bearded men and my crows were not wrong to want everything to change; they just ruined the possibility of democracy by taking refuge in the beard of the "old man in black and white."

The transgressive elements of libertine literature have provided Shalmani with the necessary interpretive tools to identify and reject authority in order to attain intellectual, physical, and spiritual freedom. She ascribes the following characteristics to libertine literature, which prompt introspection: "une éducation qui aboutit à la liberté […] une transgression qui donne des ailes à la pensée. […] L'esprit critique. Apprendre à spéculer. Ouvrir son esprit. Remettre en question. Douter. Tout le temps" (an education that leads to freedom […] a transgression that gives wings to thought. […] Critical thinking. Learning to speculate. Opening one's mind. Challenging.

[247] Op. cit., Shalmani, *Khomeiny, Sade et moi*, 194.

Doubting. All the time).[248] The influence of libertine writers such as the Marquis de Sade and Jean-Baptiste de Boyer, and in particular her reading of *Thérèse Philosophe* (1748) at the age of eighteen, thanks to her father who gifted her the book for her birthday, became the means through which she made claims to her femininity, her own subjectivity, her right to intellectual and physical freedom, and reinforced her commitment to become a writer. Reading *Thérèse Philosophe*, an anonymous novel attributed to Jean-Baptiste de Boyer, was of pivotal importance to her intellectual growth since it allowed her to draw connections between the restrictions placed on the body, especially those of women, and the suppression of political freedom by regimes such that of Khomeini. The highly censored pornographic novel about intellectual, philosophical, and sexual freedom, and political and religious hypocrisy is told through the story of Thérèse, a woman of bourgeois origins who is forcefully placed into a convent by her mother as a little girl. Due to the mental and physical suffering that she endures, as a consequence of having neglected her body and its needs within the confines of the Church, she manages to leave the convent. Subsequently, she is provided with the chance to explore erotic and philosophical fantasies through her exposure to explicit conversations and acts between Mme. C and the licentious priest, Abbé T. For 18-year-old Shalmani, and even for most readers, Thérèse, "[qui] ne porte pas le foulard mais elle est enfermée par sa mère dans un couvent – ce qui est pareil que de porter un foulard: chaque culture a sa prison des femmes" ([who] does not wear the headscarf but is confined by her mother in a convent – which is the same as wearing a headscarf: each culture has its women's prison), the novel is a big revelation because it invites "l'acceptation de son corps à la célébration de la Raison, la chair et l'esprit se renvoyant la balle d'une rencontre à une autre, d'une découverte à une métaphysique de la vie. […] Remplacez couvent par voile,

[248] Ibid, 189.

l'abbé T… par Pierre Louÿs et aventure par exil et c'est l'histoire de ma vie. Jusque dans la manie de Thérèse de se dissimuler dans les placard, dans les couloirs sombres, dans les cabinets de toilette pour découvrir la vérité" (the acceptance of one's body to the celebration of Reason, flesh and spirit passing the ball from one encounter to another, from a discovery to a metaphysical understanding of life. […] Replace veil with convent, abbé T. with Pierre Louÿs, and adventure with exile, and it's the story of my life. Even in Thérèse's habit of hiding in closets, in dark hallways, in lavatories to discover the truth).[249] By drawing connections between physical and sexual freedom with Reason, Thérèse emerges as a heroine whom Shalmani claims is still relatable today. Thus, Thérèse stands as symbolic of another equally important revolution, namely, the one that takes place on the "interior" – "la révolution intérieure."[250]

In her essay, Shalmani also acknowledges the legacy of the Marquis de Sade, who was imprisoned at the Bastille in 1784, and hails him as one of the authors who influenced her most profoundly. She describes the experience of reading Sade as "violent. But his work allows us to reassemble. [She] often return[s] to Sade, likening him to a vacuum cleaner for prejudices. We rise from the ashes with Sade; we learn to exist at the heights of the marvelous gift that is free will."[251] Sade's writings, which were nothing short of daring and obscene, directly resonated with her own experiences of bodily confinement. This was because his philosophy "placed human desire above any moral scheme. He refused any prohibitions. He believed woman equal to man.[252] Shalmani expands on the emancipatory qualities of Sade's writings in her autobiographical essay:

[249] Ibid, 186 and 185-187.

[250] Ibid, 187.

[251] Op.cit., Sparling, "In Conversation: Abnousse Shalmani on the Politics of the Female Body."

[252] Ibid.

> Il était celui qui était nécessaire à l'enfant sous le voile qui n'avait pas le droit de dire. Et plus tard, quand il fut le temps de la peur, quand il fut le temps de se taire, de se créer un personnage pour ne pas être trop seule, Sade fut celui qui m'offrit un refuge. J'ai compris que la solitude n'est pas grave, que la solitude peut être l'occasion de la création et que, finalement, un jour, la liberté de penser régnera. Encore un effort pour être républicain.[253]
>
> He was the one necessary for the child under the veil who didn't have the right to speak. And later, when it was time for fear, when it was time to be silent, to create a character to avoid being too alone, Sade was the one who offered me refuge. I understood that solitude is not serious, that solitude can be an opportunity for creation, and that, ultimately, one day, freedom of thought will reign. Another effort to be republican.

Sade provided Shalmani with the intellectual freedom needed to challenge the authoritative regime of Khomeini, whose goal was to create "un monde sans savoir et sans visage, un monde sans diversité et sans couleur, un monde où il existe aucun espace public, sauf celui de la prière, et des tas d'espaces privés, super-privés, cadenassés, fermés au monde" (a world without knowledge and without a face, a world without diversity and without color, a world where there is no public space except that of prayer, and plenty of private, super-private spaces, padlocked, closed to the world).[254] Fiction therefore offered an alternative route and a counter-narrative for the adolescent Shalmani, who aspired to one day become a writer.

Although 45 years have passed since the Iranian Revolution, Mahsa Amini's death in 2022 was just one of many incidents that have underscored the need for women's visibility in public spaces and discourse, highlighting the importance of our continuous engagement with issues pertaining to women's equality, freedom, and rights. Shalmani's autobiography stands as an example of her commitment to these matters, and her work has elucidated her experiences as a woman and an immigrant, most notably in the context of religious dictates and oppression. She has also demonstrated the various ways in which she believes solidarity can be expressed in a global, cosmopolitan context. In France, Shalmani has focused on the question of Muslim attire

[253] Op. cit., Shalmani, *Khomeiny, Sade et moi*, 214-215.

[254] Ibid, 300.

and its relation to her own experience of integration. Although her overt rejection of the hijab has been contested, she has endeavored to draw attention to the contemporary political nuances that underlie these issues. And Shalmani certainly does not oppose freedom of choice or expression. That is precisely what she is arguing *against*. Shalmani unambiguously supports the freedom *to have* a choice, and under no circumstance should any freedom, be it personal or collective, be attained at the expense of another.

While the mandatory enforcement of the veil is an issue that predominantly pertains to nations governed by Islamic regimes, Shalmani also draws attention to the various ways in which this issue extends to former French colonies and their history of decolonization. Upon encountering a woman wearing a hijab on the Paris metro, Shalmani feels compelled to explore the reasons for which some Muslim women in France choose to voluntarily abide by this tradition, which transcends cultural and national boundaries. Her analysis leads to the following observation:

> A force de lire, à force de vouloir comprendre […] j'ai découvert des analyses qui incriminaient la colonisation. C'est parce que les hommes colonisés avaient été dépossédés de leur terre, de leur liberté, qu'ils s'étaient défoulés sur les femmes en transformant leurs corps en zone ultra-privée. Comme si la possession des femmes était la seule forme d'honneur qui leur restait. Et il n'est pas ardu d'imaginer l'angoisse de la dépossession chez un colonisé. Mais la femme enfermeé dans la maison et enfermée dans son hijab est une femme emmurée. Elle n'existe plus que dans les limites du privé. Elle n'existe plus. Disparue. Et lorsque les hommes avaient été libérés par la décolonisation, ils avaient poursuivi l'enfermement des femmes.[255]
>
> Through reading and seeking to understand […] I discovered analyses that blamed colonization. It's because colonized men had been stripped of their land, their freedom, that they took it out on women by transforming their bodies into ultra-private zones. As if possessing women was the only form of honor left to them. It's not difficult to imagine the anguish of dispossession felt by a colonized person. But the woman confined to the house and enclosed in her hijab is a walled woman. She exists only within the bounds of the private sphere. She no longer exists. Gone. And when men were liberated by decolonization, they continued the confinement of women.

[255] Ibid, 195-196.

While the question of the veil is just one of many subjects that Shalmani has commented on, the issue occupies a disproportionate space in her thinking since it is inextricably linked to her own life and personal choices. Her observations have also, of course, continued to be influenced by international events. These have prompted her to engage in initiatives that support contemporary anti-government demonstrations in the Middle East and North Africa, advocating for democracy, freedom of speech, and women's rights, while providing her with motivation during the process of writing *Khomeiny, Sade et moi*:

> J'étais accrochée aux visages des femmes et aux larmes des hommes. J'étais avec eux, dans ces rues bondées d'où pouvait naître un lendemain sans barbus et sans pouvoir absolu. Le désir d'écrire était revenu avec le visage des femmes tunisiennes, avec un mouvement contre lequel aucune armée, aucun pouvoir absolu ne pouvait rien. Le pouvoir de la faim, du désir. Non seulement de la liberté mais du changement. Comme dans le siècle libertin, le mouvement qui fait fuir la peur, qui fait fuir les rois, qui détrône les fous et les sangsues.[256]
>
> I was drawn to the faces of women and the tears of men. I was with them, in those crowded streets where a future without beards and absolute power could be born. The desire to write had returned with the faces of Tunisian women, with a movement against which no army, no absolute power could prevail. The power of hunger, of desire. Not only for freedom but for change. Like in the libertine century, the movement that dispels fear, that drives away kings, that dethrones madmen and leeches.

Shalmani's insights on the female experience and her commitment to participating in international debates are indicative of her desire to foster dialogue across diverse histories and national borders, and to build cultural bridges. Chapter 3 of this dissertation will shift the focus back to *Les exilés meurent aussi d'amour* to continue the discussion of the various ways in which she explores the development of diasporic identities from the female perspective in the process of integration and assimilation within the host country – though, in this particular work, through the lens of the family paradigm. As discussed in Chapter 1, the novel is contextualized within the historical and political climate of France and Iran in the 1980s. The narrator's quest for a sense

[256] Ibid, 290.

of self and belonging is motivated by her family's political ambitions and their refusal to assimilate in France, demonstrating a resistance to change. To this end, the family paradigm and the socio-political underpinnings of the narrative provide a unique framework with which to delve into the protagonist's experience of cultural, familial, psychological, and physical displacement. These questions are explored primarily through the themes of incest, physical violence, rape, and patricide, all of which occur within the private space of the Hedayat family's home. To this end, the theme of incest as a literary trope prompts a discussion of the dialectics between the Self and Other – particularly the obsession with "sameness" and the rejection of the "Other."

Chapter 3:

Navigating the Exilic Identity: Liminality in *Les exilés meurent aussi d'amour*

> At this time (full of iniquity), a friend, who is free from defect (of insincerity,
> and in whose society is joy),
> Is the goblet of pure wine (the glorious Kuran (from whose companionship,
> one can momently snatch delight), and the song-book (Divine knowledge,
> whose reading perpetually is full of pleasure).
>
> Go alone (free from all attachments); for the highway of safety (love) is narrow
> (full of thorns and of stones):
> Seize (quickly) the cup (love's attraction); for dear life is without exchange
> (returneth not; and permitteth not the traveller to make good the omission of the past).
>
> In the world, not I alone am distressed from being without work
> From learning without doing, is the grief of the learned.
>
> In this thoroughfare full of tumult, to reason's eye,
> The world and the world's work is without permanency and without place.
>
> By the decree of eternity without beginning, the black face of the Bactrian Camel
> Becometh not white by washing and scouring. This is a proverb.
>
> Every foundation (however strong) that thou seest is capable of injury
> Save Love's foundation, which is far from injury.
>
> Great hope of union with thee, had my heart.
> But, on life's path, death is hope's robber.
>
> Seize the tress of the one of moon face (the true Beloved), and utter not the tale;
> For fortune and misfortune are the effects of Venus and of Saturn.
>
> At no time, will they find him sensible:
> For this reason, that Hafiz is intoxicated with the cup of eternity without beginning.
>
> — Hafez, *The Divan of Hafez*

> The wise concealed themselves and their deeds, and devils achieved their heart's desire. Virtue was despised and magic applauded, justice hid itself away while evil flourished; demons rejoiced in their wickedness, while goodness was spoken of only in secret.
>
> — Abolqasem Ferdowsi, *Shāh-nāma*

In *Les exilés meurent aussi d'amour*, the protagonist's narrative concludes with her reconciliation to a hybridized identity that has emerged – or rather survived – from exile yet remains on the periphery, belonging neither to her country of origin nor to her adoptive

community. Shirini's final remarks reveal the tumultuous nature of exile, an experience which definitively severs all ties that once bound the members of the Hedayat family:[257]

> Nous n'étions plus une famille. Il n'y avait plus de déjeuner ni de dîner d'anniversaire, de mariage et personne n'était encore mort. Nous étions dispersés, rien ne nous reliait plus, si ce n'est les souvenirs – et encore: chacun avait choisi ce qui l'arrangeait, le valorisait, le détachait des autres –, les quelques films de notre mémoire collective, Hâfez (mais il

[257] Shalmani's choice of the surname Hedayat for her fictional characters is very likely a reference to Sadegh Hedayat (1903-1951) – hailed as the "'plus grand écrivain de l'Iran moderne'" (greatest writer of modern Iran) by Franco-Iranian essayist Youssef Ishaghpour (1940-2021). Hedayat committed suicide in Paris while in exile. In *La littérature transculturelle franco-persane: Une évolution littéraire depuis les années 80*, Esfaindyar Daneshvar resorts to the words of Ishaghpour to illustrate the cultural and literary importance of Hedayat: "'[I]il a fait de 'la littérature' une réalité indépendante, ayant son propre accès à la vérité, libre désormais de toutes les instances extérieures qui en déterminaient la teneur et la forme, ou des buts religieux, moraux ou politiques qu'elle servait.' Pour la première fois avec Hedayat, les notions de modernité, de liberté et d'indépendance furent associées à l'écriture romanesque iranienne" ('[H]e made 'literature' an independent reality, with its own access to truth, free henceforth from all external authorities that determined its content and form, or from the religious, moral or political aims that it served.' For the first time with Hedayat, the notions of modernity, freedom and independence were associated with Iranian novelistic writing). Daneshvar describes the exile experienced by the generation of authors active thirty years after the death of Hedayat as the catalyst for "une nouvelle évolution littéraire hybride, liée étroitement à la nouvelle société, sa langue et sa culture. Abordant cette nouvelle littérature, on constate d'abord l'impact considérable des modèles romanesques occidentaux introduits en Iran dès le début du XX^{e} siècle. Les premières observations montrent ensuite des traces de mixités culturelles et linguistiques dans la composition de ces œuvres tandis qu'un examen plus approfondi révèle une interférence ingénieuse et minutieuse entre deux cultures d'origines fort éloignées. La mixité créative s'avère alors plus complexe qu'une simple juxtaposition hétérogène d'expériences sociales des auteurs. En effet, il s'agit au fond d'un processus d'assimilation culturelle volontaire et conscient des auteurs, d'abord sur le plan identitaire et qui débouche ensuite sur des œuvres reflétant une maturité technique et des synthèses inédites entre deux univers distincts que sont l'Iran et la France" (a new hybrid literary evolution, closely linked to the new society, its language and its culture. Approaching this new literature, we first note the considerable impact of Western novelistic models introduced in Iran from the beginning of the twentieth century. Initial observations then show traces of cultural and linguistic mixity in the composition of these works while a more in-depth examination reveals an ingenious and meticulous interference between two cultures of very distant origins. The creative mixity then proves to be more complex than a simple heterogeneous juxtaposition of the authors' social experiences. Indeed, it is fundamentally a process of voluntary and conscious cultural assimilation of the authors, first on the identity level and which then leads to works reflecting technical maturity and unprecedented syntheses between two distinct universes: Iran and France). Daneshvar identifies the "évolutions importantes de la société iranienne depuis le début du XX^{e} siècle" (significant developments in Iranian society since the beginning of the twentieth century) as the basis for transcultural Franco-Iranian literature: "Le transculturalisme, d'abord comme vision du monde, puise ses sources dans la modernité et la vision du monde laïque française" (Transculturalism, first as a worldview, draws its sources from modernity and the French secular worldview). For a comprehensive study of Franco-Persian literature from the 1980s onward, see: Esfaindyar Daneshvar, *La littérature transculturelle franco-persane: Une évolution littéraire depuis les années 80* (Leiden: Brill, 2019).
Esfaindyar Daneshvar, *La littérature transculturelle franco-persane: Une évolution littéraire depuis les années 80* (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 1-2.

> compte pour moitié: il lie tous les Iraniens), et un patronyme qui signifiait encore quelque chose quand on fermait les yeux […].[258]
>
> We were no longer a family. There were no more birthday or wedding lunches or dinners, and no one had died yet. We were scattered, nothing connected us anymore, except memories – and even then: each of us had chosen what suited him, made him feel good, set him apart from the others –, the few films of our collective memory, Hafez (but he counts for half: he connects all Iranians), and a surname that still meant something when we closed our eyes […].

Abnousse Shalmani's representation of the exilic condition as a permanent state of cultural, temporal, and physical dislocation is further encapsulated through an aquatic metaphor, highlighting the fluidity of displaced identities: "L'exil est une identité, un langage, un passé sans avenir. L'exil est une île où se retrouvent tous ceux qui n'ont ni le visage du pays natal ni celui du refuge: ceux qui sont trop vieux pour oublier et pas assez jeunes pour se fondre, ceux qui restent toute leur vie sur une île qui flotte sur des océans qui ne leur appartiendront jamais" (Exile is an identity, a language, a past without a future. Exile is an island where all those who have neither the face of the homeland nor that of refuge gather: those who are too old to forget and not young enough to dissolve, those who remain their entire lives on an island adrift in oceans that will never belong to them).[259] The aforementioned citation provides a dynamic point of entry to the various ways in which Shalmani explores the theoretical concepts of hybridity and liminality as they pertain to displaced identities in *Les exilés meurent aussi d'amour*. Shalmani's characterization of identity as fluid, metamorphic, and mobile – by way of adaptations, divisions, and transformations in a manner akin to alchemy – affords her the occasion to deconstruct identity markers from a transnational and transcultural framework and reconsider positions of

[258] Hafez (Hafiz) is a fourteenth-century Persian Sufi lyric poet from Shiraz, who is considered to be one of the most revered and influential figures of Persian literature. His poetry deals with themes of mysticism, love, and the divine. *The Divan of Hafez*, to which Shalmani references in the novel, is a famous collection of poems acclaimed for its "prophetic powers" commonly recited during Nowruz and Shabe Yalda.
Abnousse Shalmani, *Les exilés meurent aussi d'amour* (Paris: Éditions Grasset & Fasquelle, 2018), 374.

[259] Ibid, 374.

autonomy, which allow for the emergence of new intersubjectivity between cultures. Her conceptualization of identity as malleable and in flux shares points of commonality with sociologist Zygmunt Bauman's notion of "liquid modernity," a theoretical framework in which "'fluidity' and 'liquidity' [are] fitting metaphors when we wish to grasp the nature of the present, in many ways *novel*, phase in the history of modernity."[260] Bauman identifies modern-day society and its cultural, economic, social, and political structures as lacking stability, mimicking the physical properties of fluids, which "do not keep to any shape for long and are constantly ready (and prone) to change it; and so for them it is the flow of time that counts, more than the space they happen to occupy: that space, after all, they fill but 'for a moment'."[261] Due to the resistance to fixity and stability in contemporary globalized societies:

> [i]t is now the smaller, the lighter, the more portable that signifies improvement and 'progress.' Traveling light, rather than holding tightly to things deemed attractive for their reliability and solidity – that is, for their heavy weight, substantiality and unyielding power of resistance – is now the asset of power. Holding to the ground is not that important if the ground can be reached and abandoned at whim, in a short time or in no time. On the other hand, holding too fast, burdening one's bond with mutually binding commitments, may prove positively harmful and the new chances crop elsewhere.[262]

Bauman's insights on human movement and progress offer a fitting framework for exploring Shalmani's ontological inquiries into displacement and identity construction. She opens *Les exilés meurent aussi d'amour* by characterizing the new world in which her fictional counterpart, Shirin, finds herself as lacking both "reliability" and "solidity."

From the very beginning of Shirin's first year in exile, she becomes aware that she has been left without a place to call home and recognizes that physical displacement may eventually

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[260] Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), 2.

[261] Ibid, 2.

[262] Ibid, 13.

sever familial ties. As she reflects on her lingering resentment and sadness upon noticing the neglect of her aunts during her immediate family's reunion with the rest of the Hedayat family members, she expresses a profound sense of disorientation and an irreconcilable loss of rootedness: "Je tendais la main, et s'il y avait toujours quelqu'un pour me la tenir, je n'avais plus aucun refuge. Je ne savais pas encore que mes racines avaient été coupées" (I held out my hand, and if there was always someone to hold it for me, I no longer had any refuge. I did not yet know that my roots had been cut).[263]

In Paris, where "tout le monde semblait très occupé mais il ne se passait rien [, l]es gens parlaient politique, les idées se heurtaient les unes aux autres" (everyone seemed very busy but nothing was happening, people were talking politics, ideas were clashing with each other), life for the family was stagnant, even for grandfather Mahmoud "qui ne travaillait plus" (who no longer worked).[264] While their life in the host country bore little resemblance to the life in Tehran, the family continued to "déclam[er] la révolution alors qu'il n'y avait plus personne pour les entendre" (declaim the revolution even though there was no longer anyone to hear them).[265] The lack of familial connection and persistent quarrels within the household reduce Shirin's life at home to a state of dread and foster a deep sense of alienation. The apartment in which she is to live upon their arrival – "le salon–salle–à–manger–bibliothèque–bureau" (the living–dining–room–library–office) – is equally unwelcoming, which compels her to dream of a "chambre où [elle] pourrai[t] être seule" (room where [she] could be alone).[266] This dreadful reality gives Shirin the impression that, thereafter, she would become a "prisonnière de cet

[263] Op. cit., Shalmani, *Les exilés meurent aussi d'amour*, 19 and 20.

[264] Ibid, 20.

[265] Ibid, 20-21.

[266] Ibid, 18, 35.

appartement, de cet immeuble, coincée sous le canapé à observer ce qu'était devenue [sa] famille: des inconnus qui vivaient entre quatre murs dans un monde qui n'existait plus […]" (prisoner of this apartment, of this building, stuck under the sofa observing what had become of [her] family: strangers who lived between four walls in a world that no longer existed), in which "la révolution s'était incrustée partout, sorte d'oxygène indispensable à la vie. Chacun avait un destin et un rôle politique à tenir, chacun incarnait un idéal qui n'était jamais advenu. Communistes, radicaux de gauche, activistes" (revolution was encrusted everywhere, a sort of oxygen indispensable to life. Everyone had a destiny and a political role to play, each person embodied an ideal that never came to be. Communists, left-wing radicals, activists).[267] Back in Tehran, even Shirin was once "un rouage de la révolution" (an apparatus of the revolution).[268]

Contrary to her taciturn and tolerant father Siamak, "qui théorisait sur 'comment transformer la dictature communiste en démocratie'" (who theorized on 'how to transform the communist dictatorship into a democracy'), and her dutiful and self-sacrificing mother Niloophar, were her authoritative, envious, intolerant yet remarkably beautiful maternal aunts Mitra, Zizi, and Tala.[269] It does not take long for Mitra, the "inaccessible étoile de la féminité et l'âme de la famille [… qui] portait en elle les germes qui allaient détruire la famille" (inaccessible star of femininity and the soul of the family, [… who] carried within herself the seeds that would destroy the family), to spoil their reunification, and for exile to reveal Tala's "vrai visage: son intolérance, son arrogance, sa pulsion de mort" (true face: her intolerance, her arrogance, her death drive).[270] The day after Niloophar's arrival in Paris, Mitra welcomes her

[267] Ibid, 36 and 21.

[268] Ibid, 22.

[269] Ibid, 21.

[270] Ibid, 23.

sister with an argument over the financial matters of the household to which Shirin eavesdrops upon sneaking away from her French lesson when a ruckus suddenly breaks out in the bedroom:

> Mitra refusait de l'argent à ma mère, pour les courses. – Tu n'as qu'à en demander à ton mari. Je vous loge, je ne peux pas en plus vous nourrir! […] – Mais… c'est toi qui as notre argent… La voix de ma mère était celle d'une enfant prise en faute. Elle protestait si mollement que j'avais envie de la battre. – Ah! Revoilà ton égoïsme qui se révèle! C'est toujours dans la merde qu'on reconnaît les siens! Si tu préfères bouffer ton argent au lieu de travailler, vas-y! Je te le donne tout ton argent (elle disait ça avec un dédain prononcé pour l'argent de ma mère) et ton mari pourra continuer à jouer l'étudiant.[271]
>
> Mitra refused my mother money for shopping. – You just have to ask your husband. I house you, I can't also feed you! […] – But… it's you who has our money… My mother's voice was that of a child caught in the act. She protested so weakly that I wanted to beat her. – Ah! Here is your selfishness revealed again! It's always in shit that one recognizes their own people! If you prefer to eat your money instead of working, go for it! I'll give you all your money (she said this with pronounced disdain for my mother's money) and your husband can continue to play the student.

Niloophar's immediate dismissiveness of the argument concerning her own money and her inability to respond to her sister's insolence reveal to Shirin the self-sacrificing nature of her mother and her unwillingness to sever familial ties even when the situation demands it. With an air of confidence and authority, Mitra, the eldest and most accomplished of the Hedayat sisters with whom everyone fell in love, cajoles her docile sister into believing that it is she who will "save" the family in exile. Unlike Niloophar, who is incapable of sensing her sister's manipulative behavior and unethical nature, Shirin becomes skeptical of Mitra's benevolence and recognizes her aunt's eagerness to dominate the household, which lead Shirin to presume that "saving" the family would be taken care of by the inexorable revolutionaries – the two terrorist groups who launched violent attacks on Paris a month after their arrival, "les uns (les méchants Iraniens qui avaient gagné la révolution) [qui] voulaient tuer un maximum d'inconnus dans le métro, et les autres (les révolutionnaires français) [qui] avaient une grosse dent contre les bourgeois qui étaient tous des-putains-d'enculés-de-fascistes, alors ils mettaient des bombes dans

[271] Ibid, 34.

des banques, pour tuer l'argent" (the ones (the evil Iranians who had won the revolution) [who] wanted to kill as many strangers as possible in the metro, and the others (the French revolutionaries) [who] had a big grudge against the bourgeois who were all goddamn–fascist–motherfuckers, so they put bombs in banks, to destroy money).[272] To Shirin's dismay, the Hedayat family was once again confronted by terrorism, as the revolution they had recently escaped from transpired into a new one that was taking place in the streets of Paris. While this is initially a source of concern for Shirin, it eventually allows her to question the ideals and values of her family members by providing her with the necessary distance to rationalize the world in which they all operate. Their reaction to the terrorist attacks differs significantly from what she anticipates – a factor that ultimately enables her to save *herself* from family members who stand as obstacles to her personal growth and progress. The disappointment Shirin feels because of her aunts' eagerness to participate in illicit revolutionary activities affirms Bauman's argument that "holding tightly to things deemed attractive for their reliability and solidity" – as her family had once been regarded before exile – could no longer be "the asset of power." Rather, "[t]raveling light" and not "holding too fast, burdening one's bond with mutually binding commitments [which] may prove positively harmful" could offer a path forward, as "new chances crop elsewhere."[273]

Although Paris was under bombardment, it nonetheless appeared to be a place – unlike the confines of her home – where she might be afforded the chance to explore the unknown. Paris extended its embrace to her, while the arms of her mother and aunts imprisoned her:

> L'appréhension du dehors nous étouffait – même avant les attentats. L'extérieur, c'était la France, cette grande inconnue de moins en moins mystérieuse, où l'on mourrait de mort

[272] Ibid, 24.
See footnote 38 of Chapter 1.

[273] Op. cit., Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, 13.

> violente; c'était cette langue qui devenait certes de plus en plus familière mais dont la pratique se limitait aux murs de l'exil; c'étaient ces femmes et ces hommes si différents mais pas tant que ça, qui portaient tout autant d'idéaux impossibles et pleuraient aussi leurs morts, victimes des mêmes bombes.[274]
>
> The apprehension of the outside world suffocated us – even before the attacks. The outside world was France, that great and increasingly less mysterious unknown, where one could die a violent death; it was that language that was becoming more and more familiar but whose practice was limited to the walls of exile; it was those women and men, so different but not so much, who held just as many impossible ideals and also mourned their dead, victims of the same bombs.

Despite the threat of death, Mitra, her husband Chinois, and their communist entourage decide to partake in dangerous revolutionary procedures that consist of lodging and financing terrorists with banknotes, money laundering, and concealing documents and weaponry. The wit and intuition with which Shirin notices the family's zeal for revolution becomes a prescient sign of the impending disaster that will eventually lead to the demise of the Hedayat family and prompt Shirin to distance herself from her family members.

Although she was forbidden to leave the apartment due to the imminent danger associated with public spaces, the trauma of revolution, war, and familial conflict call on Shirin to explore the world outside of home in order to find her own haven since "ailleurs, d'autres choses existaient qui ne demandaient qu'à être racontées" (elsewhere, other things existed that just needed to be told).[275] Shirin remarks:

> J'ai longtemps gardé les séquelles de ces premiers mois et appréhendé l'idée de sortir de chez moi. Il me fallait vérifier mille fois mon sac, m'assurer que j'avais des chaussettes de rechange, un pull en cas de froid, des pansements et des médicaments, et mon nécessaire de couture miniature et tous les papiers importants, sans oublier quelques photos et encore une barre énergétique en cas de pénurie alimentaire, mais aussi des carnets et deux stylos si l'un venait à lâcher – voire trois si j'étais dans une phase d'angoisse. Et toujours un petit couteau qui devait me défendre contre la folie des hommes. Il ne faut pas faire peur aux enfants, ils ne l'oublient jamais. Toute leur vie, ils traînent derrière eux l'ombre de l'imprévu qui paralyse. Il m'aura fallu des années pour

[274] Op. cit., Shalmani, *Les exilés meurent aussi d'amour*, 118.

[275] Ibid, 40.

> réapprendre la spontanéité. Après la dispute entre ma mère et Mitra, je sus qu'il fallait fuir avant qu'il ne soit trop tard. […] avant que mes parents n'abandonnent la partie.[276]
>
> I carried the after-effects of those first months for a long time and dreaded the idea of leaving the house. I had to check my bag a thousand times, make sure I had extra pair of socks, a sweater in case it got cold, bandages and medicine, and my miniature sewing kit and all the important papers, not to mention some photos and another energy bar in case of food shortage, but also notebooks and two pens if one were to give out – or even three if I was in a phase of anxiety. And always a little knife which was to defend me against the madness of men. You shouldn't scare children, they never forget that. All their lives, they drag behind them the shadow of the unexpected which paralyzes. It took me years to relearn spontaneity. After the argument between my mother and Mitra, I knew I had to flee before it was too late. […] before my parents gave up.

Confined within the apartment by people deprived of empathy and love, the fear of abandonment leads to emotional distress: "[…] l'immobilité de l'exil me déprimait. Ici, il n'y avait rien. Et puis j'avais le sentiment de perdre de l'avance: plus personne ne faisait attention à moi, alors autant partir avant qu'ils ne m'oublient définitivement" ([…] the immobility of exile depressed me. There was nothing here. And then I had the feeling of taking the lead: no one was paying attention to me anymore, so I might as well leave before they forgot about me forever).[277] The thought of estrangement and the fear of falling into oblivion paradoxically provoke a longing to flee from home and her familial milieu – an undertaking she believes is the only solution to resolve the destruction wrought by exile. Shirin thus feels compelled to seek a sense of belonging outside the confines of her home as a means to find "equilibrium" and to reconcile her "scattered pieces" – an expression she uses to characterize her emotional, familial, and physical displacement.

Tantalized by the duffle bag in which she kept the Kurdish clothes that she brought from Tehran but is forbidden to wear in the streets of Paris, and forced to stash away underneath the

[276] Ibid, 36-37.

[277] Ibid, 38.

sofa so as to dissimulate them from her aunts, since "elles trouvaient que cela [lui] donnait l'air d'une gitane" (they thought it made [her] look like a gypsy), Shirin decides to pursue the freedom that these clothes inspired.[278] Upon hearing children's laughter and shouts from a distance on a Wednesday afternoon while left alone in the apartment unattended, without the permission to approach the balcony, the stove, the television, the books (of Lenin) in the library, nor any other corner in the house, boredom strikes. The dreadful day without school does not even spark in Shirin the desire to write in her diary, a notebook gifted by her father in which she jotted down, hidden underneath the sofa, all that she observed around her while the family congregated in the living room. The notebook not only included meticulous descriptions of her mother and aunts but, beyond anyone's imagination, it also contained information on the clandestine activities carried out by the Hedayat sisters and their entourage, as well as details of conversations and disputes between family members. As these observations and memories were transcribed into the diary in her broken French, Shirin picked up on new words and took the time to look them up in the French dictionary, allowing the French language to help define the new world in which she found herself, to transform "la réalité devenue si laide" (the reality that had become so ugly) – "Et c'était exactement à ça que servaient les mots, tous les mots: à colorer autrement les humains en leur donnant une forme nouvelle. La langue française se métamorphosait en baguette magique pour combattre le réel et sauver ce qui restait de l'enchantement de l'enfance" (And that was exactly what words, all words, were for: to color humans differently by giving them a new form. The French language was transformed into a magic wand to combat reality and save what remained of the enchantment of childhood).[279]

[278] Ibid, 38.

[279] Ibid, 59.

While Shirin's captivating "première fugue parisienne" (first Parisian escape) starts of as a thrilling experience of roaming around the city in nostalgia dressed in baggy pants, an embroidered vest, and a traditional Kurdish men's headdress, with the infantile hope that she would be heading toward her "destin d'âme kurde" (Kurdish soul's destiny), and would eventually find "un groupe de musique qui [l']engagerait comme danseuse ([ses] tantes tenaient les danseuses en très mauvaise estime car elles finissaient toujours nues)" (a music group that would hire [her] as a dancer ([her] aunts held dancers in very low esteem because they always ended up naked)), it concludes with an important realization as tears begin to fill her eyes: from that moment forward, she would no longer find herself under the sky of Tehran nor the garden of the lofty home her family left behind.[280]

Life in Paris had already been somewhat transformative and "tout était tellement différent d'*avant*, qu'[elle] en avai[t] oublié la maison où [elle] habitai[t], le jardin où [elle] jouai[t], les amis qu'[elle] ne reverrai[t] plus" (everything was so different from before that [she] had forgotten the house where she lived, the garden where [she] played, the friends [she] would never see again).[281] As the escapade abruptly comes to a halt when having reached a bridge (Pont d'Austerlitz), which she loved since it was her "chemin" (path), she is picked up from the middle of Paris and directed home by Omid, an admirer of Tala and the only courageous male figure in the family's circle of friends capable of directing Shirin on the path to discovering the value of connection and love and the humanism that her family so desperately needed yet lacked.[282] Upon experiencing this brief rupture with the past and the irremediable disconnect from her familial

[280] Ibid, 41.

[281] Ibid, 45.

[282] Ibid, 44.

and cultural roots with "chaque pas [qui l']éloignait de ce qui avait fait [sa] joie" (each step [that] took [her] away from what had been her joy), she is afforded the opportunity to indulge in the beauty of Paris and affirm her perception that "le destin tient à peu de chose" (destiny depends on a little) – that the bridge one chooses to cross, in other words, the path one chooses to pursue, is the result of the individual's daring will to embark on a new trajectory.[283] Thus understood, "destiny" becomes a matter of one's own making.

The family's awkward interaction with Omid upon their arrival home further discloses to Shirin a new set of realizations:

> Cet homme-là ne ressemblait en rien à ceux qu'[elle] avai[t] connus. Peut-être un peu à [son] père mais en plus assuré en plus drôle et en plus affectueux. Le jour où Omid est entré dans [sa] vie, [elle n'a] pas compris ce qui [l']attirait chez lui et éloignait [ses] tantes, [son] oncle et grand-père Mahmoud. Cela ne tenait pas au seul fait qu'il fût juif mais parce qu'il disait ses sentiments, les montrait au grand jour, les étalait sans crainte, les assumait à haute voix. Or, personne, jamais, ne s'était ainsi comporté autour d'[elle].[284]
>
> This man looked nothing like those [she] had known. Maybe a little like [her] father but more assertive, funnier and more affectionate. The day Omid entered [her] life, [she] did not understand what attracted [her] to him and kept [her] aunts, [her] uncle and grandfather Mahmoud away. This was not just because he was Jewish, but because he expressed his feelings, brought them out into the open, displayed them without fear, and assumed them out loud. Now, no one, ever, had behaved like this around her.

From their very first encounter, it becomes apparent to Shirin that, vis-à-vis her family, Omid's beliefs, nature, and values are antithetical – a realization which gradually serves as her antidote to exile. The family's repulsion toward Omid and Tala's rejection of his romantic advances during the night of Shirin's escapade, when she notices the Star of David around his neck, serve as an indication of her family's aversion to those who differ from them and the exclusionary ideals that sustain such intolerance.

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[283] Ibid, 45 and 44.

[284] Ibid, 55.

The night comes to an end rather ironically as Zizi turns on the television, which happens to be airing the American series *Les oiseaux se cachent pour mourir* (*The Thorn Birds*), an adaptation of the eponymous novel by Colleen McCullough (1977). McCullough's novel centers around a Roman Catholic priest named Ralph, who throughout his priesthood struggles to surmount the conflict between ambition and love, two oppositional and irreconcilable forces in Ralph's life. As a vessel of God and sanctity, he must suppress his human instincts for romantic love and sexual desire when he meets Meggie, the woman he ardently loves but to whom he cannot devote himself. While Ralph's ambitions as a "committed" priest bring him ecclesiastic success, he is incapable of pursuing love with the same zeal given that he is bound to the restrictions and responsibilities of the Church. Ralph and Meggie are thus interpreted as representations of the "thorn birds" from a Celtic legend, as McCullough suggests in the novel:

> 'The bird with the thorn in its breast, it follows an immutable law; it is driven by it knows not what to impale itself, and die singing. At the very instant the thorn enters there is no awareness in it of the dying to come; it simply sings and sings until there is not the life left to utter another note. But we, when we put the thorns in our breasts, we know. We understand. And still we do it.' (McCullough 1992). In making life choices we at times knowingly place a thorn in our breasts. Ralph creates his own thorn. He aims to be a perfect priest, but he is essentially a man, he does love Meggie – the forbidden desire. In order to fulfill his ambitions, he must sacrifice love.[285]

In the article "Conflicts between Ambition and Love of Ralph in *The Thorn Birds* in Light of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs," Congmin Zhao explores the tensions between the source of conflict in Ralph: humanism versus religion. In the pursuit of his ecclesiastical ideals, Ralph

[285] Congmin Zhao, "Conflicts between Ambition and Love of Ralph in *The Thorn Birds* in Light of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs," *Journal of Arts and Humanities*, no. 8, Aug. 2014, p. 104.
Zhao's article states that the title of the book refers to a mythical thorn bird in an old Celtic legend. There are additional legends associated with birds with thorns in their breasts. According to a Christian myth, "when Christ was carrying the cross to Calvary a small bird – usually represented as a goldfinch – flew down and plucked one of the thorns from the crown around his head. Some of Christ's blood splashed onto the bird as it drew the thorn out, and the spots of red on the plumage of goldfinches is seen as a symbol of the blood of Christ."
Beyond the Yalla Dog, "The Thorn Bird," *Beyond the Yalla Dog*, 2013,
https://www.beyondtheyalladog.com/2013/04/the-thorn-bird/.

proclaims, "'I was brought up from my cradle to be a priest.… I am a vessel, and at times I'm filled with God,'" while competing with his religiosity, are his worldly ambitions.[286] Thus, in "the attainment of wealth and seizure of church power," Ralph reveals that:[287]

> the conflict between God and love is common to many priests, it is a universal problem. […] The tragedy of Ralph and Meggie is lived through by many other priests and their loves. Hence the falsity and hypocrisy of religions. Nevertheless, the Church is dark and corrupted […]. The Church distorts human nature and consequently destroys energetic and intelligent young people. […] The Church tempts and seduces him. Amid the ambitious men there he is assimilated, revealing the bad qualities of the Church: hypocrisy, darkness and corruption.[288]

The unconsummated relationship between Ralph and Meggie, along with the salient issue at the heart of their predicament, uncannily foreshadows Omid's unsuccessful pursuit of Tala's unrequited love – a pursuit that fails due to Tala's own personal ideals and ambitions, namely, her desire to be involved in revolutionary activities, her hypocrisy, xenophobia, and inability to be receptive to love. Tala's lack of clairvoyance and analysis of the television content that she is indulging in, which stands symbolic of Tala's own failure to relinquish her ideals for the sake of love, is nonetheless evident to Shirin: "[…] mes tantes l'adoraient mais ce n'était pas assez sérieux et politique, alors elles se mirent à la dénigrer quoiqu'il eût fallu être idiot pour ne pas remarquer qu'elles pensaient exactement le contraire. Même moi, je le voyais bien. Omid […] essaya de l'embrasser mais elle le repoussa. Il était comme battu. Il l'aimait. Pourtant, il le comprit ce soir-là, c'était fini. Il n'eut pas le courage de la quitter avant que tout s'effrite. Il était cynique" ([…] my aunts loved it but it wasn't serious or political enough, so they started to denigrate it although you would have to be an idiot not to notice that they thought the exact

[286] Congmin Zhao, "Conflicts between Ambition and Love of Ralph in *The Thorn Birds* in Light of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs," *Journal of Arts and Humanities* 3, no. 8 (August 2014): 105. https://doi.org/10.18533/journal.v3i8.531.

[287] Ibid, 105.

[288] Ibid, 107.

opposite. Even I could see it clearly. Omid […] tried to kiss her but she pushed him away. He felt like he was beaten. He loved her. However, he understood that evening, it was over. He didn't have the courage to leave her before everything crumbled. He was cynical).[289]

In observing her aunts' behavior, Shirin is reminded of the definition of the word "idealist" that she had searched for in the dictionary a few days prior, as well as the sentence she had written, in terms of how it applied to her family. In her broken French, Shirin writes the following passage in her diary: "Je suis pas contente de leur idéalisme. Ils veulen améliorrer l'homme mais pourquoi pas eu? C'est bête. Et très méchant pour le vrai monde. Je détèst beaucoup les idéalistes. C'est beaucoup de caca et de mensonge" (I'm not happy with their idealism. They want to improve man but why not them? It's stupid. And very mean to the real world. I really hate idealists. It's really yucky and a lot of lies).[290] Upon noticing the family's dismissiveness of Omid, Shirin decides "pour de bon que l'idealisme, c'était pourri (for good that idealism was rotten), and while she attempts to fall asleep with teary eyes, she feels overwhelmed by the feeling of shame: "J'avais honte. De moi, de Tala, des oiseaux qui cachent pour mourir, de grand-père, de l'étroitesse de l'appartement, de mon âge à un seul chiffre. De tout le monde, sauf de mes parents. Ce fut un choc. […] Je ne savais pas encore que je venais de rencontrer l'amour. Et cet amour-là, plus qu'aucun autre, ne pouvait finir que tragiquement" (I was ashamed. Of me, of Tala, of the birds that hid to die, of grandfather, of the crampedness of the apartment, of my single digit age. From everyone except my parents. It was a shock. […] I didn't yet know that I had just found love. And this love, more than any other, could only end

[289] Op. cit., Shalmani, *Les exilés meurent aussi d'amour*, 53.

[290] The passage that Shirin records in her diary is riddled with grammatical, orthographic, and syntactical inaccuracies, which resist direct translation into English.
Ibid, 54.

tragically).[291] Shalmani's reference to the Celtic thorn bird is once more evoked as Shirin expresses her disappointment at the birds that "hide to die." The bird, in search of a thorn tree – a place where it may perch to rest – affixes itself to a thorn, its source of death: a gesture that produces the most beautiful melody yet is a lament of impending death. Much like the fate of the thorn bird, Shirin's eventual romance with Omid ultimately proves incapable of survival, despite their futile efforts to withstand the resentment and antagonism expressed by the Hedayat sisters.

The following day, Shirin's "vêtements kurdes disparurent, et [sa] mère coupa à la garçonne [ses] longs cheveux fins – il lui semblait évident qu'il existait un lien entre [ses] cheveux longs et [son] comportement de Kurde ou de gitane. Et [sa] chevelure fut sacrifiée sur l'autel de la superstition comme si, en la perdant, [elle] allai[t] perdre [sa] capacité à fuir l'enfer de l'exil" (Kurdish clothes disappeared, and [her] mother cut [her] long, fine hair short – it seemed obvious to her that there was a link between [her] long hair and [her] behavior as a Kurd or a gypsy. And her hair was sacrificed on the altar of superstition as if, by losing it, [she] was going to lose her ability to flee the hell of exile).[292] While this irrational gesture that is laden with superstitious trepidation is carried out with the intent to curb Shirin's compulsive urge to flee, to her surprise, it is followed by an important course of action that redirects her parents' destructive behavior, namely, their excessive compliance and submissiveness. Niloophar and Siamak become determined to make their own decision when the aunts intervene in the family discussion. In accordance with Omid's proposition yet against Mitra's wishes, Omid is tasked with providing Shirin French lessons and accompanying her on excursions throughout Paris, a pivotal decision that ultimately facilitates Shirin's cultural integration into the host country. Thanks to their friendship that is rooted in compassion, dialogue, and intellectual exchange, she

[291] Ibid, 53-56.

[292] Ibid, 56.

is granted the opportunity to explore what France has to offer through frequent visits to Père-Lachaise Cemetery and the Louvre during her thirty years in exile:

> La France m'offrait cet ailleurs-là, une autre manière de voir et de vivre. Enfermée dans l'Iran de l'exil, je remarquais ce qu'il m'était impossible de discerner à Téhéran: ma famille était obsédée par l'idéal et c'était un moyen d'éviter les émotions. Ce qui était caché par les fêtes, les carrières, l'artifice de la vie quotidienne, m'apparaissait aveuglant à Paris: ils ne savaient pas vivre, seulement discourir. Mais surtout, ils ne s'étaient jamais aimés et ne pouvaient plus le dissimuler dans l'exil.[293]
>
> France offered me this elsewhere, another way of seeing and living. Locked in the Iran of exile, I noticed what it was impossible for me to discern in Tehran: my family was obsessed with the ideal and it was a way of avoiding emotions. What was hidden by parties, careers, the artifice of daily life, appeared blinding to me in Paris: they did not know how to live, only how to discuss. But above all, they had never loved each other and could no longer hide it in exile.

As Shirin spends her childhood, adolescence, and adulthood with Omid by her side, with whom she eventually falls in love and experiences a passionate sexual relationship, she undergoes personal and intellectual growth while uncovering both the turbulent history of her family lineage and France's complex cultural and historical past. Throughout this transformative process, Shirin teases out the dialectical tensions between her family's parochialism and her evolving hybrid identity in exile.

Betwixt in the 'Unhomely' Worlds

From the instant Omid holds Shirin's hand to redirect her home and speaks to her in her native tongue, a moment in which "toute [son] ambition de danseuse nue s'effondr[e]" ([her] entire ambition as a nude dancer collapses), he serves as the link between the interior and exterior, Iran and France, past and present, tragedy and hope.[294] Besides his company at home,

[293] Ibid, 92.

[294] Ibid, 46.

especially during holiday celebrations and family gatherings, namely, Yalda Night (Shabe Yalda), Nowruz (Norouz), and Christmas, Omid fills Shirin's childhood with visits to French cultural sites, sometimes accompanied by Siamak, where he introduces her to French culture and history through conversations about artists, poets, and political figures: "Et c'est ainsi qu'Omid m'offrit des morceaux de France tandis que je lui donnait des morceaux d'Iran" (And this is how Omid offered me pieces of France while I gave him pieces of Iran).[295] Shirin continues, "Omid m'invitait à découvrir l'Histoire par le petit trou de la serrure, et par la chair des vivants disparus (depuis, je parle toujours du passé au présent). […] Omid savait raconter, il me transportait de siècle en siècle comme nous passions d'une rue à l'autre lors de promenades quasi quotidiennes. Les rues de Paris étaient surprenantes, aux frontières invisibles" (Omid invited me to discover History through the little keyhole, and through the flesh of the living who have disappeared (since then, I have always spoken of the past in the present). […] Omid knew how to tell stories, he transported me from century to century as we passed from one street to another during the almost daily walks. The streets of Paris were surprising, with invisible borders).[296] It is in Montmartre, during one of their strolls, that Shirin encounters the social landscape of Paris, which makes her feel "mal à l'aise" (at unease).[297] Although Paris and its rich cultural history become the gateway to her physical and intellectual freedom – "[où] il existait des rues moches, vides et sales, puis soudain, parfois même au milieu d'une rue, l'atmosphère et les visages changeaient, les restaurants gastronomiques fleurissaient toujours aux côtés d'une galerie, d'une boutique de créateur ou d'un antiquaire" ([where] there were ugly, empty and dirty streets, then

Omid is a Persian name that signifies hope.

[295] Op. cit., Shalmani, *Les exilés meurent aussi d'amour*, 98.

[296] Ibid, 95-96.

[297] Ibid, 97.

suddenly, sometimes even in the middle of a street, the atmosphere and the faces changed, gourmet restaurants always flourished alongside a gallery, a designer boutique or antique dealer) – the city's contrasting topography and socio-economic boundaries complicate her sense of belonging.[298] Shirin continues:

> […] j'étais de ceux qui étouffaient à l'ombre de la butte, quand d'autres y demeuraient et ne voulaient pas voir ce qui se jouait à leurs pieds. Paris ressemblait à un millefeuilles. L'Histoire qui transpirait dans ses rues traçait des frontières nettes entre pauvre et riches, hier et aujourd'hui, métèques et français: Paris n'était pas accueillante. Il n'y avait pas d'horizon, pas de perspective pour fuir ou pour rêver. On était bien obligé de s'y faire et de choisir son clan. De s'ancrer pour ne pas être écrasé. (Ce fut une illusion aussi: j'ai longtemps cru qu'en me plongeant dans la France je finirais par avoir son visage. Mais l'exilé n'a pas d'autre visage que celui de l'exil: il ne sera jamais son pays d'adoption, pas davantage que le pays natal. J'ai fini écrasée comme tous les exilés entre un souvenir et un espoir.).[299]

> […] I was one of those who suffocated in the shadow of the mound, while others remained there and did not want to see what was happening at their feet. Paris looked like a millefeuille. The History that transpired in its streets drew clear boundaries between poor and rich, yesterday and today, metics and the French: Paris was not welcoming. There was no horizon, no perspective in order to escape or to dream. We had to get used to it and choose our clan. To anchor oneself so as not to be crushed. (It was also an illusion: I believed for a long time that by immersing myself in France I would end up having its face. But the exile has no other face than that of exile: he will never be his adopted country, no more than his native. I ended up crushed like all exiles between a memory and a hope.).

French historian Pascal Blanchard has addressed some of these questions during a Tedx lecture (TedxPanthéon Assas), in which he provides a compelling summary of how French national narratives and discourses pertaining to public spaces tend to overshadow or downplay centuries long colonial, overseas, and immigration history. Accordingly, he proposes a revitalization of France's treatment of public spaces because there is, as he argues, a "décalage" (a time lapse) between what History is and the ways in which that History is spoken of in the present. This predicament, he claims, is not a coincidence given France's secondary attitudes towards its

[298] Ibid, 96-97.

[299] Ibid, 97.

attachment to public spaces, namely, its buildings, streets, monuments, etc. Rather, this is a reflection of how France sees itself. Blanchard continues by elucidating the connections between the broader issue of a lack of diversity and visibility and its impact on one's sense of "belonging" and "legitimacy." Blanchard contends that this issue cannot be amended through the erasure of History, the revision of its cultural and historical narratives, or the demolition of its sites of memory, but rather through a reconceptualization of the past that engages meaningfully with the present. Blanchard therefore argues that this initiative can only be achieved through the construction of *new* sites of memory and infrastructure, ones with names that commemorate and recall the diverse demographics, identities, and histories of France because "l'espace public est aussi la manière de raconter l'Histoire. […] Vous ne pouvez pas nous demander d'être légitimes dans l'espace public si ce même espace public ne parle jamais de héros que l'on a envie, avec vous, de commémorer, ou du moins que vos héros, ceux d'hier puissent être associés à des héros d'aujourd'hui" (the public space is also the way to tell History. […] You cannot ask us to be legitimate in the public space if this same public space never speaks of heroes that we want, with you, to commemorate, or at least that your heroes, those of yesterday, can be associated with heroes of today).[300] Blanchard further argues that once this initiative is implemented, it can serve as an occasion for citizens of all backgrounds – including women, whose presence, contributions, and legacies have also been excluded from France's public spaces – to stumble upon unfamiliar names and, in doing so, foster curiosity about previously untold histories and legacies.

It is through this very process – the occasional stumbling upon of names as Shirin meanders through Paris with Omid – that she begins to acquire knowledge of French history. While she immerses herself in the rich artistic and literary culture of France and the French

[300] Pascal Blanchard, "Immigration: Une histoire invisible dans les noms de rue | TEDxNewcastle," YouTube video, 20:56, May 5, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EQzvEK7ar-U.

language by way of her burgeoning friendship with Omid, and intermittently her father, who himself shares an admiration for art, cinema, and history, she comes to the realization that irrespective of her desire to integrate, she will always carry the indelible marks of exile. Although the "immobility" of Paris, with its bordered topography and social hierarchies, poses a challenge to Shirin's sense of inclusion, "pour une enfant exilée, c'est un avantage: on visite Paris comme on visiterait l'Histoire, [… on se] découvri[t] des refuges inattendus, des exilés consolateurs" (for an exiled child, it is an advantage: one visits Paris as one would visit History, [… one] discovers unexpected refuges, consoling exiles).[301] For instance, in Paris, one is confronted with Baudelaire's "internal exile" – esthetic, social, philosophical – the "poète maudit":[302] "le poète préféré d'Omid […] le poète des ados […] le poète de Paris et de l'exil: la nostalgie d'une terre qui n'a jamais existé, la mémoire qui empoisonne le présent, les rêves inaboutis, les fantasmes impossible. Ce poète-là plus que tout autre possède tout le bréviaire du déraciné" (Omid's favorite poet […] the poet of adolescents […] the poet of Paris and exile: the nostalgia for a land that never existed, the memory that poisons the present, unfulfilled dreams, impossible fantasies. This poet, more than any other, possesses the entire breviary of the uprooted).[303] Kleitia Vaso's exploration of Baudelaire's reconceptualization of exile in her thesis

[301] Op. cit., Shalmani, *Les exilés meurent aussi d'amour*, 97-98.

[302] Stéphane Cermakian in *Poétique de l'exil: Friedrich Hölderlin, Arthur Rimbaud et Nigoghos Sarafian*, provides the following explanation of internal exile – esthetic, social, philosophical: "un auteur, sans être exilé physiquement de son pays, peut être considéré comme un 'auteur d'exil' – ou du moins, son œuvre, comme 'littérature d'exil', puisqu'elle fait état d'un exil qui a forcément à voir avec la vie de l'auteur et son rapport au monde" (an author, without being physically exiled from his country, can be considered as an "author of exile" – or at least, his work, as "literature of exile", since it reports an exile which necessarily has to do with the author's life and his relationship to the world).
Stéphane Cermakian, *Poétique de l'exil: Friedrich Hölderlin, Arthur Rimbaud et Nigoghos Sarafian* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2021), 19.

[303] Op. cit., Shalmani, *Les exilés meurent aussi d'amour*, 98.

"Modern Literary Exile: The ones who stay and the ones who leave," finds particular resonance with Shirin's sense of dislocation:

> Baudelaire redefined the meaning of exile by including internal exile as a manifestation of the condition. This displacement excludes a physical uprooting and is strictly internal. In addition to this acquired layer of meaning, the question of exile is complicated further by the modern author's assumed distance from the rest of the community [… that] results from the incongruity between his inherent nature and the requirements of the external environment. […] While not explicitly an exilic condition, this estrangement contains elements that resemble facets of exile, internal and physical. [… The artist in exile, with his] privileged dual position as a member and a critical observer of the masses […] possesses the one advantage of participating in a new, strange world, while, at the same time, through estrangement, maintaining a degree of objectivity and clarity of vision.[304]

In a similar light, the exilic condition – the feeling of un-belonging – manifests for Shirin as one that is also internal, within the confines of her home, as well as in the outside world. Nonetheless, this estrangement, as Shirin upholds, can prove advantageous for the exiled subject, since it enables engagement with what lies beyond the boundaries of the norm – namely, narratives and histories that are otherwise inaccessible, invisible, and untold. To this end, storytelling becomes a transcultural and transnational site for negotiating the dialectical tensions between conflicting beliefs, values, and worldviews.

In Paris, "[i]l n'y avait plus de dates pour marquer le temps, il n'y avait plus que de dates pour se raccrocher à la réalité de plus en plus floue de ce qui avait été. […] Dans l'exil, les films vus au cinéma se sont transformés, ils sont devenus, pour [sa] famille, les points d'ancrage de la mémoire" (there were no longer any dates to mark time, there were only dates to cling to the increasingly blurred reality of what had been. […] In exile, the films seen in the cinema were transformed, they had become, for their family, the anchor points of memory).[305] Hereafter, the present and the past – a "monde mythique, aujourd'hui inaccessible" (mythic world, now

[304] Kleitia Vaso, *Modern literary exile: the ones who stay and the ones who leave* (Athens, University of Georgia, 2009), abstract and 12.

[305] Op. cit., Shalmani, *Les exilés meurent aussi d'amour*, 85.

inaccessible) – were to be reconciled through artistic, cinematic, and literary productions.[306] The Tuesday-night film screenings with her aunts became the happiest Parisian gatherings and resembled most her life in Tehran. While watching *Lawrence of Arabia* transported her to the Iranian farewell parties held for her aunts' departure to Paris, and filled her with a sense of comfort since it carried her, in spirit, back to her native country, the screening of Bertrand Blier's *Les Valseuses*, as suggested by her father, became the perfect means to "appréhender le pays où [ils avaient] débarqué – c'était le meilleur moyen de ne plus entendre Mitra" (apprehend the country where [they had] landed – it was the best way to no longer hear Mitra).[307] In contrast with the films the family watched in Iran, the screenings of French films in France, which were according to Shirin, "trop intimiste, trop centré sur le couple, le sexe, l'adultère, l'intime" (too intimate, too focused on the couple, sex, adultery, intimacy), called into question the Hedayat family's perspectives on femininity, sexuality, and the politics of the female body:[308]

> Ce fut un choc culturel monstrueux: qu'est-ce que ma famille pouvait bien comprendre devant *Les Valseuses*? [… le film] commençait quand mon père me mit dans les mains un dictionnaire franco-persan. Mais ma surprise, mon embarras et ma fascination ne laissèrent aucune place au vocabulaire. […] *Les Valseuses* fit entrer les mots et les rires dans le sexe, lui rendant sa juste place, celle du plaisir et de la liberté. *Les Valseuses* désamorça le drame de la chair sans désir, créa le lien qui me manquait, donna un sens aussi absurde fût-il, à toutes les laideurs, toute la violence, toute la grossièreté des

[306] Ibid, 96.

[307] Op. cit., Shalmani, *Les exilés meurent aussi d'amour*, 87-88.
Shirin highlights the importance of the Egyptian actor Omar Sharif's role in *Lawrence of Arabia*. An actor whom she considers to have physical and cultural proximity to all Orientals, is described by her as the "reconnaissance du métèque, le glamour qui leur manquait, leur Clark Gable à eux" (acknowledgement of the metic, the glamor they lacked, their own Clark Gable). See p. 85 of *Les exilés meurent aussi d'amour*.
The 1974 comedy-drama *Les Valseuses* (*Going Places*) has remained a very controversial French film that centers around the criminal adventures and sexual exploits of the rogues Jean-Claude and Pierrot, who rape, steal, terrorize, and deceive the people they encounter while traveling across France. The film's explicit scenes of criminal and sexual violence, particularly toward elderly women and underaged girls, were a source of public debate during its release. It premiered a few days prior to President Georges Pompidou's death, "whose culture minister, Maurice Druon, had been notoriously pro-censorship" and thus, the film became a symbol of political retaliation. See: James Travers, "*Les Valseuses* (1974)," *French Films*, 2012, http://www.frenchfilms.org/review/les-valseuses-1974.html.

[308] Op. cit., Shalmani, *Les exilés meurent aussi d'amour*, 88.

> rapports humains. Voilà ce qu'était la France: à poil et en voiture. Le contraire de l'immobilité et de la prison de l'exil. Fascinant et salutaire. J'étais sauvée.[309]
>
> It was a monstrous cultural shock: what could my family understand when watching *Les Valseuses*? [… The film] began when my father put a Franco-Persian dictionary in my hands. But to my surprise, my embarrassment and my fascination left no room for vocabulary. […] *Les Valseuses* brought words and laughter into sex, giving it its rightful place, that of pleasure and freedom. *Les Valseuses* defused the drama of the flesh without desire, created the bond that I was missing, gave meaning, however absurd it may be, to all the ugliness, all the violence, all the crudeness of human relationships. This is what France was: naked and in a car. The opposite of immobility and the prison of exile. Fascinating and salutary. I was saved.

By instilling within Shirin an appreciation for French cinema and Persian poetry, Siamak fosters the hope that she will grow up to follow a different trajectory than his – one guided by empathy and critical reflection: "Il devait espérer en ma jeunesse et en exil, se dire qu'il était encore possible de m'inoculer le virus de l'amour, que c'était le plus sûr moyen de me prémunir contre les perversions idéologique. Mais il espérait aussi que je ne suive pas sa voie, que je ne réitère pas ses erreurs. Je ne savais pas encore qu'il avait su aimer un jour" (He must have hoped in my youth and in exile, to say to himself that it was still possible to inoculate me with the virus of love, that it was the surest way to protect me against ideological perversions. But he also hoped that I would not follow his path, that I would not repeat his mistakes. I didn't yet know that he had known how to love one day).[310]

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[309] Ibid, 88-90.

[310] Ibid, 90.
Esfaindyar Daneshvar provides the following analysis of poetry's role in Iranian literature and culture: "La littérature classique iranienne est essentiellement constituée de poésie. Traditionnellement, celle-ci est marquée par une forte dimension interprétative moralisante des mœurs, ou encore une forme métaphorique de 'résistance' politique, toujours en réaction à un phénomène social, politique ou moral. La modernité occidentale qui fait également son entrée en Iran par la voie de la littérature occidentale et surtout française traduite se retrouve dans la continuité de cette tradition" (Classical Iranian literature is essentially composed of poetry. Traditionally, this is marked by a strong moralizing interpretive dimension of morals, or even a metaphorical form of political 'resistance,' always in reaction to a social, political or moral phenomenon. Western modernity, which also made its entry into Iran through Western literature, especially translated French literature, is found in the continuity of this tradition).
Op. cit., Daneshvar, *La littérature transculturelle franco-persane: Une évolution littéraire depuis les années 80*, 37.

Shirin later learns from her father that prior to his marriage to Niloophar, he had been in love with another woman. After spending several years together, he informs his beloved – at the age of eighteen – of his interest in marrying her. When the girl's parents become aware of the situation, they agree to the marriage on the condition that he renounce his aspirations of becoming a director. Irrespective of their wishes, Siamak continues to pursue chemistry and directs Chekhov's theatrical plays, as well as those written by his beloved. To prevent the marriage to an "entertainer" – people whom his beloved's family perceive as having a bad reputation – her father sedates her with opium and arranges for her to be sent to Shiraz under false pretenses. Following these events, the couple – perceived by others as being too Westernized and free-spirited – never has the opportunity to reunite. Many years later, when Siamak receives an unexpected call from her informing him of her son's death from cancer, she reveals that in the forty years since her "own death," she never stopped writing – unlike Siamak, who renounced his passion for writing and theater. His beloved proceeds to assert that it will be his daughter who will find the courage to pursue her passions and ultimately to write about their romance. She then confesses to Simak her feelings about humanity, stating that people are monsters and he, a coward. When Shirin learns of her father's failed relationship and his lack of courage to pursue the career and woman he loved, she makes the following observation: "Mon père a vu sa vie détruite par les cathédrales de Téhéran, les certitudes qui broient. Du jour où il perdit son grand amour, il refusa tout idéalisme, Il s'était résigné. Les cathédrales s'étaient dressées devant lui, imposantes, intransigeants, interdites aux amants" (My father saw his life destroyed by the cathedrals of Tehran, certainties which crush. From the day he lost his great

love, he rejected all idealism. He had resigned himself. The cathedrals stood before him, imposing, uncompromising, forbidden to lovers).[311]

Siamak's adamant decision to introduce the film *Les Valseuses* to Shirin despite her young age and the family's hostile reaction, culminates in Shirin's desire to adopt a French identity and to integrate their cultural values, as the world of the French people, in all respects, appeared fundamentally different from the one in which she had been raised.[312]

> Même sur le petit écran, les Français paraissaient plus vivants et plus heureux que nous ne l'avions jamais été. Et ils étaient amoureux. Moi, je ne savais pas ce qu'était l'amour. Personne ne s'aimait d'amour dans ma famille. Ils étaient en couple pour plein de raisons mais jamais pour l'amour. […] Le corps ne servait qu'à parader avec des vêtements minutieusement choisis pour impressionner les voisins et cacher la misère de l'exil. Regarder les corps français, c'était déjà comprendre que quelque chose n'allait pas avec le mien. Je n'avais pas le mode d'emploi, je ne savais pas comment on vivait dans son corps, ni comment l'aimer.[313]
>
> Even on the small screen, the French seemed more alive and happier than we had ever been. And they were in love. I didn't know what love was. No one loved each other with love in my family. They were a couple for many reasons but never for love. […] The body was only used to parade with clothes carefully chosen to impress the neighbors and hide the misery of exile. Looking at the French bodies was already understanding that something was wrong with mine. I didn't have instructions, I didn't know how one lives in one's body, nor how to love it.

The film's explicit scenes and the diverse representations of sexuality in French cinema elicit a profound sense of shock in Shirin. However, this did not constitute her initial exposure to the subject of sex. Through conversations with her father, she had already gained an understanding of the biological and romantic reasons behind why individuals engage in sexual activity: "Il avait dédramatisé ce qui préoccupait généralement les autres enfants qui imaginaient beaucoup trop sans rien savoir du tout" (He had toned down what generally worried other children who

[311] Op. cit., Shalmani, *Les exilés meurent aussi d'amour*, 389.

[312] Ibid, 90.

[313] Ibid, 92.

imagined too much without knowing anything at all).[314] Her viewing of *Les Valseuses* was also not the first occasion that had exposed Shirin to sexual content on television. A few days before the family gathered to watch the film together – in the days leading up to their first (disastrous) Parisian celebration of Shabe Yalda – Shirin, during one of her usual hideouts underneath the sofa, catches a glimpse of the pornography grandfather Mahmoud was indulging in while masturbating. The grotesque sight evokes in her both repulsion and a hope that she would never be left alone in the apartment with her grandfather: "il ne fallait plus laisser le patriarche seul, [sa] mère et Mitra se relayaient donc pour lui tenir compagnie […]." (one should no longer leave the patriarch alone, so [her] mother and Mitra took turns to keep him company […]).[315] Now, more than ever, the patriarch needed to remain under the supervision of his daughters. Not only because he had just survived an opium overdose during the Shabe Yalda celebration, which years down the line led him to uphold the reputation among the neighbors that "la drogue et les Iraniens, c'est culturel" (drugs and Iranians, it's cultural), but also because grandfather Mahmoud was an incestuous molester who prayed on his own daughters.[316]

The erotic scenes in *Les Valseuses* remind Shirin of the pornography her grandfather had watched. However, the film's sexual content does not evoke in her the abhorrent feelings she experienced when she caught him red-handed.[317] On the contrary, *Les Valseuses* becomes one of the films that fosters her desire to embrace her hybrid identity and to reconcile her internalized sense of alterity: "Le porno du grand-père et *Les Valseuses* m'y aidèrent en m'offrant des corps différents, des corps contradictoires, des corps à penser" (The grandfather's porn and *Les*

[314] Ibid, 82-83.

[315] Ibid, 81.

[316] Ibid, 81.

[317] See p. 89 of *Les exilés meurent aussi d'amour*.

Valseuses helped me by offering me different bodies, contradictory bodies, bodies to think).[318] The unexpected incident involving grandfather Mahmoud reveals yet another dysfunctional dynamic within the household: the private space of the home in which the patriarch lives is uninhabitable, as even his own daughters become objects of sexual temptation and prey to the licentious impulses of the old man. The Hedayat family's resistance to assimilation – the successful integration of the Other – which is precluded by their fixation on sameness – is represented through the literary trope of incest, particularly, the incestuous inclinations of grandfather Mahmoud. This dynamic confines the female body to a space in which destructive patterns of behavior and desires lead to self-containment, superstitions, violence, and patricide, ultimately signaling the impossibility of progress in a foreign country. Accordingly, Shirin's exilic condition and her path to cultural integration become attempts to initiate a trajectory that may rectify the family's unprosperous circumstances.

Negotiating Difference in the Liminal Space of Hybridity

Abnousse Shalmani situates the question of un-belonging and in-betweenness at the forefront of *Les exilés meurent aussi d'amour*, particularly through her treatment of the binaries between the private and public, past and present, and Iran and France. To this end, Shalmani's ontological inquiries on identity and belonging call for the exploration of hybridity and liminality from a sociological theoretical framework. Her insights on hybridity find resonance with Bhabha's conceptualization of a "Third Space" in his book *The Location of Culture*. While Bhabha's queries on the dichotomy between the private and public are explored through the condition of the "unhomely," a concept applied to the experience of colonial and post-colonial

[318] Op. cit., Shalmani, *Les exilés meurent aussi d'amour*, 92.

subject's disoriented negotiation of the "borders between home and world, [… this concept] has a resonance that can be heard distinctly […] in fictions that negotiate the powers of cultural difference in a range of transhistorical sites."[319] Bhabha continues, "[t]o be unhomed is not to be homeless, nor can the 'unhomely' be easily accommodated in the familiar division of social life into private and public spheres. […] The recesses of the domestic space become sites for history's most intricate invasions. In that displacement, the borders between home and world become confused; and uncannily, the private and the public become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is divided as it is disorienting."[320] Drawing on the theoretical framework of Bhabha, displaced identities, both personal and collective, can be best conceptualized through a "negating activity [which] is, indeed, the intervention of the 'beyond' that establishes a boundary: a bridge, where 'presencing begins' because it captures something of the estranging sense of the relocation of the home and the world – the unhomeliness – that is the condition of extra-territorial and cross-cultural initiations."[321] Bhabha further problematizes the notion of identifying with a monolithic cultural, social, and national identity through what he calls *vernacular cosmopolitanism*, a conceptual framework in which the recognition of the failure of nation-centered belonging aims to make claims to freedom and equality [that] are "marked by a 'right to difference in equality' [which] as Etienne Balibar suggests, does not require the restoration of an original [or essentialist] cultural or group identity."[322] Bhabha develops the argument further:

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[319] Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 13.

[320] Ibid, 13.

[321] Ibid, 13.

[322] Ibid, xvii.

> Our nation-centered view of sovereign citizenship can only comprehend the predicament of minoritarian 'belonging' as a problem of ontology – a question on *belonging* to a race, a gender, a class, a generation becomes a kind of 'second nature,' a primordial identification, an inheritance of tradition, a *naturalization* of the problems of citizenship. The vernacular cosmopolitan takes the view that the commitment to a 'right to difference in equality' as a process of constituting emergent groups and affiliations has less to do with the affirmation or authentication of origins and 'identities,' and more to do with political practices and ethical choices. […] In keeping with the spirit of the 'right to narrate' as a means to achieving our own national or communal identity in a global world, demands that we revise our sense of symbolic citizenship, our myths of belonging, by identifying ourselves with the 'starting-points' of other national and international histories and geographies. […] If we look at the relation of cultures in this way, then we see them as part of a complex process of 'minoritarian' modernity, not simply a polarity of majority and minority, the center and the periphery.[323]

Bhabha's theories provide a useful cosmopolitan framework through which to unpack Shalmani's decentering of "nation-centered belonging," particularly the various ways in which the novel negotiates rigid familial and cultural paradigms while the protagonist forges a new transcultural and transnational identity that is grounded in her own ethical choices and desires. This detachment comes into fruition only when Shirin learns of her family's heritage and grants herself the right to narrate it in the form of a book – at the end of the novel, Shirin reveals that the author of the book is, in fact, her, and the story that the reader has just read is the product of notes that she has transcribed from her notebook. As Shirin gradually becomes estranged from her family, the boundaries between home and world, past and present, Iran and France intertwine, creating new interstices between two distinct cultures, histories, and identities. Throughout this experience, Shirin learns that these interstices provide a space for recognition, healing, and reconciliation – the ultimate objective of her initiative to write the novel. Upon reaching her thirtieth year in exile and revealing the dark secrets behind her family's demise, she discovers that it is only through this revelatory process that she has claimed her selfhood and

[323] Ibid, xvii and xx.

agency – qualities that empower her to narrate the unspoken and suppressed events of her family's legacy amidst personal, political, and historical crises, namely, internal and geographical exile, revolution (Iranian Revolution), terrorism, and war (Iran-Iraq War). While Shirin loses the familial and cultural bonds she once held dearly, in return, she discovers new means through which to form meaningful connections and to cultivate empathy and love. Her endeavor to embrace humanism also allows her to find a new sense of belonging and system of ethics and values. In her efforts to counter homophobic sentiments, anti-Semitism, and xenophobia – prejudices she observes in some members of her family – Shirin builds authentic relationships with others, irrespective of their ethnic, cultural, national, and religious background through a process of immersion in art and in the shared human experience of love. Immigrating to France thus provides her with the opportunity to liberate herself from the yolk of idealism and totalitarianism.

It is through Shirin's growing awareness of the somatic differences that set her apart from her aunts and their idealized beauty that she begins to feel a profound sense of alienation within her home. Unlike the Hedayat sisters, she is not perceived as the embodiment of Iranian feminine elegance and beauty given that she does not have the long black hair and thick brows that traditionally symbolize Iranian femininity and grace. Shirin is endowed with a "visage sans origine et [des] cheveux de paille" (face without origin and straw-colored hair).[324] As a result, she becomes the subject of repudiation and is deemed unattractive by her aunts since she does not carry any exterior markers of her Iranian origins:

> En Iran, plus les sourcils sont épais, plus ils sont beaux. Dans tous les poèmes, il existe une référence aux sourcils. […] Les miens étant blonds, j'étais forcément moche. Mon visage ne ressemblait pas à ceux de mes tantes aux traits orientaux ronds, épanouis et

[324] Op. cit., Shalmani, *Les exilés meurent aussi d'amour*, 278.

> agressifs – Mitra me trouvait trop fade, trop claire, trop européenne. Ce visage dont je souffrais enfant, puis adolescente, parce qu'il était sans lien avec la famille à laquelle je ne ressemblais pas, fut certainement ma chance: faisant de moi une bâtarde, une "non-reliée," mon visage m'offrait une place à part. […] Le pire était peut-être mon corps: désespérément sec, sans formes, longiligne, nerveux, dénué de sensualité.[325]
>
> In Iran, the thicker the eyebrows, the more beautiful they are. In all the poems, there is a reference to eyebrows. […] Mine being blond, I was inevitably ugly. My face did not resemble those of my aunts with their round, full and aggressive oriental features – Mitra found me too bland, too fair, too European. This face from which I suffered as a child, then as a teenager, because it was unrelated to the family to which I did not resemble, was certainly my luck: making me a bastard, an "unrelated," my face offered me a separate place. […] The worst was perhaps my body: desperately dry, shapeless, slender, nervous, devoid of sensuality.

This reality lends credence to the idea that even nature had estranged her from her "rightful" origins. Lacking the exterior markers of Iranian femininity that would attract the men of her Iranian community, how could she ever become the object of their desire?

> Avant il y eut la douleur de ne ressembler à Tala, ni à une Iranienne. En trente ans d'exil, pas une seule fois je ne fus reconnue comme telle. Je les repérais bien, moi, les Iraniens, hommes, femmes, enfants, que je croisais au hasard des rues, du métro, des cafés. Mais eux passaient devant moi, indifférents. […] Ma mère, incapable de dire son amour ou son ressenti depuis l'enfance, cuisinait pour compenser et sa cuisine-amour était forcément trop abondante, enrichie de tout ce qu'elle avait sur le cœur et qui n'était jamais passé par ses lèvres. Elle me nourrissait et je ne grossissais pas. Elle pensait que je ne l'aimais pas, que je refusais son amour en refusant les kilos. Surtout, elle avait tant enduré, à cause de son physique éloigné des standards iraniens, qu'elle craignait que je ne subisse le même sort.[326]
>
> Before there was the pain of not looking like Tala, nor like an Iranian. In thirty years of exile, not once was I recognized as such. I could clearly spot them, me, the Iranians, men, women, children, whom I encountered randomly in the streets, on the metro, in cafes. But they passed in front of me, indifferent. […] My mother, unable to express her love or her feelings since childhood, cooked to compensate and her cooking with love was necessarily too abundant, enriched with everything that was in her heart and which had never passed through her lips. She fed me and I didn't gain weight. She thought that I didn't love her, that I refused her love by refusing the kilos. Above all, she had endured so much, because of her physique far from Iranian standards, that she feared that I would be subjected to the same fate.

[325] Ibid, 62-63.

[326] Ibid, 62-63.

While this alterity initially constitutes the source of both her and her mother's misery, it later serves as an advantage with which Shirin is able to distance herself from the toxic and destructive patterns of her family. As the "bastard" – the illegitimate and impure progeny of her lineage – she could rightfully lay claim to another identity, one that privileges difference over sameness. Delighted to escape the gaze of Iranians – whom she believes perceive the female body as confined to its biological functions and as a symbol of purity, thus stripped of carnal pleasure and sensuality – Shirin feels liberated from their scrutiny and judgment. She draws our attention to Iranian artistic, cultural, and literary representations of the female body, highlighting the dialectical tensions between the East and West:

> Le corps de la femme n'existe pas en Iran. Ni dans la poésie, ni dans la littérature, ni dans les conversations. Au mieux peut-on, au détour d'un vers, au creux d'une description, lire qu'elle a la taille fine et élancée. Rien de plus. Il n'y a pas de seins, de fesse, de ligne de hanches, de chute de reins. Il y a un visage avec des sourcils et des yeux, des grains de beauté, des lèvres rouges qui s'ouvrent sur une promesse (jamais un baiser, une promesse c'est déjà trop) mais tout s'arrête au cou. Ce refus du corps, les Iraniens l'ont intégré. […] Le grand écart entre l'Occident et l'Orient tient au corps. Là, il y a affirmation d'un corps, ici négation. Là, il y a des corps de femme qui somnolent, qui rient, qui posent, qui dansent, qui rêvent, qui se dressent, des tableaux, des sculptures, des métaphores, des poèmes, des dessins, des symboles, des romans, ici il y a des visages parfois, des regards le plus souvent, des mains qui s'échappent par mégarde des robes qui couvrent l'interdit absolu.[327]
>
> The female body does not exist in Iran. Neither in poetry, nor in literature, nor in conversations. At best we can, at the turn of a verse, within the hollows of a description, read that she has a thin and slender waist. Nothing more. There are no breasts, no buttocks, no hip line, no lower back. There is a face with eyebrows and eyes, beauty marks, red lips that open up to a promise (never a kiss, a promise is already too much) but it all stops at the neck. This refusal of the body, the Iranians have integrated it. […] The big gap between the West and the East arises from the body. There, there is affirmation of a body, here negation. There, there are female bodies lying dormant, laughing, posing, dancing, dreaming, standing up, paintings, sculptures, metaphors, poems, drawings, symbols, novels, here there are faces sometimes, glances more often, hands which inadvertently escape from the gowns which cover the absolute interdiction.

[327] Ibid, 221-222.

The normative codes of conduct and beauty standards Shirin's aunts impose on her throughout childhood, adolescence, and adulthood, often criticizing her attire and dictating how she should properly dress and behave, culminate in Shirin's gradual dissociation from home. Given her "lack of feminine beauty and decorum" and her successive failed romantic relationships, the Hedayat sisters feel convinced that Shirin will never be sought after by Iranian men, keep a Frenchman by her side, nor have the chance to settle down and marry – projections that cause Shirin to internalize negative yet also empowering perceptions of her identity: "il était évident qu'aucun Iranian ne voudrait de moi, que ni mon visage, ni mes mollets d'homme, ni ma poitrine de petit garçon, ni mon mauvais caractère, ni mes pantalons, ni mon manque de goût n'attireraient un Persan. C'était miraculeux qu'un Français ait daigné poser un regard sur moi et je ne trouvais rien de mieux que de détruire la 'chance de ma vie'" (it was evident that no Iranian would want me; neither my face, nor my manly calves, nor my boyish chest, nor my bad temper, nor my pants, nor my lack of taste would attract a Persian. It was miraculous that a Frenchman had deigned to cast a glance at me, and I could think of nothing better than to destroy the 'chance of my life').[328] While Shirin occasionally attracts the attention of French men during her early adulthood – "[sa] famille repoussoir était attrayante pour les Français" (her repulsive family was attractive to the French) – the outcome of her romantic relationships always remain the same, as do the reactions of her mother and aunt Mitra, who "tenait absolument à [la] voir mariée – mais certainement pas à [la] voir 'réussir'. Elle détestait les femmes qui faisaient carrière. D'après le bréviaire de Mitra, le jour où les femmes s'étaient mis cette idée en tête, elles avaient perdu leur pouvoir. Une femme qui fait carrière réussira toujours moins bien qu'un homme et ne retrouvera jamais ce pouvoir intense de domination qu'elle tisse dans son lit" (absolutely wanted to see

[328] Ibid, 281.

[her] married – but certainly not see her 'succeed'. She despised women who pursued careers. According to Mitra's breviary, the day women got this idea into their heads, they lost their power. A woman who pursues a career will always succeed less than a man and will never regain the intense power of domination that she weaves in his bed).[329] Shirin describes Mitra's unwavering curiosity in her marital status as an "instinct familial" (familial instinct), evoked by "un réflexe de caste" (a caste reflex), as if Shirin's fate would somehow predict or influence her own future, since she too shared with Shrin the same family lineage:[330]

> Shirin n'était toujours pas mariée. Qu'entre-temps j'aie gagné mon indépendance, elle s'en foutait. Une femme qui n'était pas bonne à marier, était une qualité négligeable, une demi-femme, une bavure familiale. Ma mère, chaque fois qu'elle rentrait de l'immeuble de Mitra, pleurait à chaudes larmes sur mon célibat qui s'éternisait. Et plus Mitra renvoyait ma mère à son échec de mère, et plus je constatais, avec la ruine de mes histoires d'amour, la difficulté qu'éprouve une exilée à se faire aimer. Il y a toujours un moment où les hostilités s'imposent entre les protagonistes d'un couple mixte. Ce ne sont pas les différences culturelles, les expériences de la vie qui rendent difficile la symbiose nécessaire à la vie amoureuse. Il est facile de sauter par-dessus ses habitudes culturelles. Comme il est stupide de reprocher à son conjoint de n'avoir pas connu la guerre, le bruit des bombes, ou la mort. Non, ce qui rend souvent l'union caduque, c'est la difficulté à accepter le métèque pour autre chose qu'un métèque, à le détacher de sa naissance.[331]
>
> All my relationships led to the same conclusion: Shirin was still not married. That I had gained my independence in the meantime didn't matter to her. A woman who wasn't good for marriage was a negligible quality, a half-woman, a family blunder. My mother, every time she returned from Mitra's building, would cry her eyes out over my prolonged singleness. And the more Mitra reminded my mother of her failure as a mother, the more I realized, with the ruin of my love stories, the difficulty an exile faces in being loved. There always comes a moment when hostilities arise between the protagonists of a mixed couple. It's not cultural differences or life experiences that make the necessary symbiosis of love difficult. It's easy to leap over cultural habits. And it's foolish to blame one's partner for not having experienced war, the sound of bombs, or death. No, what often makes the union obsolete is the difficulty in accepting the metic as anything other than a metic, to detach him from his birth.

[329] Ibid, 280 and 282-283.

[330] Ibid, 282.

[331] Ibid, 289-290.

These intimate experiences prompt Shirin to reflect on the underlying reasons for her family's obsession with ideals and their suppression of what she perceives to be the most essential human qualities: their emotions. Unlike other members of her family, Shirin is intrepid in displaying the true nature of her character, compelling her to courageously reveal her internal struggles as she slowly reaches maturity. The process of rejecting her family's ignorance and fear of living an authentic life, which ultimately inhibits their assimilation in France, encourages her to embrace the possibility of claiming a new identity and accepting the reality and "truth" of life's circumstances – a shift in her perspective that is precluded for those consumed by ideals: "il ne faut jamais regarder la vérité en face et encore moins la dire (la dire, c'est l'accepter et c'est intolérable)" (one must never look the truth in the face and even less say it (to say it is to accept it and this is intolerable).[332] Shirin arrives at this conclusion when she discovers the untold history of her family lineage through Zizi, an incident that marks her rite of passage to adulthood. It is right before her eighteenth birthday that she confirms grandfather Mahmoud's incestuous inclinations, which impel him to rape his daughter Tala, and for Tala, in return, to commit patricide in the midst of the sexual violence. Only by confronting this reality can Shirin have the chance to evince the family's connection to their dark past and to find a sense of belonging amidst the chaos and disorder of exile. Shirin offers insights into the reconciliation of transgenerational memory and trauma:

> Dans toutes les familles, il existe une lignée décalée, désespérante, honteuse, libre. Souvent, les mauvaises graines meurent sans descendance mais il y a toujours un frère, une sœur qui transmet, à ses dépens, l'héritage de la mauvaise graine à ses propres enfants. C'est aussi une vengeance à rebours: la branche officielle ne peut oublier ce qu'elle a rejeté puisqu'elle survit là, sous leurs yeux, sous les traits de leur progéniture. La génétique est aussi farceuse que cruelle. Elle est aussi le meilleur soutien des singuliers, des insoumis, des sans-frontières, et des sans-idéaux.[333]

[332] Ibid, 78.

[333] Ibid, 283-284.

> In every family, there exists a misaligned, despairing, shameful, and free lineage. Often, the bad seeds die without descendants, but there is always a brother or sister who, at their own expense, passes on the legacy of the bad seed to their own children. It is also a form of reverse revenge: the official branch cannot forget what it has rejected because it survives there, under their eyes, in the guise of their offspring. Genetics is as mischievous as it is cruel. It is also the greatest support for the unique, the rebellious, the borderless, and those without ideals.

To this end, Shirin's internalized sense of displacement, combined with her desire for integration, can best be analyzed through the condition of liminality, a methodological and theoretical tool useful for navigating the "[u]ncertainties created by globalization processes [that] have triggered new divisions and antagonism."[334] First discussed in social anthropology by Arnold van Gennep in his study of rites of passage, and later by Victor Turner, the concept of liminality originally refers to "the ubiquitous rites of passage as a category of cultural experience, captures in-between situations and conditions characterized by the dislocation of established structures, the reversal of hierarchies, and uncertainty about the continuity of tradition and future outcomes."[335] In *Breaking Boundaries: Varieties of Liminality*, Ágnes Horváth, Bjørn Thomassen, and Harald Wydra explore the "liminal conditions of irrationality [and how this] [l]ived experience transforms human beings – and the larger social circles in which they partake – cognitively, emotionally, and morally, and therefore significantly contributes to the transmission of ideas and formation of structures."[336] Their interdisciplinary study attempts to understand the processes occurring in these liminal moments when one forgoes a former identity and gains a new one "which lies at the core of 'experience,'" and how cultures

[334] Ágnes Horváth, et al., *Breaking Boundaries: Varieties of Liminality* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2015), 1.

[335] Ibid, 2.

[336] Ibid, 2.

"try to capture the nature of this experience: the 'experience' of 'experiencing'."[337] Accordingly, these rites of passages, or

> rituals that help human beings and communities pass through major moments of transitions in their life cycles […] can be seen as changes of identity […]. The experience of a particular event can cause an identity to change, prepared by the fluidity of the liminal situation. Such a liminal moment is 'unforced,' emerging within the context of everyday life as a sudden challenge, crisis or opportunity. However, once knowledge is acquired about the transformative power of liminal situations, that knowledge can also be deployed to purposefully create liminality, undermine a previous, intact identity, and then literally manipulate the human beings entrapped in this precarious state to acquire a new, ready-made identity.[338]

Shirin's observations on the "mischievous" and "cruel" nature of genetics and inherited traits, which, by way of "manipulations," paradoxically serves as the "greatest support" for the "unique, rebellious, borderless, and those without ideals" during the process of identity formation, echo the perspectives articulated in the aforementioned citation. The trajectory of Shirin's integration and dissociation from her Iranian family, a process that gradually unfolds throughout her "everyday life" and manifests "as a sudden challenge, crisis or opportunity," could therefore be explored through the multidisciplinary and dynamic paradigms of liminality, which "intends to gauge the cultural dimensions in contemporary socio-political processes, especially through crisis in people's lives, loss of meaning, ambivalence, and disorientation. As a fundamental human experience, liminality transmits cultural practices, codes, rituals, and meanings in-between aggregate structures and uncertain outcomes."[339] Arnold Van Gennep and Victor Turner, "who draw on evidence from practically all the studied cultures on the planet," interpreted human experiences as rites of passage, in other words, the processes or transitions in

[337] Ibid, 19.

[338] Ibid, 89.

[339] Ibid, 2-3.

which one becomes an adult and undergoes a series of transformative phases, providing structure to one's experiences.[340] Expanding on their scholarship, Arpad Szakolczai analyzes the value of examining the interrelations between unique, subjective experiences and the collective, and explores the various ways in which singular events acquire meaning when situated in relation to the broader human experiences of others, compelling "us to realize that everyone around us has a similar but also a different viewpoint, which in turn helps us to acknowledge perspective."[341] He resorts to the words of Immanuel Kant to maintain his argument: "if we want to go beyond mere fancy and partiality, we have to resign ourselves to a watered-down knowledge of the most important part of our world: human experiences."[342] Szakolczai elaborates further to suggest that (liminal) experiences, interpreted as rites of passage, "offer a solution to this dilemma."[343] One such example that he draws upon is the rite of initiation – the transition from adolescence into adulthood – which he characterizes as a rebirth of sorts:

> To become an adult, one must go through a series of crucial experiences. An initiation rite paradigmatically condenses these into the time and space of a single rite. It accomplishes maturity […] without ignoring the participatory aspect, as an initiand must not only understand how to become adult but actually do so. This transition to adulthood does not simply happen naturally but has a specific structure, which a rite of passage sets in motion and thus reveals. This can be understood through the three phases, a rite of separation, as a metaphorical, but not only metaphorical – death. Any child must become adult, but this is a most troublesome process both for the child, who must learn to behave as an adult, and the community, which must adjust its own structure and practices to this new reality. To grow up, a child must first undergo a painful separation from family, literally dying 'as' a child. This suggests that an experience is possible only if one first leaves something behind. It supposes some kind of clean slate, a break with previous practices and routines. We become 'children' again when we leave behind a certain fixed role, status, or identity – that is, when we reenter a liminal situation. […] The second

[340] Ibid, 17.

[341] Ibid, 17.

[342] Ibid, 17.

[343] Ibid, 17.

> phase is […] the [c]reation of a tabula rasa via the removal of previously taken-for-granted forms and limits is necessary for the passage to adulthood, both from the perspective of the initiand, who is thereby enabled to make the move across, and for society at large, as the crossing would otherwise be a threatening transgression. However, the resulting situation is just as dangerous as transgression of established customs, as the initiands – and in a way the entire community – are actually moved to the limit. […] In the terminology used emphatically by van Gennep and Turner, 'death' is followed by a 'birth': the child has died, but only to be reborn as an adult. The third phase, the rite of reaggregation, which celebrates this new birth, is indeed used to mark significant experiences in the life of every human being.[344]

During the liminal period, which erodes existing structures yet gives rise to new ones, a series of critical evaluations is initiated:

> [T]he most basic rules of behavior are questioned, doubt and skepticism about the existence of the world are radicalized. However, the problematizations, formative experiences, and reformulations of being that arise during the liminality period proper feed the individual (and his/her cohort) with a new structure and set of rules that, once established, glide back to the level of the taken-for-granted. Liminal periods, characterized by wholescale collapse of order and loss of background structure, push agency to the forefront and produce reorientations in modes of conduct and thought within larger populations.[345]

In the concluding section of this chapter, I will analyze the various ways in which Shirin negotiates the collapse of order through the art of writing and storytelling, transgressive acts that grant her agency as she uncovers family secrets of incest, patricide, physical violence, and rape during the liminal period of her transition into adulthood.

Revisiting the *Janam*: Transcending Destiny as a Pathway to Healing

Les exilés meurent aussi d'amour is a philosophical text about exile in its many forms – cultural, geographical, internal, familial. The book narrates a story about courage, oppression,

[344] Ibid, 17-18.

[345] Ibid, 51-52.

moral resilience, rebellion, and, most importantly, reflects on the value of storytelling, which is inextricably linked to language. Shalmani's novel contemplates the many transformations of the filial and familial bonds that bring people together to form a sense of kinship and community. Exile challenges the foundations of these tenacious familial connections, culminating in what Shirin describes as a reversal of "the balance of power":

> Le mal était fait: mes parents n'étaient plus vraiment mes parents et je savais que je prendrais désormais seule mes décisions, sans m'asseoir autour de la table familiale pour débattre de mon avenir. […] La langue nous sépara encore un peu plus: je ne pouvais pas m'exprimer en persan, ils ne pouvaient pas comprendre le français, nos conversations devinrent laborieuses, notre intimité impossible. Parfois, j'avais l'impression de vivre dans une pension de famille dont j'étais locataire. Dedans et dehors. L'exil fait ça aussi: il tue la filiation, il renverse le rapport de force.[346]
>
> The damage was done: my parents were no longer really my parents and I knew that from now on I would make my decisions alone, without sitting around the family table to discuss my future. […] Language separated us a little more: I could not express myself in Persian, they could not understand French, our conversations became laborious, our intimacy impossible. Sometimes I felt like I was living in a guesthouse where I was a tenant. Inside and outside. Exile does that too: it kills filiation, it reverses the balance of power.

As the title suggests, exiles, those uprooted from their culture, home, language, and lineage, also die of love. While grappling with unbridled attachments and the irremediable loss inherent in exile, they too must successfully navigate the paradoxical human experience of love – a force that can be at once destructive and redemptive. Shirin emerges as the only protagonist to recognize and address this predicament upon reaching adulthood: when exile disrupts order and structure, the human experience of love and connection must not only be cultivated but also challenged in order to mend the resulting destruction. As Siamak and Niloophar struggle to surmount the paradoxes of attachment, exile, and love, and ultimately fail to adapt to the demands of life abroad, they prove incapable of strengthening their romantic and familial bonds, thereby creating an irreconcilable rift between Shirin and themselves:

[346] Op. cit., Shalmani, *Les exilés meurent aussi d'amour*, 192.

> Ma mère, cette magicienne qui ne connaissait pas la puissance de son amour, ma mère qui ne savait pas ce qu'elle eût pu devenir, si toute cette énergie en elle avait été mise ailleurs que dans cet amour indéfectible qu'elle réservait à ses sœurs, ma mère qui n'avait jamais voulu entrevoir ce qu'une vie pour soi aurait pu signifier, ma mère m'arrachait des larmes de colère. […] *Si* elle avait eu le courage de créer au grand jour, *si* elle avait eu le courage de poursuivre ses études de médecine, *si* elle avait eu le courage de reprendre des études, *si* elle s'était un peu, rien qu'un un peu plus aimée. Elle possédait l'imagination et l'endurance, la créativité et la folie, l'amour et la compassion. Elle m'apparaissait comme un immense gâchis, une conséquence du manque misérable d'attention, une esclave de son sexe de femme et de ses yeux bridés. […] Ma mère et ces mille chemins qu'elle n'avait pas empruntés m'apparurent soudin comme la conséquence d'une culture trois fois millénaire où le destin, le janam, le déterminisme, le mektoub, le karma – appelez cela au goût de vos prières – avait une part trop grande, ma mère n'était que le produit d'une culture qui brise les femmes, davantage que les hommes, en les enchaînant à tant d'interdits, tant de malédictions, tant de réputations, tant de regards qui empêchent, aliènent, qu'elle se prennent à croire au malheur de leur sexe alors qu'elles ne craignent que l'isolement, l'opprobre, et qu'elles ne s'autorisent qu'une seule route, celle du sacrifice. Pourtant, elle n'était pas une victime. Elle n'était pas un jouet. Elle était imbibée de préjugés. Elle aurait pu. Elle aurait dû. *Si*. Mais elle possédait tout sauf le désir de s'accomplir elle-même.[347]
>
> My mother, this magician who did not know the power of her love, my mother who did not know what she could have become if all this energy in her had been put elsewhere than in this unwavering love she reserved for her sisters, my mother who had never wanted to contemplate what a life for herself could have meant, my mother was tearing angry tears from me. […] If she had had the courage to create in broad daylight, if she had had the courage to continue her medical studies, if she had had the courage to resume studies, if she had been just a little bit, just a little bit more loved. She possessed imagination and endurance, creativity and madness, love and compassion. She appeared to me as an immense waste, a consequence of the miserable lack of attention, a slave of her female sex and of her slanted eyes. My mother and these thousand paths that she had not taken suddenly appeared to me as the consequence of a culture three thousand years old where destiny, janam, determinism, mektoub, karma – call it whatever according to the taste of your prayers – had too great a role, my mother was simply the product of a culture which breaks women, more than men, by chaining them to so many prohibitions, so many curses, so many reputations, so many glaces which prevent, alienate, that they begin to believe in the misfortune of their sex when they only fear isolation, opprobrium, and only allow themselves one route, that of sacrifice. However, she was not a victim. She was not a toy. She was steeped in prejudice. She could have. She should have. Yes. But she had everything except the desire to be fulfilled in herself.

Shirin expresses this tirade after finding out that her mother has been shoplifting for the sake of pleasing her sisters, who lack appreciation for the unconditional attention, care, and love they are

[347] Ibid, 342-343.

endowed with by Niloophar. Their dismissiveness knows no boundaries. At times, Niloophar's sisters go as far as to avoid her by neither affiliating with nor calling her, while being fully aware that this is a gesture she would be unable to emotionally withstand. Despite Niloophar's inability to accept the ill intentions of her sisters, certain incidents cannot go unacknowledged. On one occasion, Niloophar is apprehended by authorities for theft after being framed by Mitra, though she is not prosecuted. Despite engaging in acts such as stealing documents and information for her brother's communist revolutionary activities in Iran and, now in the host country, committing petty crimes, Niloophar nevertheless evokes sympathy, as everything she does – whether good or bad – is motivated by her unwavering commitment to the loyalty and love she feels for her family. While her shortcomings are not to be excused by her good intentions, they nonetheless portray the extent to which a loving and diligent individual may succumb to fatal attachments for the sake of protecting "sacred" relationships and ideals.

It is worth noting that the fictionalized representation of Niloophar bears a resemblance to Shalmani's mother and her experience of exile – an observation drawn from *Khomeiny, Sade et Moi* in which she expresses admiration for her mother, who, like Niloophar, has a self-sacrificing and nurturing character. In the essay, Shalmani writes that her mother suffered emotionally from being poorly loved and considered by her siblings, for whom she felt obliged to set aside her own studies in order to meet the financial demands of her sisters' education and to tend to the responsibilities of the household. Despite her sacrifices, her brother and sisters fail to express gratitude in return. At times when Shalmani's mother endured emotional pain as immigrant life in France did not bring prosperity, she never received a call from her brother, nor did he allow his children to pay her a visit during their stay in Paris. Their feelings of shame, which were elicited by the condescending standards they imposed on her, led them to believe

that she was a "ratée à Paris. Son appartement était trop petit, son métier trop humiliant – 'assistante maternelle' n'était pas exactement un signe de réussite aux yeux des bourgeois de Téhéran –, sa beauté s'était fanée" (failure in Paris. Her apartment was too small, her job too humiliating – 'childcare provider' – was not exactly a sign of success in the eyes of Tehran's bourgeoisie –, her beauty had faded).[348] It is through her autobiography that Shalmani expresses the suppressed and conflicting feelings of anger and disappointment she harbored toward her mother for failing to address and rectify the mistreatment she endured from family members:

> Ma mère est le résultat le plus abouti de la mauvaise éducation à l'iranienne: complexée et seule. Elle n'a aucune malice et a intégré absolument les interdits, les absurdités et les limites liés à son sexe. Au contraire de ses sœurs, elle n'a jamais maîtrisé l'hypocrisie qui permettait de vivre sa vie malgré tout, à la dérobée. Ma mère savait pourtant que quelque chose ne tournait pas rond dans sa vie, elle savait qu'incapable de prendre une décision sans en référer à ses sœurs, elle ressentait un mal-être qu'elle ne voulait pas me transmettre. Alors, elle a tenté de m'enlever en toute liberté tout en déversant sur moi des tonnes d'amour – fardeau bien encombrant quand il s'agit un jour de vivre sa vie. Elle me voulait aussi libre que son frère avait pu l'être tout en craignant mes provocations, et aussi belle que sa sœur pouvait l'être tout en craignant que je me fasse trop remarquer. Mes tantes ont voulu me faire croire durant toute mon enfance et encore plus tard, que mon père ne m'aimait pas, qu'il préférait les garçons. Pourquoi? Elles n'appréciaient pas davantage les femmes mais les hommes étaient des ennemis. Elles avaient si souvent entendu qu'elles n'étaient *que* des femmes, elles avaient tellement perdu en étant des femmes, qu'elles n'aimaient (mal) que les filles. Il est temps de régler mes comptes ici. Il est tentant d'inscrire en toutes lettres ma rage de tout ce que je peux reprocher aux sœurs de ma mère. Mais justement il y a ma mère. Il y a son amour absolu pour ses sœurs, il y a son incapacité à vivre sans elles. Et si elles sont la preuve que quelque chose ne tourne pas rond dans l'éducation des femmes au pays des barbus – avant même qu'ils ne soient au pouvoir – je dois me retenir […] et ne pas dire tout ce qui m'a brisée, tout ce qui a isolé ma mère, tout ce qu'a souffert mon père. Et pourtant. Ma colère d'aujourd'hui est à la hauteur de l'amour que j'avais pour ces femmes – et que j'ai presque malgré moi *encore* pour elles. Elles ont peuplé mon enfance avec leur chevelure noire, leur féminité exacerbée, leur rire et leur amour. Elles m'ont aimé et je les ai aimées. Mais l'amour n'a pas tenu face à la brutalité de l'exil. L'amour de mes tantes s'est évaporé quand je me suis battue pour l'indépendance qu'elles me reprochent encore. Reste ce que je ne pourrai jamais pardonner: l'abandon de cette femme si vulnérable, si naïve, si pleine d'amour qu'est ma mère.[349]

[348] Op. cit., *Khomeiny, Sade et moi*, 61.

[349] Ibid, 61-62.

> My mother is the epitome of flawed Iranian upbringing: insecure and isolated. She lacks any malice and has fully internalized the restrictions, absurdities, and limitations associated with her gender. Unlike her sisters, she never mastered the hypocrisy that allowed one to live life surreptitiously. My mother knew, however, that something did not run smoothly in her life. Unable to make a decision without consulting her sisters, she felt a discomfort she didn't want to pass on to me. So, she tried to liberate me while showering me with tons of love – a burden that would prove cumbersome when it came time for me to live my own life. She wanted me to be as free as her brother had been while fearing my provocations, and as beautiful as her sister could be while fearing that I would draw too much attention. My aunts tried to make me believe throughout my childhood, and even later, that my father didn't love me, that he preferred boys. Why? They didn't appreciate women any more, but men were enemies. They had so often heard that they were *just* women, they had lost so much by being women, that they (poorly) loved only girls. It's time to settle my accounts here. It's tempting to write out in full my rage at all I can blame my mother's sisters for. But then there is my mother. There is her absolute love for her sisters, her inability to live without them. And if they are proof that something is wrong with the education of women in the land of the bearded men – even before they came to power – I must restrain myself […] and not say everything that broke me, everything that isolated my mother, everything my father suffered. And yet. My anger today matches the love I had for these women – and which, despite myself, I still almost have for them. They filled my childhood with their black hair, their heightened femininity, their laughter and their love. They loved me and I loved them. But love did not withstand the brutality of exile. My aunts' love evaporated when I fought for the independence they still hold against me. What remains is what I can never forgive: the abandonment of that vulnerable, naive, and so loving woman who is my mother.

Shalmani negotiates her conflicted emotions through the protagonist Niloophar and the complex relational dynamics between Shirin and her mother. As discussed earlier in the chapter, the disconnect that gradually develops between the Hedayat family members traces back to their first year in exile. The growing altercations become apparent to Shirin from her early interactions with her aunts in Paris, as she repeatedly witnesses her mother being subjected to their mockery. These tensions compel Shirin to internalize the emotional abuse her mother endures and ultimately to intervene on her behalf in an attempt to "save" her before it is too late. While one might expect Shirin to be the one in need of maternal protection, it is she who asserts a form of authority in their relationship, as Niloophar – whose attention, generosity, love, talent, and vulnerability are continually exploited by her sisters – proves incapable of rectifying their

mistreatment. Instead of retaliating when subjected to their humiliation, Niloophar assumes a meeker and subordinate position.

Another important dynamic among the Hedayat sisters – Mitra, Zizi, and Tala – is their refusal to emulate the tolerance Niloophar expresses toward individuals who do not share their convictions, religion, or ethnicity. Their ignorance reaches extreme lengths – at the time when Shirin falls ill with severe allergies, they interpret her health condition as a dangerous sign of contagion. This becomes an occasion for them to keep her at a distance, perceiving the cause of her "deformed and fragmented" body as the transformation into a "demon and monster" that needed to "be kept at a distance – expelled, ostracized, banned, stigmatized.[350] This perception similarly extends to "bodies whose physical features deviate from the regular and normal. In many ancient cultures, disabled or disfigured children were killed immediately after birth or were banned, kept out of sight. Physical distance was maintained between irregular or disfigured persons and the community of normals to prevent contagion and contamination."[351] Mirroring these antiquated perspectives, Shirin's aunts refuse to lend a helping hand or provide a space for Shirin to recuperate, forcing her family to move into the home of their Jewish family friend Hannah, "une pure cartésienne, un pur produit de l'école française avec ses contradictions, la collaboration au milieu, là, comme une plaie, la raison érigée en boussole, le questionnement infini de la liberté […]. [E]lle pensait à hauteur d'homme. Pour elle, c'était ça l'humanisme: ne pas penser aux hommes tels qu'ils devraient être pour être heureux, mais tels qu'ils sont malheureux" (a pure Cartesian, a pure product of the French school with its contradictions, collaboration in the middle, there, like a wound, reason elevated to a compass, the infinite questioning of freedom […]. She thought from a human perspective. For her, this was

[350] Op. cit., *Les exilés meurent aussi d'amour*, 174.

[351] Op. cit., Horváth, *Breaking Boundaries: Varieties of Liminality*, 64.

humanism: not thinking of men as they should be to be happy, but how they are when they are unhappy).[352] Shirin eventually recognizes that Mitra's rejection of her and the friends with whom her parents interact – manifested through her fear of "contagion" – is a reflection of her aunt's intolerance and aversion to change, which, in turn, confirm Hannah's philosophies on human nature: "les mauvaises idées sont vicieuses, c'est pour ça qu'elles sont plus contagieuses" (bad ideas are pernicious, that's why they are more contagious) – "le problème était toujours le même depuis le premier jour lointain des hommes qui couvrirent la terre de frontières pour se distinguer par la langue, le pagne, la couleur des paumes" (the problem has always been the same since the first distant day when men covered the earth with borders to distinguish themselves by language, loincloth, and the color of their palms).[353] Mitra's desire to isolate Shirin due to her openness to others – an idea she deems pernicious – represents her own resistance to initiating meaningful ethical and ideological progress. Despite the profound emotional and physical suffering Shirin endures without the support of her aunts, who cloister themselves in their apartments, this experience becomes an occasion for her to question the ethical and moral foundations of her milieu, as she indulges in the company and affection of Omid and Hannah. Mitra's dismissiveness reinforces Shirin's convictions: "mon corps déformé et éclaté, me permettait de me récréer, de me donner un autre visage, un autre destin. Je ne savais plus qui j'étais ni à quoi ressembler. Je perdais mon corps et mon visage" (my deformed and fragmented body allowed me to recreate myself, to give myself another face, another destiny. I no longer knew who I was or what I looked like. I was losing my body and my face).[354] While Omid offered Shirin refuge through tales he narrated of historical events, Tala, on the other hand, sought to distance herself

[352] Op. cit., Shalmani, *Les exilés meurent aussi d'amour*, 234 and 236-237.

[353] Ibid, 235 and 236.

[354] Ibid, 174.

from Omid by provoking feelings of animosity: "elle était comme ses sœurs, comme son pays de naissance, elle ne supportait pas qu'un étranger assiste aux ravages de la maladie. […] Je n'ai pas souvenir qu'elle m'ait tenu la main une seule fois – elle aussi devait me croire contagieuse. […] [E]n quittant la chambre d'Hannah, elle le croisa et lui lança: 'Il y a trop de juifs autour de cette enfant' (she was like her sisters, like her country of birth, she couldn't stand the idea of a stranger witnessing the ravages of illness. […] I don't remember her holding my hand even once – she must have thought I was contagious too. […] [U]pon leaving Hannah's room, she crossed paths with him and said, 'There are too many Jews around this child').[355] Such antagonism is expressed by the Hedayat sisters on multiple occasions, both in their homeland and abroad. In Iran, they could not withstand the friendship Niloophar shared with her childhood best friend Wanda, who was a Polish Jew and a descendant of a Holocaust survivor. To sabotage the friendship, the sisters would put salt in Wanda's tea and cow dung in her shoes, while their brother Behrouz would forbid her entrance to their home since he believed that "elle avait une mauvaise influence sur [Niloophar]: elle lui faisait lire de la littérature juive" (she had a bad influence on [Niloophar]: she made her read Jewish literature).[356] Although Niloophar and Wanda's bond endures the Hedayat family's manipulations and cruelty, it proves incapable of resisting the destructive force of exile:

> Wanda était la seule personne au monde qui s'était vraiment intéressée à ma mère à chaque étape de sa vie. […] Les premières années, ma mère l'appela toutes les semaines, puis de moins en moins, puis plus du tout. Leurs existences étaient trop éloignées, et ma mère trop embourbée dans les filets de son malheur parisien. Peut-être ne pouvait-elle pas avouer à Wanda que ses sœurs étaient cruelles. C'eût été les trahir et elle n'avait rien d'autre à raconter.[357]

[355] Ibid, 174-175.

[356] Ibid, 52.

[357] Ibid, 52.

> Wanda was the only person in the world who was truly interested in my mother at every stage of her life. […] For the first few years, my mother called her every week, then less and less, then no more. Their lives were too far apart, and my mother too mired in the web of her Parisian misfortune. Maybe she couldn't tell Wanda that her sisters were cruel. It would have been a betrayal and she had nothing else to say.

Even the thought of confiding in her friend about her sisters' inhumanity would be regarded as an act of disloyalty toward her family. In spite of the maltreatment she endures from her sisters, Niloophar goes to great lengths to uphold their kinship and seek their approval even while knowing they perceive her as a failure. Niloophar tirelessly expresses her love in silence and maintains a serene and nurturing demeanor, despite her efforts going unnoticed. Her steadfast acts of service are motivated not only by a desire to preserve genuine familial connection but also by the fear of losing their affection. Through various acts of manipulation, Niloophar was exploited in Iran as a tool in her family's revolutionary activities, burdened with dangerous tasks that her siblings were unwilling to undertake. Now, in Paris, she found herself refurbishing her sisters' apartments, cooking, cleaning, and even stealing to feed and clothe them. All of Niloophar's efforts go unacknowledged by her sisters and sometimes they are attributed to Mitra, who seeks the spotlight and enjoys receiving accolades from others.

While renovating the Hedayat family's shabby apartment upon their family reunification, Shirin realizes that her mother suppresses an unmatched talent, one that is akin to that of a "magician." Unlike her sisters, who waste away their artistic talents by building statuettes to transport clandestine material for terrorist activities, Niloophar invests all her creative abilities into refurbishing their home as a means to express her unwavering love for her unappreciative sisters. Niloophar not only has the potential to transform a banal room with her hard work but also the ability to cultivate empathy, hope, and love even when others abandon it. When Shirin comes to this realization, she perceives her mother as an "alchemist," "un elfe, une créature féerique qui possédait le don de rendre beau le laid. […] C'était les seules heures où elle semblait

profondément heureuse. Elle ponçait, clouait, sciait, soudait et il n'y avait alors plus aucune trace de souffrance sur son visage. Je pris l'habitude de la regarder dans son laboratoire, admirant sa patience, sa concentration, ses choix, ses mains qui n'hésitaient jamais, sa volonté qui ne connaissait pas l'impossible" (an elf, a fairy creature who possessed the gift of making the ugly beautiful. […] Those were the only hours when she seemed deeply happy. She sanded, nailed, sawed, welded and then there was no longer a trace of suffering on her face. I got into the habit of watching her in her laboratory, admiring her patience, her concentration, her choices, her hands that never hesitated, her will that knew nothing of the impossible).[358] As Shirin observes her mother transform the family's modest apartment into a more welcoming home, Shirin recalls the word alchemist that she had once looked for in the dictionary while attempting to articulate, through words, her reality:

> Devant les colonnes mystérieuses du dictionnaire, je cherchais des mots à mettre sur ce monde inconnu qui se déployait autour des trois appartements familiaux de l'exil, et c'est ainsi que je découvris que ma mère était une authentique alchimiste. Capable de transformer le plomb en or. […] Comme ma mère le faisait avec les vieux meubles cassés, je transformais la réalité devenue si laide, je la sublime par les nouveaux mots que je découvrais chaque jour dans le dictionnaire, qui devint mon laboratoire à moi.[359]
>
> In front of the mysterious columns of the dictionary, I looked for words to put on this unknown world which unfolded around the three family apartments of exile, and this is how I discovered that my mother was an authentic alchemist. Capable of transforming lead into gold. […] Like my mother did with old broken furniture, I transformed the reality that had become so ugly, I sublimated it with the new words that I discovered every day in the dictionary, which became my own laboratory.

In the chapter "The Genealogy of Political Alchemy" of *Breaking Boundaries: Varieties of Liminality*, Ágnes Horváth explores the human, social, and political impact of technology, particularly how the genealogy of metallurgy and the discipline of alchemy can be interpreted as a source of identity change and transformation. Horváth's etymological interpretation of the

[358] Ibid, 59 and 58.

[359] Ibid, 58-59.

Greek term "metallurgy" finds particular resonance with Shirin's observations of her mother's labor as a process which extracts the impurities of the physical objects and spaces in which they live, as well as her own ability to use the French language as a means to transform her experience and perception of reality:

> [Metallurgy] "means 'one after one,' alluding to the rite of passage that stones are subjected to in being transformed into metals: the technique of purifying metal alters the character of the original ores, first by weakening and then by mounting them, imposing on them a new property that now has an eternal battery of growth in its deprivation of self-support. This growing imitation of creation provides the ultimate justification for alchemy, as it attempts to assert itself against boundaries and break free of constraints toward new desires and expanding possibilities.[360]

Much like metallurgical processes, which involve breaking down and refining raw materials to bring about transformation, Niloophar's hobbies yield a similar effect, turning what was once "ugly" into something "beautiful" by way of sanding, nailing, sawing, and welding, replicating the alchemical process of turning "lead into gold." The healing and meditative aspects associated with this process, occurring while Niloophar is immersed in her work, is analogous to what Giesen describes as the "transformation of garbage into usable, profane things [which] follows the logic of separation and elementarization. Disgusting garbage is removed to a space beyond our perception. In this enclosed space the decay of garbage is accelerated until it dissolves into its elementary components. This elementary stuff, now rid of any memory of its previous form, can be encountered again as useful raw material that no longer causes disgust."[361] Giesen's depiction of waste as an entity that "represents the death of things, which has to be hidden from sight" is particularly interesting to explore during liminal and in-between moments, which he

[360] Op. cit., Horváth, *Breaking Boundaries: Varieties of Liminality*, 78.

[361] Ibid, 63.

characterizes as a "fundamental ambiguity or indissoluble remainder that resists any attempt at unambiguous classification."[362] Giesen elaborates further:

> Even though this inbetweenness is inherent and unavoidable in the operation of classifying, ordering, and coding the world, it is disregarded, invisible, and silenced in the order generated by classification. In the natural attitude of everyday life, the world presents itself as neatly ordered. Cultural classification, however, is somehow weirdly aware of this elementary but excluded inbetweenness and responds to it by producing order even in the realm that seems to escape it. It classifies the unclassifiable, describes different kinds of ambiguity, and delineates inbetweeness through symbolic figures. It classifies garbage, imagines monsters, and tells the story of the uncanny behind the boundary.[363]

Giesen's reconceptualization of garbage stands as an "example of attempts to cope with this elementary ambiguity."[364] The moments during which Niloophar works tirelessly, she finds herself alone, without the company of her sisters, reorganizing their environment: "Elle reprit son marteau et sa perceuse, ses peintures et son imagination, et elle répara tout, harmonisant l'ensemble. Nous découvrîmes alors le vrai goût de ma mère: en Iran, puis à Paris chez Mitra, elle suivait la ligne traditionnelle, mais soudain, abandonnée par ses sœurs, son goût se déploya en toute liberté. […] Ma mère et son bon goût occidental dépleurent à ses sœurs" (She took up her hammer and drill, her paints and her imagination, and she repaired everything, bringing harmony to the whole. We then discovered my mother's true taste: in Iran, and later in Paris at Mitra's, she followed the traditional line, but suddenly, abandoned by her sisters, her taste unfolded freely. […] My mother and her good Occidental taste abhorred her sisters).[365] Cooking, cleaning, and refurbishing all become efforts to navigate the reality of exile and, at times, an attempt to express her desire for integration. Shirin asserts: si je devenais familière de la cuisine

[362] Ibid, 62-63.

[363] Ibid, 63.

[364] Ibid, 63.

[365] Op. cit., Shalmani, *Les exilés meurent aussi d'amour*, 179-180.

française [c'était] grâce au talent de ma mère et à son désir d'intégration" (if I became familiar with French cuisine [it was] due to my mother's talent and her ambition for integration).[366] Unlike Niloophar, who enjoys cooking traditional Iranian meals and occasionally infuses her dishes with French flavors, her sisters show no interest in such "laborious" activities; and when she prepares beef bourguignon and fois gras, she is reprimanded: "Elles se moquaient des efforts de ma mère pour être française. Et quand j'avais demandé à mon père pourquoi elle était davantage française que ses sœurs, il avait répondu: 'Elle ne l'est pas, elle fait juste mieux semblant'" (They ridiculed my mother's efforts to be French. And when I asked my father why she seemed more French than her sisters, he replied: 'She isn't, she's just better at pretending').[367]

While language serves as a means for Shirin to broaden her perspectives and break from traditions and constraints, Niloophar, by contrast, fails to follow this trajectory due to external pressures. Even years after their migration, she shows no competence in the French language and eventually relies on Shirin for the household's bureaucratic matters. This becomes a source of concern for Shirin because the reversal of roles "perturba tout l'équilibre affectif et familial: ils avaient besoin de moi pour survivre dans le nouveau pays, je n'avais plus besoin d'eux pour vivre" (perturbed all emotional and familial balance: they needed me to survive in the new country, I no longer needed them to live).[368] Niloophar and Siamak's ineptitude in this regard – "ne connaissant pas les codes que [Shirin] maîtrisai[t] mieux qu'eux" (not knowing the codes that [Shirin] mastered better than them) – results in their inability to provide guidance in a

[366] Ibid, 273.

[367] Ibid, 201.

[368] Ibid, 191.

foreign country.[369] This circumstance, Shirin claims, leads to her mother's internalized feelings of shame and suffering, which in turn reduce her mother to silence, as she feels embarrassed to ask her adolescent daughter for assistance. Witnessing her mother silently suffer leads to her own emotional distress.

The gulf between Niloophar and her daughter is so apparent that Shirin's teachers and classmates assume that she is her nanny: "je voulus rectifier tout de suite mais ma mère m'en empêcha. […] [E]t alors que je retenais mes larmes pour ne pas rajouter à son malheur, que c'était mieux je n'aie pas de lien avec elle, ni même à supporter, en plus de tout le reste, une mère qui ne se montrait pas à la hauteur de la France" (I wanted to rectify it right away, but my mother prevented me from doing so. […] [A]nd as I held back my tears so as to not add to her sorrow, I realized it was better not to have any connection with her, nor to endure, on top of everything else, a mother who did not measure up to France).[370] This experience, in turn, becomes a source of embarrassment for Shirin among the few friends she has at school, evoking feelings of regret as she recognizes the wasted potential of her mother.

While Shirin is often filled with disappointment, she nonetheless shows appreciation for her mother's creative and transformative talents from the very beginning of their exile – "elle savait tout faire avec ses mains, la couture, le bricolage et le vol à l'étalage" (she knew how to do everything with her hands: sewing, DIY projects, and shoplifting).[371] Despite Niloophar's lack of successful integration, Shirin recognized her mother's efforts and her deep longing to secure a

[369] Ibid, 191.

[370] Ibid, 191-192.

[371] Ibid, 340.

better life for her family, a wish she makes during each celebration of Nowruz.[372] Her efforts are demonstrated through her keen ability to swiftly acquire new skills and her dexterity in cooking and crafts. Even while Shirin "à l'intérieur [se] sen[t] tétanisée, malade de [s]a vie d'exilée," (inside feels paralyzed, sick from her life as an exile), her mother's diligence serves as a source of encouragement throughout her integration.

Accordingly, an interesting link can be drawn to Horváth's analysis of the interpretations of alchemy and its relation to identity change in Chinese philosophy. Around 600 BC, Chinese alchemists, "a peculiar class of image-makers[, perceived] "transformation processes as an imitation of nature":[373]

> Chinese thinkers attributed a vast cosmological significance to this technology, believing they were purging the natural world of its impurities and thereby redeeming it (Riesebrodt 2009; Asad 1993). […] As a new discipline, alchemy later passed through many transformations, but identity change remained at the forefront. Gold was considered a paradisiacal metal, and its successful production, or the artificial creation of a like image, necessarily evoked its connotation with the promised land flowing with milk and honey, the land of youthfulness.[374]

The complex shifts and processes of identity change begin during the family's first year in exile when Shirin notices her mother's sacrificial and hardworking nature, as she observes her prepare for their first Parisian Shabe Yalda (Night of Rebirth) – a festival celebrated on the night of the winter solstice with family and friends that traditionally consists of reading the poems of Hafez, a fourteenth-century Persian mystic poet. The gathering is "a night of welcoming. A night of love, light, and rebirth of the sun […] in the hope of a bright sunrise and longer days to come."[375] Unfortunately, in their case, the festivity ends on a rather negative note as grandfather Mahmoud

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[372] See p. 112 of *Les exilés meurent aussi d'amour*.

[373] Op. cit., Horváth, *Breaking Boundaries: Varieties of Liminality*, 82.

[374] Ibid, 82.

[375] Sayed Mohammad Nabi, "Shabe Yalda: The Longest Night of the Year," *Natakallam*, https://natakallam.com/blog/shabe-yalda-the-longest-night-of-the-year/.

is rushed to the hospital from an opium overdose. The plot is once again tinged with irony, this time, during a special holiday that commemorates the passing of the longest night of the year. The celebration of an antique Persian Zoroastrian holiday that has withstood the test of time and conquests from foreign invasions is ruined by the patriarch by his deliberate actions and near death, an event which foreshadows the family's "bad luck" and the impending estrangement from their cultural and familial roots and patrimony.

"Après moult cris, portes qui claquent, larmes et chantage au suicide, Omid [est] également convié" (After many screams, slamming doors, tears and suicide blackmail, Omid [is] also invited) for the lavish dinner along with a few Iranians and their French neighbors (to grandfather Mahmoud's dismay).[376] Gathered around the table to eat "la bouffe iranienne, du dépaysement dans l'assiette" (Iranian food, a disorientation on the plate), arduously prepared by Niloophar, Siamak – the most skilled reciter of poetry in the family – is summoned to read Hafez's *ghazal 250*:[377] "une sorte d'hymne familial maudit. Celui qui impose le silence. Celui

[376] Op. cit., Shalmani, *Les exilés meurent aussi d'amour*, 61.

[377] Ibid, 68 and 76-77.
Le Divân, Ghazal n° 250 Ne te désole pas!: Joseph, qui fut perdu, reviendra en Canaan, ne te désole pas!/ Un jour la cabane aux chagrins deviendra roseraie, ne te désole pas!/ L'état de ce cœur affligé va s'améliorer, ne te désole pas!/ Et cette tête troublée va s'apaiser, ne te désole pas!/ Si deux jours durant la rotation du firmament n'est pas allée, à notre gré,/ la marche du Temps n'est pas toujours de même ne te désole pas!/ Si le printemps de la vie se déploie sur la banquette des parterres,/ Oiseau chanteur, tu te couvriras de l'ombrelle de la Rose, ne te désole pas!/ Si le torrent du néant arrache les fondements de l'existence, mon cœur,/ puisque Noé est ton pilote, du Déluge ne te désole pas!/ Hé! ne désespère pas: tu n'es pas au fait du secret du monde invisible./ Sous le voile sont les jeux dérobés, ne te désole pas!/ Si par passion de la Kaaba tu veux marcher au désert,/ si l'épine de la ronce t'aiguillonne, ne te désole pas!/ Si même l'étape est fort périlleuse et le but très éloigné,/ Nul chemin n'est sans fin, ne te désole pas!/ Notre situation, séparés de l'Aimé, harcelés par Son gardien,/ Dieu qui inverse les situations la connaît toute, ne te désole pas!/ Hâfez, au recoin de la pauvreté, dans la solitude des sombres nuits,/ tant que tu t'astreindras à prier, à étudier le Coran, ne te désole pas!
The Divan, Ghazal No. 250 Do Not Be Dismayed!: Do not be dismayed! Joseph, who was lost, will return to Canaan, do not be dismayed!/ One day, the hut of sorrows will become a rose garden, do not be dismayed!/ The state of this afflicted heart will improve, do not be dismayed! And this troubled mind will be calmed, do not be dismayed!/ If for two days the rotation of the firmament has not gone as we wished,/ The march of Time is not always the same, do not be dismayed!/ If the spring of life unfolds on the bench of flowerbeds,/ O singing bird, you will be covered by the umbrella of the Rose, do not be dismayed!/ If the torrent of nothingness tears away the foundations of existence, my heart,/ Since Noah is your pilot, do not be dismayed by the Flood!/ Hey! Do not despair: you are not aware of the secret of the invisible world./ Under the veil are hidden games, do not be dismayed!/ If by passion for the Kaaba you want to walk in the desert,/ If the thorn of the bramble pricks you, do not dismayed!/ Even if the journey is very perilous and the goal very distant,/ No path is endless, do not be dismayed!/

dont [ils] ne récit[ent] jamais les vers" (a sort of cursed family anthem. The one that imposes silence. The one whose verses [they] never recite).[378] Shirin proceeds to elaborate on the importance of Hafez's collection of poetry, explaining both the methods of its recitation by the reader and its interpretation by the listener:

> Cet homme inspiré a su réunir dans un unique recueil de poèmes, tout l'éventail des questions et des espoirs, des peurs et des joies, de l'amour charnel et divin, de l'ivresse et de la piété, tout ce qui un jour ou l'autre, prend les hommes à la gorge et les pousse à interroger le ciel, un imam, un père, une mère, une étoile filante, un livre saint pour savoir de quoi sera fait demain. Depuis le XIV[e] siècle, à chaque solstice d'hiver, les Iraniens, tous les Iraniens, analphabètes compris, se saisissent de l'unique livre de poésie de Hâfez et chacun, tour à tour, demande au poète de l'éclairer. Le personnage le plus sage – ou plus exactement celle qui sait tout bonnement lire – ouvre le recueil au hasard et lit le poème censé offrir une réponse, souvent énigmatique. Chaque *ghazal* s'achève par une strophe qui associe le poète avec l'"interrogeant". Dans la pensée soufie, le poète et le récitant ne font qu'un:
>
> *Au désert de la Quête, il y a danger de toute part,*
> *Mais Hâfez, cœur perdu, avance paisible vers Ton amitié.*
>
> Hâfez est l'interrogeant, c'est lui qui, cœur *perdu, avance paisible*… L'interprétation peut aller de la résolution d'une histoire d'amour à un questionnement sur la foi, à un problème de stérilité, etc. Chacun adapte les vers sacrés de Hâfez à ses tourments […].[379]

> This inspired man knew how to bring together in a single collection of poems, the whole range of questions and hopes, fears and joys, carnal and divine love, intoxication and piety, everything that one day or another, takes men by the throat and pushes them to question the sky, an imam, a father, a mother, a shooting star, a holy book to know what tomorrow will bring. Since the fourteenth century, at each winter solstice, Iranians, all Iranians, including illiterates, have taken up Hafez's unique book of poetry and each, in turn, asks the poet to enlighten it. The wisest person – or more precisely the one who simply knows how to read – opens the collection at random and reads the poem that is supposed to offer an answer, often enigmatic. Each ghazal ends with a stanza which associates the poet with the "questioner". In Sufi thought, the poet and the reciter become one:
>
> *In the desert of the Quest, there is danger on all sides,*
> *But Hafez, with a lost heart, advances peacefully towards Your friendship.*

Our situation, separated from the Beloved, harassed by His keeper,/ God, who reverses situations, knows it all, do not be dismayed!/ Hafez, in the corner of poverty, in the solitude of dark nights,/ As long as you compel yourself to pray, to study the Quran, do not be dismayed!
For access to the poem, see: https://patertaciturnus.wordpress.com/tag/hafez-de-chiraz/.

[378] Op. cit., Shalmani, *Les exilés meurent aussi d'amour*, 73.

[379] Ibid, 73-74.

> Hafez is the questioner, it is he who, with a lost heart, moves forward peacefully… The interpretation can range from the resolution of a love story to a questioning of faith, to a problem of sterility, etc. Everyone adapts the sacred verses of Hafez to their torments […].

The Hedayat family's interpretation of the poem is somber, as it traces the origins of grandfather Mahmoud's incestuous nature and the family's cyclic repetition of curses: "la malédiction avait commencé bien avant: mon arrière-arrière-arrière-grand-père avait posé une banale question à Hâfez un soir d'hiver, et le lendemain, pouf! Il avait disparu" (the curse had started long before: my great-great-great-grandfather had asked Hafez a trivial question one winter evening, and the next day, poof! He disappeared).[380] From that moment forward, a tragic family legend was born. Leaving only *ghazal 250* to his wife Soraya, the great-great-great grandfather Hossein abandons her without any warning. According to the family legend, tears had flowed from her eyes to such an extent that they left permanent scars, and she lived 106 years with the hope that one day she would see her husband return, but to no avail. How could a poem with such an optimistic message, instill false ambitions and compel Soraya to relinquish all agency and personal fulfillment simply because of futile hope? To this question, Shirin responds: "Rien n'est aussi fort que cet appel à ne jamais abandonner. J'ai lu et relu le *ghazal* interdit. J'ai cru que les derniers vers étaient trop religieux pour ma famille d'athées avant d'entrevoir que la religiosité n'avait jamais cessé de nourrir la morale familiale – l'athéisme n'était qu'une posture sociale qui allait bien avec le communisme" (Nothing is as strong as this call to never give up. I read and reread the forbidden ghazal. I thought the last verses were too religious for my atheist family before realizing that religiosity had never stopped nourishing family morality – atheism was just a social posture that went well with communism).[381] Unfortunately, the great-great-great

[380] Ibid, 75.

[381] Ibid, 77.

grandmother had succumbed to the trappings of heedless and stubborn ambition and unconditional self-sacrifice as a result of misinterpreting Hafez's poem. It was not that her husband wanted to instill within her the hope that he would one day return (her husband preferred the love of a man and had left his wife to pursue a male wrestler), but rather that he had wanted her to hope for "le retour du bonheur auprès d'un homme qui aimait les jupons" (the return of happiness beside a man who was fond of women).[382]

For the Hedayat family, the ghazal thus serves as a stark reminder to never directly confront the truth, "et si le mari est homosexuel, mieux vaut raconter une histoire qui deviendra un mythe" (and if the husband is homosexual, it is better to tell a story that will become a myth), compelling Shirin to make the following observation: "ce vrai-faux coming-out (le premier d'une longue suite) a exercé une influence néfaste sur le cœur des femmes de [sa] famille qui n'ont jamais plus été amoureuses. Le désir a été emporté avec [le] arrière-arrière-arrière-grand-père qui rendit si heureux les hommes de sa vie" (this true-false coming-out (the first in a long series) exerted a harmful influence on the hearts of the women in her family who never fell in love again. Desire was carried off with the great-great-great-grandfather who made the men in his life so happy).[383] Just like their great-great-great grandmother, the Hedayat sisters had given in to a false interpretation, leading them to believe in superstitions, and ultimately, to the renouncement of love. Insteading of facing reality, without the reliance on the mere promise of hope, and reflecting upon their shortcomings, namely, their anti-Semitism, xenophobia, drive for terrorism, antipathy to foreigners, and love, they choose to blame their misfortunes on the *janam*: "la nature

[382] Ibid, 77.

[383] Ibid, 78.

cachée et héritée" (the hidden and inherited nature), a powerful force that is subject to repetition until it has been avenged.[384]

As Shirin introduces the reader to the "origins" of the Hedayat family's misfortunes when recounting the events of their first Parisian Shabe Yalda, she also discloses the destructive power of myths and the dangers of succumbing to the past as an excuse to not bring upon positive transformative change, in their case, to resist the temptation of involving themselves in terrorist activities, to integrate, and ultimately, to cultivate love. The choices Shirin makes during her trajectory of integration, which create irreconcilable divides between her and her family, are deliberate attempts to subvert the misconceptions associated with the *janam*, what she describes as the Oriental equivalent of the Occident's notion of determinism. In exile, each family celebration, holiday or hallmark event, seems to justify Shirin's desire to break away from her source of unhappiness. Shabe Yalda is ruined by grandfather Mahmoud, while their first Parisian Nowruz (Persian New Year), a celebration of the advent of spring, is marred by the adults in the household as the haft-seen – the table arrangement serving as the symbol of spring, hope, and rebirth, meticulously prepared by Niloophar – is demolished on the first day of their Iranian new year in Paris. Every year, the haft-seen is delicately assembled by Niloophar. Shirin recalls her mother's fear when one year, the goldfish that traditionally adorns the haft-seen table, dies prior to their celebration, leading Niloophar to have the premonition that this is perhaps an omen of an impending disaster that would soon unravel: the Hedayat family's eventual dissolution and the rupture with their familial and cultural roots. Shirin proclaims:

> Ma mère appréhenda donc cette année-là – le poisson rouge étant mort deux fois. À raison: cette année fut l'une des pires de notre exil. Tout se dérègle avec force et fracas, l'image du poisson rouge refusait de vivre chez nous ne me quitta pas. Malgré tous mes efforts pour ne pas me laisser contaminer par la superstition, de ma mère, je ne peux

[384] Ibid, 263.

> m'empêcher d'être à l'affût, du néfaste quand vient l'heure de changer de saison et d'année. Je résiste, je me débats, je refuse de vérifier trente-six fois l'agacement du *haft sin*, de regarder si le blé n'est pas déjà en train de moisir, les œufs de pourrir… En vain. Je ne le répète à personne. Je le garde en moi comme un lien incongru avec le pays natal.[385]
>
> My mom dreaded that year – the goldfish died twice. Rightly so: that year was one of the worst of our exile. Everything went awry with great tumult, and the image of the dead goldfish wouldn't leave me. Despite all my efforts not to be influenced by superstition from my mother, I couldn't help but be on the lookout for omens when it came time to change seasons and years. I resist, I struggle, I refuse to check thirty-six times the arrangement of the *haft seen*, to see if the wheat isn't already starting to rot, the eggs to spoil… All in vain. I don't repeat this to anyone. I keep it to myself as a peculiar link to the homeland.

For Shirin, the destruction of the haft-seen stands symbolic of the consecutive ruptures that are to follow and play a significant role in her decision to take charge of her own *janam*. Shalmani's exploration of this phenomenon offers interesting insights into the various ways in which the past is perceived as a mechanism for introspection, healing, and reconciliation within a diasporic context. It also provides a lens through which to explore the dialectical tensions between the past and present and the Self and Other from a female perspective.

Just before her eighteenth birthday, Shirin learns of her *janam* when Zizi, nearly half asleep during her afternoon nap and on her second pipe of opium, finally decides to share the story of their family heritage with Shirin upon discovering her interest in creating a family tree. As soon as great-great-great grandfather Hossein leaves his wife and three daughters – Rousse, Sombre, and Ardente – whose unmatched beauty becomes a source of jealousy for others, his family experiences a series of misfortunes. After Soraya arranges Rousse's marriage to their full-blooded cousin in order to preserve the family lineage, Rousse is assassinated by a schizophrenic neighbor, who claims to see the devil in her red hair. Soraya then arranges for her second daughter, Sombre, to marry Rousse's widowed husband, with whom she gives birth to six

[385] Ibid, 112-113.

girls and one boy. It is from Sombe's lineage that Shirin's family has descended. As for Ardente's destiny, she is kicked out from home and eventually becomes a prostitute, pursues acting, and later writes for journals to defend artists and women. Her lineage ends there as she never gets married nor gives birth to any children. Sombre's life takes a turn when her two incestious daughters leave the city, one of whom ends up commiting suicide when the sister falls in love with someone else. The situation gets even more gruesome and eerie when Sombre becomes pregnant with her only son, Rostam, after feeling deprived of sexual pleasure by her "idle" husband.[386] Throughout Sombre's pregnancy, her red-headed son becomes consumed by Elham's unrequited love, a girl of Mongol and Indian origin whom he rapes and ultimately forces into marriage. Like Sombre, Elham gives birth to six girls and one boy. The child that Sombre conceives with her own son – a blind boy with webbed hands – can only be met with condemnation. He is banished but eventually crosses paths with his half-father/half-brother, only to be molested and beaten by him on multiple occasions. As Elham witnesses this tragic scene, she provides the boy with food and money, and in return, is helped by him to escape her wicked husband Rostam.

It is from this treacherous and hybrid lineage that grandfather Mahmoud, who is also a redhead, is born. The cyclic pattern of violence, committed in the name of revenge, continues when Mahmoud himself forms a family. Mahmoud's wife gives birth to their first-born daughter, Ziba: "[elle] était la vérité révélée de la Mongole: elle avait les yeux bridés, les pommettes hautes et la peau couleur confiture de merde comme on disait en Iran. Mon grand-père la détesta tout de suite: l'Inde et la Mongolie se battaient sur son visage, elle était le mauvais présage qui

[386] Rostam, a heroic warrior in Persian mythology, is one of the central figures in Ferdowsi's tenth-century epic poem *Shāh-nāma.* Shalmani's tapestry of references to and subversions of key literary figures, which stand as revered symbols of Iranian ethnic and national identity and culture, are elements that enrich the analysis of the novel and compel the reader to explore Iranian art, culture, and history.

annonçait les cinq filles et l'unique garçon à venir. Il la viola alors qu'elle était une enfant, réitérant le geste de son père sur sa mère, venger le destin" (she was the truth revealed from the Mongolian: she had slanted eyes, high cheekbones and skin the color of lousy jam as they said in Iran. My grandfather hated her straight away: India and Mongolia were fighting in her face, she was the bad omen that announced the five girls and the only boy to come. He raped her when she was a child, repeating his father's action on his mother, avenging fate).[387] Ziba, a victim of sexual violence due to her unequivocal hybridity and ancestors' tragic fate, which reminded the patriarch of his father's exogamy and rape, "mit à écrire des poèmes qui disaient l'étau du sentiment, la douleur de la perte, la souffrance du manque" (began to write poems that spoke of the vice of feeling, the pain of loss, the suffering of lack).[388] Treacherous Mahmoud and his son Behrouz destroy the poems Ziba writes, apart from the ones she manages to conceal beneath the carpet of her room, which are later discovered and preserved by other members of the family. The Hedayats eventually change residence to settle in Tehran. Three years later, Ziba commits suicide after discovering that she is bearing the child of her father Mahmoud.

This is the legacy that the Hedayat family attempts to suppress and erase at all costs. The past, always under scrutiny, especially by the watchful and "evil" gaze of the Other, presents itself as a burden from which one cannot readily escape until one faces their *janam*: L'œil est la passion de l'Orient. L'œil est toujours mauvais, l'œil c'est l'Autre qui vous jette un sort, l'Autre qui, d'un regard, détruit la beauté de ce visage ou l'élégance de cette démarche ou la possibilité d'une promotion. L'œil est la première cause des malheurs de l'Orient, il est l'envie, la jalousie, la sociabilité" (The eye is the passion of the Orient. The eye is always malevolent, it is the Other

[387] Op. cit., Shalmani, *Les exilés meurent aussi d'amour*, 257.

[388] Ibid, 259.

who casts a spell upon you, the Other who, with a glance, destroys the beauty of a face or the elegance of a stride or the possibility of promotion. The eye is the primary cause of misfortunes in the Orient; it is envy, jealousy, sociability).[389] The process of avenging the Hedayat family's *janam* begins from the moment grandfather Mahmoud is killed by his youngest daughter Tala. It is initiated while Niloophar is pregnant, as she rushes to her sister Tala upon receiving her call to come to her rescue, and in the midst of helping her sister, gives birth to a boy – "un enfant [qui vient] pour la sauver, la venger, la soutenir" (a child [who comes] to save her, to avenge her, to support her).[390] What would otherwise be an occasion to celebrate with the company of family members, the somber birth of Siyavash, which coincides with the patriarch's death, passes by unacknowledged, since at this point in time, all familial ties are almost irremediably severed, marking "la fin officielle du refuge, et le début de [la] solitude [de Shirin]. La vraie, celle qu'aucune présence amicale, aucun amour sincère, aucune joie ne peut jamais combler. Celle que vous traînez avec vous jusqu'à votre tombe qui en paraît dès lors moins terrifiante" (the official end of refuge, and [the] beginning [of Shirin's] solitude. The real one, the one that no friendly presence, no sincere love, no joy can ever fill. The one you drag with you to your grave which from then on seems less terrifying).[391]

Siyavash, a lonesome and precocious boy born with extraordinary abilities, refuses to tolerate his aunts' cruelty and learns ways to protect his mother by playing various tricks on his aunts and their affiliates, who are involved in terrorist activities. Repudiated by everyone but his mother, their mutual bond and love are unmatched – "Tous le craignaient. D'ailleurs, dès l'âge de dix ans, il remplaça notre père. […] Il ne quitta jamais notre mère. Il était le fruit de sa frustration

[389] Ibid, 248-249.

[390] Ibid, 184.

[391] Ibid, 142-143.

et de ses espoirs, mais aussi ce qu'elle ne savait pas et qu'elle ne saurait jamais: le vengeur de son humiliation" (Everyone feared him. In fact, from the age of ten, he replaced our father. […] He never left our mother. He was the product of her frustration and hopes, but also something she didn't know and would never know: the avenger of her humiliation).[392] Through his passion for alternative medicine and knowledge of plants, he creates concoctions of sorts to poison his aunts until they become weak and oftentimes sick, embodying the characteristics of Arpad Szakolczai's "obscure, ambivalent, shadowy figure of the trickster […], a universal, […] archaic figure present in folktales and myths of all cultures."[393] Tricksters are described by Szakolczai as marginal figures, characters particularly drawn to liminal moments and conditions that allow for impulsive acts of transgression:

> they are outsiders, and thus cannot trust or be trusted, cannot give or share, and are incapable of living in a community, they are repulsive […]. However, tricksters can suddenly become dangerous: in a situation where the community lets its guard down, in any instant the trickster can capture the occasion and institute a lasting reversal of roles and values, making himself a central figure instead of a marginal outcast. The condition that makes such trickster takeovers possible is a liminal situation where certainties are lost, imitative behavior escalates, and tricksters can be mistaken for charismatic leaders.[394]

Bjørn Thomassen also upholds this interpretation of the trickster, individuals who, during "a situation of political unrest and real-world loss of established structures, […] might easily be perceived to represent a solution to a crisis."[395] This is because they are deemed as "experts at upsetting social order by reversing values and deploying their rhetorical and theatrical skills."[396] Siyavash's birth, which occurs during a liminal moment between life and death, and his

[392] Ibid, 151-152.

[393] Op. cit., Horváth, et al., *Breaking Boundaries: Varieties of Liminality*, 26.

[394] Ibid, 26.

[395] Ibid, 53.

[396] Ibid, 54.

whimsical nature that is motivated by the desire to reestablish a new order in the Hedayat family, exemplify Szakolczai and Thomassen's insights into the figure of the trickster. While Siyavash's methods for revenge are morally questionable, as they inflict sickness and bodily distortions, the mutilations are oftentimes limited and allow for partial recuperation. For instance, after destroying Mitra's physical beauty through his trickery, which pushes her to the brink of complete paralysis, Siyavash tends to her ailments: "il était le poison et l'antipoison, le mal et sa guérison. Il se rendit indispensable […]. Notre mère portait la tête haute, métamorphosée, digne: dorénavant, elle était la mère de celui qui sauvait Mitra" (he was the poison and the antidote, the evil and her cure. He made himself indispensable […]. Our mother bore her head high, transformed, dignified: henceforth, she was the mother of the one who saved Mitra).[397] Shalmani's representation of the "trickster," with his messianic attributes, echoes Thomassen's description of these "non-beings who appear out of the blue, inserting an element of novelty and uncertainty into a well-established society."[398] The moment at which tricksters are "mistaken for saviors":

> emotions are continually and repeatedly incited until the community is reduced to a schismatic state. Societies lacking stable external referent points can maintain themselves in these oppressive, violent situations for a long time without returning to normal order. Indeed, this is why schismogenic societies need to maintain themselves in a perpetual state of war, presumably surrounded by enemies who try to conquer and destroy them […].[399]

Similarly, Siyavash's birth, which occurs at the intersection between life and death, along with his compulsive and manipulative trickeries that are carried out with a lack of emotion and a "regard neutre et glacial sur les humains comme sur les événements" (neutral and frozen gaze

[397] Op. cit., Shalmani, *Les exilés meurent aussi d'amour*, 233-234.

[398] Op. cit., Horváth, et al., *Breaking Boundaries: Varieties of Liminality*, 53.

[399] Ibid, 29.

upon both humans and events), facilitate a restructuring of "order" within the Hedayat family, a disruption that would otherwise remain unachievable.[400] Siyavash's impartial observations and feats effectively restore Niloophar's dignity, end the emotional abuse she endures at the hands of her sisters, and thwart her "destiny" – a preoccupation that continually fuels his mother's anticipation of a prosperous future.

Niloophar's relentless focus on premonitions and her obsession with foretelling the future are exemplified by her natural gift for reading coffee cups, an activity she resumes in exile while working undercover to provide financial support for her family. The long lines of clients, serving as proof of her talent, do not go unnoticed: "Elle leur signalait les dangers à éviter, les voyages à venir, l'argent qui sommeille, l'amour en planque" (She pointed out to them the dangers to avoid, the upcoming journeys, dormant money, and hidden love).[401] The circumstances under which Niloophar turns her hobby into a source of income are also a cause for concern for the family. The constant fear of being arrested by authorities for unreported employment lingers, and Shirin "détestai[t] l'idée que [sa] mère lise dans le marc de café […] déguisée, qu'elle se cache derrière les tentures et la pénombre du cliché alors qu'elle était si douée, si perspicace, si instinctive" (hated the idea of [her] mother reading coffee grounds disguised, hiding behind the curtains and the shadows of cliché when she was so gifted, so perceptive, so instinctive).[402] Irrespective of these circumstances, Niloophar continues to use her talent to foretell the future, and on one occasion decides to read Shirin's coffee cup – "Ce jour-là, mon marc l'inquiéta. […] Je notais les symboles qui ne racontaient que la destruction, la pourriture, le silence, la maladie, l'aveuglement et je commençais à appréhender mon avenir quand elle me dit: 'Il va y avoir

[400] Op. cit., Shalmani, *Les exilés meurent aussi d'amour*, 232.

[401] Ibid, 195.

[402] Ibid, 326.

beaucoup de problèmes qui ne s'arrêteront jamais plus et quelqu'un se vengera'" (That day, my coffee mark worried her. […] I noted the symbols that only depicted destruction, decay, silence, illness, and blindness, and I began to fear for my future when she told me: 'There will be many problems that will never stop, and someone will take revenge').[403] The "bad omen" gradually unravels, and life takes a turn when Siyavash miraculously survives a pedestrian-car collision, prompting Niloophar to immediately quit her job on the basis of the following presumption:

> l'accident du tout petit frère était le signe qu'elle n'aurait jamais dû faire de l'argent avec son don. En Iran, elle n'avait jamais fait payer ses prédictions. Sa tante, laide mais charmante, le lui avait répété assez souvent: on ne monnaye pas son don. On l'offre. Ma mère pensait que les règles n'étaient plus les mêmes dans l'exil. Et puis nous avions besoin de manger, de vivre. Mais l'accident du tout petit frère prouvait le contraire. Mon père sans travail, ma mère sans travail, nous nous sommes soudain sentis fébriles, inquiets.[404]
>
> the little brother's accident was a sign that she should never have made money with her gift. In Iran, she had never charged for her predictions. Her aunt, ugly but charming, had repeated it to her often enough: you do not sell your gift. You offer it. My mother thought that the rules were different in exile. And then, we needed to eat, to live. But the little brother's accident proved otherwise. My father without work, my mother without work, suddenly we felt feverish, worried.

The apprehension provoked by superstitions, which go as far as to sever her only source of income that ensures the family's livelihood, reinforce Niloophar's concerns for protecting the well-being of her son, even through the most sacrificial of ways. This observation can be drawn from the circumstances surrounding Siyavash's birth and in Niloophar's choice of name for her son, compelling Shirin to wonder if by naming him Siyavash, her mother had intended to ward off "le sort et défier sa mauvaise fortune […]" (fate and defy her bad luck […]).[405] Shalmani's reference to Ferdowsi's *Shāh-nāma*, a monumental tenth-century epic poem "often closely

[403] Ibid, 139.

[404] Ibid, 333-334.

[405] Ibid, 153.

associated with proto-nationalism and a concrete sense of Iranian identity" offers insights into this claim.[406]

Three months following Siyavash's birth, Niloophar names him after Ferdowsi's mythological prince, Siyāvash, the son of king Kay Kāvus, who is "forced to leave Iran because of an argument with his father, […] and eventually killed at the order of the Turanian King, Afrāsiyāb, whose protection he had sought."[407] A cultural production that is revered by Iranians to this day, Ferdowsi's epic poem "has long been viewed as both a repository and a shaper of Iranian identity, as well as a promoter of a primordial form of Iranian nationalism."[408] Shalmani in the novel describes Siyāvash, "le prince innocent" (the innocent prince) of the Iranian Empire, as the "[p]remière grande figure du martyr, victime de la jalousie et de l'envie, [qui] ne parvint pas à inverser le destin, malgré sa tendresse, son humanisme, ses choix justes et raisonnables" ([f]irst major figure of martyrdom, a victim of jealousy and envy, [who] could not reverse his fate, despite his tenderness, his humanism, and his just and reasonable choices).[409] In keeping with Ferdowsi's representation of the poem's hero, Niloophar's decision to renounce her source of income is predicated on the presumption that the "immoral" behavior of "selling her gift," despite her aunt's advice, could potentially bring Siyāvash's ill fate upon her own son.

Shalmani's reference to the legend of Siyāvash opens an interesting discussion pertaining to the themes addressed in the both the novel and the epic poem, namely, exile, hybridity, incest, and nostalgia. Alyssa Gabbay in 'The Earth My Throne, The Heavens My Crown': Siyāvash as Supranational Hero in Ferdowsi's *Shāh-nāma*," problematizes the widely held representations of

[406]Alyssa Gabbay, "'The Earth My Throne, The Heavens My Crown': Siyāvash as Supranational Hero in Ferdowsi's Shāh-nāma," Journal of Persianate Studies 15, no. 2 (2023): 157, https://doi.org/10.1163/18747167-bja10007.

[407] Ibid, 157-158.

[408] Ibid, 159.

[409] Op. cit., Shalmani, *Les exilés meurent aussi d'amour*, 153.

Siyāvash's identity, arguing that he, who is of "mixed heritage," "moves from nationalistic to supranationalistic (or cosmopolitan) concerns—that is, from a seemingly coherent national identity opposed to 'the Other' to one that transcends national identity altogether, with a good deal of hybridity thrown in along the way."[410] Despite the poem "possess[ing] and prompt[ing] elements of a coherent national identity that is related to ethnicity," the article challenges "the coherence of Iranian identity" given that "the country's boundaries continually shift" and "widespread mixing with other ethnicities occurs."[411] Thus, Gabbay "proposes that Ferdowsi's depiction of Siyāvash's evolving sense of identity—one that contains elements of what we would associate today with supranationism (or cosmopolitanism) and hybridity—creates a subtext that promotes ideals running counter to the proto-nationalist tendencies outwardly espoused by the epic."[412] Gabbay writes, "the story's poignancy derives at least partly from the tension it reveals between loyalty to one's king and country […] versus a greater loyalty to God, and the necessity of losing one's home— and, ultimately life—out of this greater loyalty."[413]

In the context of Shalmani's reference to Ferdowsi's hero Siyāvash, two central themes of the novel – incest and exile – are of particular relevance to our discussion of the epic poem. Before going into exile, Siyāvash is confronted with the incestuous advances of his stepmother Sudāda. Fortunately, he is able to successfully reject her perverse desires and prove his innocence to his father. However, the bond he shares with his father is ultimately severed as Siyāvash chooses to disobey his father's orders when refusing to continue to fight the enemy

[410] Op. cit., Gabbay, "'The Earth My Throne, The Heavens My Crown': Siyāvash as Supranational Hero in Ferdowsi's *Shāh-nāma*," 159.

[411] Ibid, 159.

[412] Ibid, 157.

[413] Ibid, 158.

Afrāsiyāb given that he had already settled accounts by agreeding on a ceasefire. Instead of complying with his father's commands, Siyāvash submits himself to exile:

> taking on an identity as a wanderer and a homeless man. From [then] on, he declares, God will be 'my refuge, the earth will be my throne and the heavens my crown' (*idem* 1987–2009, II, 274; 2004, 242). […] [T]he young prince's declaration makes clear that he is relinquishing not only his claim to nobility and his relationship to the king, but Iran, his beloved homeland. A resolute national identity, softened by empathy for 'the Other,' is superseded by an ascetic, transcendent supranationalism.[414]

Upon abandoning his homeland, Siyāvash is welcomed by Afrāsiyāb, where he is provided with refuge, a gesture which is suggestive of a temporary coexistence of sorts and "reconciliation" with the enemy. However, the displacement is filled with emotional turmoil as Siyāvash is struck by haunting recollections of the past, "becomes mournful, thinking of Iran, when they later pass through towns full of music and perfumed with musk":[415]

> As Siyāvash makes the journey from his homeland to Turan, and settles there, he develops a consciousness of what Rushdie has called (15) a 'plural and partial' identity: that of a person who belongs partly to one culture, partly to another, and sometimes 'fall[s] beneath two stools.' He also experiences the harrowing sensations common to many of the characters who populate exile literature, both premodern and contemporary. The trip itself is filled with sadness as Siyāvash endures what Said has described (173) as 'the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home.'[416]

Despite Siyāvash's "ability to see the humanity in his enemies, and his willingness to prioritize his loyalty to God above his claims to family, crown, throne," his unfortunate fate leads to his death when Afrāsiyāb is manipulated by his brother Garsivaz into thinking that "welcoming a 'stranger into [his] family' can only bring harm, besides defying the laws of nature: 'No one has ever seen a lion and an elephant mate, or fire above while water flows below'."[417]

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[414] Ibid, 161.

[415] Ibid, 162.

[416] Ibid, 162.

[417] Ibid, 171 and 165.

Shalmani's reference to Ferdowsi's epic poem draws attention to the central message of her novel. Despite the manifold predicaments that Ferdowsi's heroic figure, Siyāvash, faces while being away from his beloved homeland, he maintains his moral and ethical integrity. Shalmani's protagonist is also endowed with an equally important moral responsibility – to avenge his incestuous grandfather, who denounces exogamy. While the patriarch's heinous act of incest is carried out in the name of "revenge" for his hybrid and "impure" lineage, Siyavash's birth, which unfolds in the midst of bloodshed and patricide, serves to rectify the violent actions of a man who is repulsed by his own hybrid identity. Shalmani's evocation of Ferdowsi's hero echoes Alyssa Gabbay's subversion of Siyāvash's evolving sense of identity, further supporting Gabbay's claim that "the supranational aspects of the story likewise make it highly relevant for today, when exile, refugees, and the question of nationalism versus cosmopolitanism abound in both literary and political discourse."[418]

After the death of grandfather Mahmoud, the Hedayat family disintegrates, and, as is often the case when someone passes, "[…] non seulement les vivants s'écharpent pour les biens matériels mais ils récoltent aussi, souvent bien malgré eux, les traits de caractère ou les habitudes du disparu. Face à la mort, la panique de l'inconnu est si grande, que préserver ce qui a été révèle indispensable pour continuer à vivre" ([…] not only do the living fight over material goods, but they also harvest, often in spite of themselves, the personality traits or habits of the deceased. Faced with death, the panic of the unknown is so great that preserving what has been proves indispensable to continue living).[419] Zizi, who becomes an opium addict after her father's passing, mysteriously dies when Siayash pays her a visit. Mitra, whose son commits suicide and

[418] Ibid, 158.

[419] Op. cit., Shalmani, *Les exilés meurent aussi d'amour*, 176.

daughter is killed by a terrorist's kalachnikov in Paris on November 13, 2015, becomes more reactionary, and is accompanied by Tala in her pursuits.[420] Mitra and her husband, Chinois, eventually disappear from sight. Tala also disappears, but she manages to accumulate some wealth prior to departing from France. Life for Niloophar and Siamak remains rather stagnant. As for grandfather Mahmoud's haunting memory, it is gradually forgotten by everyone but Shirin, who decides to write a book and tell the story of how her exile, once and for all, avenged the *janam* of the Hedayat family. During one of her "fleets," as she is running through the streets of Paris, Shirin gains some clarity:

> Pour sentir mon corps exister, pour dépasser la douleur, pour me prouver que j'étais capable. Mais ce jour-là, je courais surtout pour me réveiller d'un très long sommeil. Depuis l'an I de l'exil et mon unique fugue, je n'avais rien tenté, rien choisi. Je suivais mes études, je vivais au rythme imposé par le tout petit frère. […] Je courais en me disant que c'était fini: je n'étais plus une exilée, je n'étais plus un rouage familial, je n'étais plus obligée de subir, je ne devais plus me taire. Je pouvais fuir. Je pouvais dire. Je devais dire. Un lien faisait jour entre le corps qui se dépasse, et la parole qui se prend. Je m'arrêtai sur le pont d'Austerlitz et le goût de la fugue me gagna de nouveau. Au cœur de cette volonté un point sombre me retenait encore. Grand-père Mahmoud se rappelait à moi, grand-père Mahmoud et le viol de Tala que j'avais enterré avec mon enfance et mes silences aussi coupables que ceux de la famille. Entendre Omid nous raconter ses parents à vif, avait ravivé en moi le souvenir de mon aïeul et son regard concupiscent. Peut-être que je constatais que je ne pourrais pas guérir sans dire.[421]
>
> To feel my body exist, to surpass the pain, to prove to myself that I was capable. But that day, I was running mainly to awaken from a very long sleep. Since the first year of exile and my only escape, I had attempted nothing, chosen nothing. I pursued my studies, I lived with the rhythm imposed by the youngest brother. […] I ran telling myself it was over: I was no longer an exile, I was no longer an apparatus in the family, I was no longer obliged to endure. I should no longer remain silent. I could flee. I could speak. I had to speak. A connection emerged between the body surpassing itself, and the voice taking hold. I stopped on the Austerlitz bridge and the taste of escape overcame me again. At the heart of this determination, a dark spot still held me back. Grandfather Mahmoud reminded me of myself, grandfather Mahmoud and Tala's rape that I had buried with my

[420] Mina's passing is a reference to the terrorist attacks that took place in Paris on November 13, 2015. In the novel, Shirin states, "[s]i ces salauds d'Américains n'avaient pas envahi l'Irak avec des mensonges, tout cela ne serait jamais arrivé" ([i]f those American bastards hadn't invaded Iraq with lies, none of this would have ever happened). These terrorist attacks have been attributed to ISIS and were carried out as a response to France's military actions against ISIS in Iraq and Syria.

[421] Ibid, 220.

> childhood and my silences as guilty as those of the family. Hearing Omid recount his parents' raw emotions had revived in me the memory of my ancestor and his lecherous gaze. Perhaps I realized that I could not heal without speaking.

Shirin's initial act of filling her notebook with observations from the moment they arrive in France culminates in her desire to become a writer, which she makes known to her mother during her adolescence. The decision to follow this trajectory causes Niloophar to be filled with apprehension, as this gesture would equate to an act of transgression:

> Personne (ou presque) n'avait jamais pris la parole dans la famille. […] Écrire, c'était dire. […] Écrire c'était poser volontairement des mots sur les choses et ça, ce n'était pas tolérable. Cela supposait que ce pouvait être vrai, et peut-être inspiré de la réalité, et ma mère ne pouvait l'accepter […] [E]lle me réduisait à l'absinthe, aux cafés, enfumés, et imaginait la mort et la prison au bout de mon chemin. Ma mère était impitoyable avec l'avenir.[422]

> Hardly anyone had ever spoken up in the family. […] Writing was speaking out. […] Writing was deliberately putting words to things, and that was not tolerable. It suggested that it could be true, and perhaps inspired by reality, and my mother couldn't accept that […]. [S]he reduced me to absinthe, to smoky cafes, and imagined death and prison at the end of my path. My mother was merciless about the future.

Niloophar's distorted perception of the art of writing does not dispel Shirin's desire to embark on her journey as a writer. Grandfather Mahmoud's crimes and transgressions, which destroyed the family, were to be supplanted by a less violent form of transgression: "Quelque chose remuait en moi, quelque chose qui me dégoûtait de moi-même, et une toute petite colère de rien du tout, un microbe de colère, commença à grimper le long de ma pensée balbutiante. Dire c'était vivre. C'était vivre. C'était obscur mais c'était là – c'était grand-père Mahmoud qui ricanait dans mon dos" (Something stirred within me, something that disgusted me with myself, and a tiny bit of anger, a microbe of anger, began to crawl along my stuttering thoughts. To speak was to live. It was to live. It was obscure but it was there – it was Grandfather Mahmoud sneering behind my

[422] Ibid, 208.

back).[423] Shirin's testimony serves on multiple fronts – writing avenges her *janam* and becomes the means through which she saves herself from the destructive origins of her family, who fails to use exile as an opportunity to forgo the chaotic past for a chance of a better future – "les Iraniens n'integraient pas. Ils revenaient toujours à la virginité, à ce qui se faisait et ne se faisait pas, à ce que pensait le voisin. Ils vivaient toujours trop près de leur famille, de leur clan, de leur tradition, de leur passé" (Iranians didn't integrate. They always reverted to virginity, to what was done and not done, to what the neighbor thought. They always lived too close to their family, their clan, their tradition, their past).[424]

The epilogue of the novel concludes with a recapitulation of her family's ultimate dissolution. Shirin reflects upon the letter that she had received from Zizi informing her that she had killed Omid with the help of Amir upon discovering that he and Shirin had had an intimate relationship. After Zizi walks in on Shirin and Omid amidst a moment of intimacy, Omid makes the decision to leave Shirin because he is aware that their love would never receive the approval of her aunts. The Hedayat sisters were convinced that "Omid représentait un autre chemin, un autre chemin où il était plus important de vivre que de poursuivre des chimères qui se métamorphosaient en cauchemars dans le monde réel" (Omid represented another path, another path where it was more important to live than to pursue chimeras that turned into nightmares in the real world).[425] As a final remark, Shirin expresses gratitude for her willingness to detach herself from her family, despite the pain of nostalgia she feels during their final celebration of Nowruz as a family: "À cet instant, perdue au milieu d'un fragment de pays artificiellement reconstitué, j'aurais aimé me reconnaître dans ma famille, j'aurais aimé ne plus devoir tenir

[423] Ibid, 212.

[424] Ibid, 238.

[425] Ibid, 322.

ensemble tous mes morceaux éparpillés. […] Moi, j'étais hors sol. Je ne me reconnaissais nulle part. Pourtant, je regardais partout, et si je m'illusionnais parfois d'un nouvel amour, je finissais toujours, un carnet à la main, par constater ma solitude… une solitude bâtie sur les ruines d'une famille française" (At that moment, lost in the middle of a fragment of an artificially reconstructed country, I wished I could recognize myself in my family, I wished I no longer had to hold together all my scattered pieces. […] I was uprooted. I did not recognize myself anywhere. Yet, I looked everywhere, and even if I sometimes deluded myself with a new love, I always ended up, notebook in hand, acknowledging my solitude… a solitude built on the ruins of a French family).[426] Through her narrative, Shirin demonstrates that sometimes, the proverbial fruit does fall far from the tree, and this fruit can be the harvest of a tree well nourished, unlike the infertile fruit of incest. Shirin claims that she, among all of her family, has been the exception to this rule, since it is only she who chooses to not conform to the dictates, ideals, fears, and preconceived expectations of the Hedayat family. Shirin also discloses to the reader the completion of a novel that she has written about an exiled Iranian family. She writes, "[l]'exil pique, mail il m'a fait le cadeau d'une nouvelle page, vierge. A moi de l'écrire. Cette lignée singulière, bâtarde, mal aimée, faite de trop de morceaux disparates, traversée de désirs morbides, fragile, excentrique, aventureuse, joyeuse, torturée, exilée, cette lignée est la mienne" ([e]xile stings, but it has given me the gift of a new, blank page. Up to me to write it. This unique lineage, bastard, unloved, made of too many disparate pieces, crossed by morbid desires, fragile, eccentric, adventurous, joyful, tortured, exiled, this lineage is mine).[427] As the following citation suggests, Shirin makes claims not to a biological lineage, but rather to a lineage that is set to be

[426] Ibid, 323-324.

[427] Ibid, 399.

born from exile, attained not by the rejection of attachments, but by a process Edward Said describes as "an independence and detachment [achieved] by *working through* attachments":[428]

> Voilà ce dont je suis le fruit. […] J'ai roulé très loin de mes racines – et c'est heureux. Par mûr rencore, je suis le fruit de tout ce sang, de toute cette merde, de cette folie jamais nommée, de ce mal qu'on se transmet par lâcheté, par facilité et conseravatisme idiot. Le janam a fait du bon boulot dans ma famille, il s'est démené pour signaler sa présence et entamer les pourparlers. Mais personne n'a voulu le voir. Alors à force d'être ignoré, le janam s'est vengé. Il fallait au moins l'exil pour qu'enfin quelqu'un accepte de le voir, mieux, pour que quelqu'un accepte de le regarder en face. Je l'ai fait. Ça pue. Mais finalement, rien de méchant. Le janam a la gueule de l'exil et le cœur du pays natal, il charrie beaucoup de désespoir, d'idéaux et de perversions.[429]
>
> Here is what I am the fruit of. […] I have rolled far from my roots – and that's fortunate. Still, I am the product of all this blood, all this crap, of this madness never named, of this evil that we pass on out of cowardice, out of ease, and idiotic conservatism. The janam did a good job in my family, it struggled to signal its presence and initiate talks. But no one wanted to see it. So, being ignored, the janam got avenged. It took exile at least for someone to finally accept to see it, better yet, for someone to accept to face it. I did. It stinks. But ultimately, nothing malicious. The janam has the face of exile and the heart of the homeland, it carries a lot of despair, ideals, and perversions.

In Shalmani's literary works, the development of displaced identities and the transformations they undergo within transcultural, transhistorical, and transnational sites confirm a perspective that views modernity as "a temporal experience of seeing the 'present' as having overcome the past, and the future as an open horizon (Koselleck 1979). As Giesen argued (2009), modernity is a continuous transgression of boundaries and the breaking down of traditions, and therefore involves a deep-rooted sense of ambivalence."[430] It is thanks to these spaces of ambiguities, uncertainties, and un-belonging that both Shalmani and her fictional counterpart are able to find new spaces of belonging, spaces reconciled with the idea that even un-belonging can be recognized as a space that is productive rather than destructive.

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[428] Op. cit., Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Literary and Cultural Essays*, 191.

[429] Op. cit., Shalmani, *Les exilés meurent aussi d'amour*, 398.

[430] Op. cit., Thomassen, *Breaking Boundaries: Varieties of Liminality*, 55.

Chapter 4:

Shifting Boundaries: The Politics of the Metic's Aesthetics

> It is, therefore, a source of great virtue for the practised mind to learn, bit by bit, first to change about invisible and transitory things, so that afterwards it may be able to leave them behind altogether. The man who finds his homeland sweet is still a tender beginner; he to whom every soil is as his native one is already strong; but he is perfect to whom the entire world is as a foreign land. The tender soul has fixed his love on one spot in the world; the strong man has extended his love to all places; the perfect man has extinguished his.
>
> — Hugo of St. Victor, *The Didascalicon of Hugh of St. Victor*

> The exile knows that in a secular and contingent world, homes are always provisional. Borders and barriers, which enclose us within the safety of familiar territory, can also become prisoners, and are often defended beyond reason or necessity. Exiles cross borders, break barriers of thought and experience.
>
> — Edward Said, *Reflections on Exile*

> On ne bataille pas pour des pierres… On bataille pour des idées, pour de la poésie, on abandonne les pierres quand elles nous enserrent dans un linceul, on marche vers une autre terre, où les idées peuvent s'entrechoquer et grandir, les vers s'épanouir. On ne bataille pas pour des pierres, car seule la pensée est immortelle et permet de survivre à leur disparition.
>
> — Abnousse Shalmani, *Éloge du Métèque*

Éloge du Métèque begins with an epigraph quoting *The Satanic Verses* (1988), a novel by British-Indian writer Salman Rushdie that led Ayatollah Khomeini to issue a *fatwa* against him a few months after its publication. The passage that Shalmani selected as the starting point for her essay encapsulates the central themes of Rushdie's polemical novel, particularly the migrant's negotiation of a hybrid identity within the diasporic context and the tensions inherent in this

process that Rushdie refers to as self-creation. The epigraph, which places Shalmani's essay in dialogue with Rushdie's literary enterprise, reads:

> Selon une certaine façon de voir les choses, l'homme qui a pour but de se créer s'approprie le rôle du Créateur; c'est un anormal, un blasphémateur, l'abomination des abominations. D'un autre point de vue, on peut imaginer en lui du pathos, de l'héroïsme dans sa lutte, dans sa volonté de prendre des risques: tous les mutants ne survivent pas. Ou bien, considérons-le sous l'angle socio-politique: la plupart des migrants apprennent, et peuvent devenir des masques. Nos descriptions fausses, pour contrecarrer les mensonges inventés à notre sujet, cachent pour des raisons de sécurité nos moi secrets.[431]
>
> According to a certain way of seeing things, the man whose aim is self-creation assumes the role of the Creator; he is abnormal, a blasphemer, the abomination of abominations. From another perspective, one might see in him pathos, heroism in his struggle, in his will to take risks: not all mutants survive. Or, let us consider him from a socio-political angle: most migrants learn, and can become masks. Our false descriptions, to thwart the lies invented about us, conceal for reasons of safety our secret selves.

Rushdie's compelling depiction of the paradoxical nature of the migrant experience mirrors the socio-political tensions that inform *Éloge du Métèque*, a "eulogy" that narrates Shalmani's "suffering and solitude" and pays tribute to foreigners from all walks of life, whom she refers to in the essay as *les métèques* (metics).[432] In the introductory pages of *Éloge du Métèque*, Shalmani asserts that she has claimed the metic identity. She, who on February 11, 1979 found herself in "pieces" and soon in "exile," would since then become a metic and a rightful participant in this long history of "vagabondage, de larmes, de vol, de peur, d'ostracisme, de combat, de pas de côté" (vagrancy, of tears, of theft, of fear, of ostracism, of struggle, of sidesteps).[433] Exactly forty years after the Iranian Revolution, in the month of February, Shalmani would begin to write *Éloge du Métèque*, a work that stands as a literary expression of her "amour des sans-frontières,

[431]Abnousse Shalmani, *Éloge Du Métèque* (Paris: Éditions Grasset & Fasquelle, 2019), 9.
All English translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

[432] Ibid, 13.

[433] Ibid, 12.
February 11, 1979 marked the end of the Iranian Revolution.

des sans-pays, des sans-terre" (love for the borderless, the stateless, the landless).[434] The essay begins by characterizing the identity of the metic as one that embodies ambivalence, enchantment, movement, precariousness, seduction, uprootedness. Replete with contradictions, tensions, and transgressions, this identity, which resists a definitive and singular definition, can thus be cohesively represented through a reconceptualization of the *experience* of the metic, "ce mot accolé à tout ce qui n'est pas d'*ici*, à tout ce qui fait peur, à l'exotisme, à l'aventure, à la méfiance, à la traîtrise, au déracinement, ce mot tranquillement balancé aux visages trop burinés, aux mains calleuses, aux esprits libres, aux athées, aux juifs, aux Noirs, aux métis, aux Arabes, aux étrangers, aux vagabonds, aux clochards" (this word that is attached to everything that is not from *here*, everything that evokes fear, to exoticism, adventure, suspicion, betrayal, uprootedness, this word is casually hurled at weathered faces, calloused hands, free spirits, atheists, Jews, Black people, mixed-races, Arabs, foreigners, vagabonds, and beggars).[435] Shalmani asserts that her deliberate choice to adopt this opaque identity has served as a means of reconciling the condition of exile and attaining autonomy and freedom, achieved by rejecting historical, religious, sexual, or social determinism. She writes, "je refuse d'être mon ADN, je refuse de n'être qu'une suite de cellules héritées de mes parents, je refuse d'être entravée par la tradition, de n'être qu'une partie d'une communauté organique, faite de culture et de langue. Je refuse de n'être que le fruit pourri d'un déterminisme historico-génétique qui honnit le doute et la liberté. […] Ma seule idéologie est la liberté, ma seule ambition le monde, ma seule maison celle que je construis au fil de mes désirs" (I refuse to be my DNA, I refuse to be merely a sequence of cells inherited from my parents, I refuse to be shackled by tradition, to be only a part of an organic community shaped by culture and language. I refuse to be nothing more than the

[434] Ibid, 12 and 13.

[435] Ibid, 12.

rotten fruit of a historical-genetic determinism that despises doubt and freedom. […] My only ideology is freedom, my only ambition is the world, my only house is the one I build according to my desires).[436] While Shalmani's statement undoubtedly alludes to the trajectory of her exile and the ways in which she, as a former political refugee, has gained agency, she nonetheless conveys the idea that her personal experience is part and parcel of a broader, collective contemporary history, "où chacun est sommé de se présenter un drapeau à la main, disant son origine nationale, ethnique, religieuse, sexuelle, ses préférences, le passé dont il se réclame" (where everyone is required to present themselves with a flag in hand, stating their national, ethnic, religious, sexual origin, their preferences, the past they claim).[437] Perceived within the French context, those whom Shalmani identifies as metics represent the marginalized, the minorities, and the underclass of France, an "outdated" yet dynamic label that serves as an overarching category for those on the peripheries of French society. Shalmani is incontrovertibly referring to France's "Others" to discuss the migrant experience in France. However, what sets her work apart are the ways in which she applies this label to find new meaningful methods through which to elucidate the complex nature of immigrant life. Accordingly, it is important to historicize the terminology that she employs to articulate their experience.

The etymological origins of the word metic trace back to Greek Antiquity, where the Greek equivalent *metoikos* is derived from the prefix *meta* (change) and *oikos* (dwelling). The Greek word *metoikos* "first appear[ed] in (surviving) public documents in the second quarter of the fifth century, [… and] the earliest of the retrospective definitions, that of Aristophanes of Byzantium (*c.* 257-180) is also the fullest: ('A metic is anyone who comes from a foreign (city)

[436] Ibid, 14.

[437] Ibid, 13-14.

and lives in the city, paying tax toward certain fixed needs of the city. For so many days he is called a *parepidemos* and is free from tax, but if he overstays the specific time he becomes a *metoikos* and liable to tax').[438] Throughout the classical period, metics, also translated as "resident aliens," formed part of the tripartite structure of male Athenian society, which also comprised "Athenian citizens […] and slaves"; and within this system, "[t]he opportunities available to and requirements demanded of a man depended on his category."[439] The male foreign residents of Athens "with the legal status of 'metic' were, unlike slaves, free, but, unlike citizens, […] could not own land, vote in the Assembly, or serve as a *dikastes* or as a magistrate; in addition, metics were required to pay a poll tax (the *metoikion*) and to have a citizen sponsor (*prostates*).[440]

Shalmani provides a brief historical overview of the Athenian metic-status in the opening pages of the essay. However, her primary focus lies in examining the socio-cultural evolution of the label as it relates to France from the nineteenth century to the present day. The word metic, as Shalmani explains, was once considered an "honorific title" but came to be regarded as an "insult" in the nineteenth century following Charles Maurras' pejorative use of the term in reference to immigrants. In the twentieth century, the label would then refer to migrants originating from Maghreb and, more broadly, Africa. Before becoming obsolete in the French vernacular, the term was popularized with more positive connotations by French-Egyptian singer

[438] David Whitehead, *The Ideology of the Athenian Metic* (Cambridge: Cambridge Philological Society, 1977), 7.
Similar to *metoikos*, the Greek word *parepidemos* translates to "foreigner." However, Aritophanes' definition of the term metic highlights the more temporary nature of the *parepidemos*' stay in a foreign city.

[439] James Watson, "The Origin of Metic Status at Athens," *The Cambridge Classical Journal* 56 (2010): 259, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1750270500000348.

[440] Ibid, 259.
In ancient Greece, *dikastes* was a judge or juror.

Georges Moustaki after the release of his song *Le Métèque* in 1969.[441] Moustaki's poetic lyrics, as Shalmani avers, redefined the image of the metic in popular culture, rendering it more "tamed" and enchanting.[442] The song's romanticized nuances thus suggested the notion that the metic represented the antithesis of the immigrant, creating an irreconcilable divide between the uncouth migrant and the debonair metic:

> [c]omme si la merveilleuse chanson […] anoblissait le métèque et renvoyait l'immigré à ses ténèbres: d'un côté le métèque sensuel, maraudeur certes, mais poète, désespéré, oui, mais capable d'amour, voleur mais avec grâce, et de l'autre côté l'immigré laid, violent, analphabète, incapable de volupté. En glorifiant le métèque, sans rien cacher de la méfiance qu'il inspire (vagabond, voleur, séductuer, le triptyque classique), Moustaki crée une hiérarchie.[443]
>
> [a]s if the marvellous song […] ennobled the metic and consigned the immigrant to his shadows: on the one hand, the sensual metic, certainly a marauder but a poet, desperate, yes, but capable of love, a thief but with grace; and on the other hand, the ugly, violent, illiterate immigrant incapable of sensuality. By glorifying the metic, without hiding the mistrust he inspires (vagabond, thief, seducer, the classic triptych), Moustaki creates a hierarchy.

Shalmani's analysis of the label's etymology in the French context underscores a shift in the ways in which immigrants have been perceived throughout the twentieth century under the aegis of the French Republic. This development can be attributed to the change in migration patterns prior to and following World War II. Shalmani explains that the label fell into disuse after the Second World War, a moment in French history that witnessed a change in the ethnic, racial, and religious composition of its migrants. Before World War II, France predominantly welcomed immigrants of Jewish and European origin, while after the war, migrants from former French colonies, particularly North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa, arrived initially as guest workers to rebuild France following the economic and infrastructural devastation caused by the war.

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[441] Op. cit., Shalmani, *Éloge Du Métèque*, 17.

[442] Ibid, 27.

[443] Ibid, 27.

The origins of the Athenian metic-status will benefit from additional discussion in order to better contextualize the socio-political nuances of the label as it relates to France. Historian David Whitehead in *The Ideology of the Athenian Metic* provides an insightful study of the metic-status by investigating the various definitions, usages, and "ideologies" associated with metics in contemporary (fourth and fifth century BC) Athenian epigraphical and literary sources. A crucial problem that Whitehead prefaces in his research are the challenges of writing a "'history' of the Athenian metic" due to the scarcity of data, which "are so sparse that vast expanses of metic history are totally undocumented, even in the classical period."[444] Despite the limited (surviving) documentation of the historical development of the metic-status, Whitehead's contributions to the field are both significant and unique as his book revisits available source-material to inquire into "the ideology of the metic," namely, "a portmanteau phrase encompassing not only the sum of opinions, prejudices and tensions, recorded or deducible, in [the Athenian] *polis* but the actual reciprocal relations between *politai* and *metoikoi* co-existing in a political and social environment controlled by the *politai*."[445] Thus, in his introduction to *The Ideology of the Athenian Metic*, Whitehead elaborates on the two principal phases that studies on the Athenian metic have undergone. Extrapolating from Michel Clerc's monograph *Les métèques athéniens* (1893) – a text considered by specialists of the field to be of pivotal importance – during the initial phase, which dates back to studies conducted in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, "scholars saw the Athenian metic as a humiliated being, hounded from pillar to post by a narrow-minded, vindictive citizenry; and metic-status, on this view, was a burden to be avoided

[444] Op. cit., Whitehead, *The Ideology of the Athenian Metic*, 140.

[445] Ibid, 3.
In ancient Greece, the *politai* referred to the body of citizens living within a city-state.

if at all possible."[446] Contrary to the initial phase, the latter provides a more positive perspective on the metic-status, which Whitehead denotes as the "modern orthodoxy." He attributes this shift to the findings of August Böckh, Heinrich Schenkl, Ulrich Wilamowitz, and others, for whom "the Athenian metics enjoyed a privileged status, a 'quasi-citizenship' (Wilamowitz' own term) coveted throughout Greece and beyond."[447] David Whitehead's analysis of the metic-status is extensive in scope, and for the purpose of this chapter, it will be useful to examine a few points drawn from the literary evidence, particularly from the genre of tragedy, which he identifies as the earliest literary evidence. Of particular importance is the usage that is made of the term in the plays of three tragedians, namely, Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, who "were drawing upon the characteristics and implications of a contemporary institution when they illustrated their ideas by reference to the *metoikos* and the *metoikia* – in metaphor, and by the transposition of historical elements into mythologised archaic society of tragedy."[448] According to Whitehead, in the "literary testimony[,] *metoikos* often suggests pathos, submission and restriction. Very few people use the word of *themselves*: Antigone, Eurystheus and Cadmus – all characters in tragic drama!"[449] Such a conclusion drawn from the plays of the tragedians confirms "the implications of the epigraphical evidence and suggests that at best *metoikos* was an unattractive piece of nomenclature and at worst a ready-made jibe, a reminder of exclusion and ineradicable gulfs."[450] Furthermore, James Watson, in the article "The origin of metic status at Athens," also highlights

[446] Ibid, 1.

[447] Ibid, 1.

[448] Ibid, 34-35.
The term *metoikos* in its singular form referred to an individual who held the metic-status, whereas *metoikia*, to the condition or state of being a metic.

[449] Ibid, 57.

[450] Ibid, 57.

the utility of literary evidence – more specifically, the works of tragedians, who "regularly engaged with contemporary concerns in their plays."[451] For him, references to the play of Aeschylus provide insights into the social construction of mid-fifth century BC Athens, a time during which the *polis* experienced a growth in its citizen population after the Persian invasion of 480-479.[452] The article's primary focus is to speculate the reasons for which a distinction in status was established, which Watson attributes to the growing "interest in restricting who might become a citizen."[453] He identifies the origin of the metic-status as having been initiated in 451/0 BC following the enactment of Perikles' citizenship law.[454] Watson alludes to Professor Geoffrey Bakewell's reading of Aeschylus' *Suppliants* to elaborate on the Athenians' growing concern for the increase in the large population of immigrants gaining citizenship in Athens around that time.[455] Among scholars, Aeschylus is recognized as having made "[t]he earliest literary usage of the word *metoikos* […] and its cognates in several of his tragedies, including the *Persians*, performed in 472 (line 319) and the *Suppliants*, performed in 463 (lines 609, 994).[456] In developing his observations based on Bakewell's reading of the tragedy, who suggests "that when the *Suppliants* was performed in 462, metic status was 'a recent innovation', and that 'the metic references [in the play] might… have been directed at the audience and intended as an explanation of the new status'; he sees the *Suppliants* as produced 'within the climate leading to

[451] James Watson, "The Origin of Metic Status at Athens," *The Cambridge Classical Journal* 56 (2010): 270, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1750270500000348.

[452] Ibid, 259-260.

[453] Ibid, 260.

[454] Ibid, 260.

[455] Ibid, 270.

[456] Ibid, 265.

Pericles' citizenship law'."[457] Watson expands on Bakewell's interpretation to argue that Aeschylus' play was, for the tragedian, a means of "addressing a cause for concern in Athens of the 460s: the issue of immigrants."[458] He continues:

> whether we see Aeschylus exploring the vulnerability of immigrant citizens and suggesting that they may need some form of guardian, or whether we imagine him to have been laying out a proposal for a new system which would deny citizenship to immigrants, it seems likelier that he was exploring a live issue rather than attempting to explain away legislation. Interpreted in this way, the *Suppliants* adds weight to the suggestion that the 460s were a time when immigrants and their rights were very much on the Athenian agenda.[459]

In his concluding remarks, Watson elaborates on the plausible reasons for which Athenians placed limitations on who could be granted or denied citizenship, which was likely to have been considered "an honour, a privilege, and something to be jealously guarded."[460] While "the very creation of a metic status indicates that the Athenians hoped that immigrants would continue to come to Attica," it did not intend to prevent immigrants "from living and working in Athens." The substantial influx of foreigners to Athens is accounted for by the "benefits of living in Athens [, which] were many:"

> the city offered opportunities for employment and for protection – indeed, it was probably such opportunities that had contributed to drawing such a large wave of immigrants to Athens in the years after 480 in the first place. […] Throughout the first half of the fifth century, the self-esteem of the Athenians must have been growing. By 451/0, the Athenians had enjoyed considerable military success against the Persians; the economy of their city was flourishing; their status within the Greek world had reached a peak […]. These developments cannot have been lost on the Athenians, who, I suggest, came to see themselves as 'something special'. […] In such a climate, a proposal to deny non-Athenians the chance of becoming Athenian may well have begun to appeal strongly to the proud citizen body of Athens […]. Athenian self-confidence contrived to make

[457] Ibid, 270.

[458] Ibid, 270.

[459] Ibid, 270-271.

[460] Ibid, 271.

> Athenian citizenship a gift that Athenians no longer wanted to give to anyone who wanted it.[461]

Drawing on the observations of Watson, Whitehead, and Shalmani, it becomes clear that the Athenian citizenry ensured exclusivity to their rights by categorizing its male inhabitants into what formed the tripartite structure of Athens. The rights conferred upon metics surely remained limited, as they were excluded from participating in the political life of the Athenian *polis*.[462] Shalmani explains that under such restraints, metics were to also upkeep their economic and social standing by regularly reassuring the community of their rightful presence through participation in religious offerings and funding charitable works.[463] Despite the economic contributions of metics and their involvement in the cultural landscape of Athens, "in matters of language, gods, and churches," metics were regarded as inferior to citizens: "On s'en méfiait quand ils réussissaient, on s'en méfiait quand ils rataient. Qu'il qu'il arrive, le métèque demeure un danger pour la cohésion de la cité, un homme sous surveillance" (They were distrusted when they succeeded, they were distrusted when they failed. Whatever happened, the metic remained a danger to the cohesion of the city, a man under surveillance).[464] Across history, the metic has unequivocally embodied a transient and marginal identity, representative of a figure that exudes "danger" due to his lack of rootedness in the land where he is born. To this end, *Éloge du Métèque* proposes a new framework through which to explore the complex and paradoxical experience of the contemporary migrant, an undertaking which may be more holistically analyzed by assigning the modern-day foreigner a new identity – that of the Athenian metic.

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[461] Ibid, 273-274.

[462] Op. cit., Shalmani, *Éloge Du Métèque*, 18.

[463] Ibid, 18.

[464] Ibid, 18-19.

Abnousse Shalmani's essay *Éloge du Métèque* (2019) follows her earlier literary works, notably *Khomeiny, Sade et moi* (2014) and *Les exilés meurent aussi d'amour* (2018). Chapters 1 and 2 of this dissertation have examined the various ways in which these two texts explore the development of liminal/hybrid migrant identities within the diasporic context, focusing primarily on the challenges of cultural assimilation. While the narrative of *Éloge du Métèque*, much like Shalmani's earlier literary publications, draws on her experience of exile and integration through personal anecdotes, her more recent essay adopts an additional framework through which to reconceptualize the identity and experience of migrants in the contemporary French context. Shalmani alludes to an array of historical, fictional, and personal accounts and cultural productions to represent the experience of the metic, which are divided into seven distinct and dynamic categories: temperament, ambition, aesthetic, transgression, sensuality, misunderstanding, and fiction. These categories highlight the complexity of the immigrant experience in France, particularly in relation to the contemporary political discourse on the "immigration crisis" and the broader public debates on France's imperative to preserve the integrity of "French national identity," which remain inextricably linked to France's colonial legacy, notably that of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Important to these discussions are the French Republic's founding principles of republicanism and universalism, philosophical doctrines originating from the Enlightenment, which, as the first two chapters demonstrate, Shalmani unequivocally valorizes. However, in *Éloge du Métèque*, Shalmani adopts a more critical stance on France's identity politics, which she claims are sustained by the ever-present racial and social hierarchies and stereotypes that were established in the nineteenth century following the "scientific and sociological" advancements of Arthur de Gobineau (1816-1882) and Ernest Renan (1823-1892). Irrespective of the official discourse that France's adoption of

republican universalism ensures equality for all and promotes the integration of foreigners into the nation's cultural and social fabric, Shalmani argues that these fundamental principles have ultimately been undermined by nationalistic and particularist ideologies and policies institutionalized by France from the nineteenth century to the present day.[465] One way in which Shalmani supports her argument is by underscoring the West's rhetoric on the question of immigration, which, in the contemporary context, has often been characterized as an "invasion" that poses a threat to national cohesion and security.[466] In the realm of politics, such discourse around immigration has resulted in the treatment of migrants as an "argument électoral […], un repoussoir pour les électeurs qui, crises économique et identitaire combinées, rejettent sur les migrants, les exilés, les déplacés, la cause de leur échec, le pourquoi de leur déclin" (electoral argument, a scapegoat for voters who, with the combined economic and identity crises, blame migrants, exiles, and displaced persons for their failure, the reason for their decline).[467] In political debates, the immigrant has undoubtedly remained a "source de conflits et de fantasmes, tiraillé entre le discours opportuniste de la gauche (jusqu'à la radicale) et le discours maurrassien de la droite (jusqu'à l'extrême)" (source of conflicts and fantasies, torn between the opportunistic rhetoric of the left (to the far-left) and the Maurrasian rhetoric of the right (to the far-right).[468] As a result of these culture wars, "le migrant a pris le visage du désastre. […] Le migrant n'étant qu'un métèque déguisé, il reprend son rôle trois fois millénaire de bouc émissaire, il enfile le

[465] For a comprehensive study on this subject, see: Patrick Weil, *How to Be French: Nationality in the Making since 1789*, translated by Catherine Porter (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).

[466] At the time when Shalmani was writing *Éloge du Métèque*, the most recent and significant wave of migration to Europe occurred in 2010. Despite the dominant perception that this constituted an "invasion" of Europe, reports, to which Shalmani references, show that compared to the 513 million inhabitants of Europe, only one million individuals were seeking to settle in the West. See p. 24 of *Éloge du Métèque*.

[467] Ibid, 24.

[468] Ibid, 22.

brassard 'coupable'. […] Le migrant d'aujourd'hui dit le péril de la civilisation et la fin de l'Occident. Comme s'il avait la puissance nécessaire pour dissoudre le sol sur lequel il s'installe…" (the migrant has taken on the face of disaster. […] The migrant, being nothing but a disguised metic, resumes his three-thousand-year-old role as a scapegoat, he puts on the 'guilty' armband. […] The migrant of today speaks of the peril of civilization and the end of the Occident. As if he had the necessary power to dissolve the ground on which he settles…).[469] It is in this context that Shalmani alludes to the metic-status to describe the social and political tensions and nuances that accompany the immigrant experience in the Hexagon.

Europe's failure to address its current "economic and identity crises" in a manner that avoids placing the blame on its immigrants, as Shalmani asserts, has impelled the West to have recourse to what is most "fragile" and "visible" – "les frontières, le récit national, la grandeur passée" (borders, the national narrative, the past grandeur).[470] Shalmani identifies such forms of regression as a prevalent issue reflected in the consciousness of modern-day French society, which traces back to the colonial era and extends well into the twenty-first century. The persistent prominence of the Far-Right in French politics attests to the ongoing anxieties surrounding foreigners and immigration, which was once notably propagated by the ideologue Charles Maurras (1868-1952), a "nationaliste, antidémocrate, antiparlementaire, antisémite, antiprotestant, royaliste" (nationalist, anti-democrat, anti-parliamentary, anti-Semite, anti-Protestant, royalist).[471] *Éloge du Métèque* underscores this issue by elaborating on the enduring influence of Maurrasian anti-immigrant sentiments, which she believes challenge the

[469] Ibid, 25-27.

[470] Ibid, 26.

[471] Ibid, 20.

very foundations of the French nation, namely, the values and principles established by the French Revolution. Shalmani asserts that Maurras, for whom foreigners were the "preuve vivante […] de la déliquescence et de la fin de la vraie France, celle d'avant la Révolution française" (living proof […] of the decay and the end of true France, the one that existed before the French Revolution), called into question Diderot and d'Alembert's definition of a nation provided in their *Encyclopédie*, a groundbreaking contribution of the French Enlightenment, which placed "man [as] the sole point from which to begin, and to which all must be brought back, if [they, the group of authors] are to please, engage, and affect the reader even in the most arid considerations and driest details."[472] The *Encyclopédie*, which was produced "to collect knowledge disseminated around the globe; to set forth its general system to the men with whom we live, and transmit it to those who will come after us, so that the work of preceding centuries will not become useless to the centuries to come [… ,]" placed the emphasis on "the principal faculties of man" and stressed the importance of relying on oneself to reason.[473] As Denis Diderot writes, the ultimate goal of such artistic, scientific, and philosophical inquiry is as follows:

> [to] set forth truths; unmask errors; artfully discredit prejudices; teach men to doubt and wait; dispel ignorance; weight the value of human knowledge; distinguish between true and false, true and plausible, plausible and miraculous or incredible, common phenomena from extraordinary phenomena, certain facts from doubtful facts, and those from facts absurd and counter to the natural order; become acquainted with the general course of events, and take each thing for what it is, and consequently inspire a desire for knowledge, a horror for lies and vice, and a love for virtue […].[474]

To build on these concepts, in the essay, Shalmani alludes to Diderot and d'Alembert's definition of a nation provided in the *Encyclopédie*: "Une quantité considérable de peuple, qui *habite* une certaine étendue de pays, renfermée dans de certaines limites, et qui *obéit* au même

[472] Dena Goodman and Kathleen Wellman, *The Enlightenment*, eds. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2004), 16.

[473] Ibid, 14 and 16.

[474] Ibid, 17.

gouvernement" (A considerable quantity of people, who *live* within a certain area of land, enclosed within certain boundaries, and who *obey* the same government).[475] Shalmani makes the argument that the definition provided by these two Enlightenment thinkers is important to consider given that it does not make any reference to "race, religion, sex, corporatism, culture, language or history."[476] The nation is fundamentally constituted by a people, who *live* and *obey* a certain government. And, within a nation, the citizens, irrespective of all the aforementioned factors, are to be encouraged and granted the freedom to, as Diderot maintains, "set forth truths," "discredit prejudices," "seek knowledge," and "dispel lies and vice." In contrast to this interpretation of a nation that is rooted in Enlightenment humanism was Maurras' conservative and nationalistic ideals of a France that would return to its monarchic traditions – one lacking in ethnic, racial, and religious diversity and mixity. Shalmani writes, "Maurras ne voulait pas l'égalité, il fantasmait le passage de relais entre générations, l'armée qui défend les frontières nées de l'Histoire, nourries du sang français, et la tradition cadenassée qui ne souffre aucun métissage. Maurras fantasmait la nation organique, l'individu relié, rattaché, prisonnier de la communauté" (Maurras did not want equality, he fantasized about the passing of the baton between generations, army that defends the borders born of History, nourished by French blood, and locked-up tradition that does not tolerate any mixing. Maurras fantasized about the organic nation, the individual connected, attached, and prisoner of the community).[477] Based on Maurras' conception of nationhood, Shalmani infers that she, as a former exile from Iran, would be excluded from France's collective identity. As demonstrated in the previous chapters of this

[475] Op. cit., Shalmani, *Éloge du Métèque*, 21.

[476] Ibid, 21.

[477] Ibid, 21.

dissertation, her experience in France has, in many ways, aligned with the exclusionary vision Maurras had longed for for the France of today.

To this end, *Éloge du Métèque* compels the reader to reflect upon the legacy of the Enlightenment to find responses to the identity politics of contemporary France because the Enlightenment provides one with tools to imagine "l'Autre comme son égal, exercer son esprit critique, abattre les murs de sa maison natale" (the Other as one's equal, to exercise one's critical mind, to break down the walls of one's birthplace).[478] It is crucial to note that there is, however, a conundrum inherent in Shalmani's argumentation. She is a fervent and unwavering advocate of French universalism, yet in the essay, Shalmani places under pressure the extent to which France, as a universalist nation, has failed to embrace and account for the diversity of its population. Subjecting French universalism to additional scrutiny allows for a comparative analysis of the French and American social models. The former is often regarded as the antithesis of American multiculturalism because of its emphasis on assimilationist models and objective of eliminating markers of difference for the purpose of integrating foreigners into French society. Despite Shalmani's steadfast advocacy for French universalism, the essay concludes with her expressing a positive shift in her perspective on American multiculturalism, a stance influenced by France's exclusionary attitudes toward its foreigners:

> Nous fantasmons l'Amérique, car nous la craignons, tant nous avons peur de perdre notre mélodie historique; nous nous réfugions derrière l'universalisme, mais sans accorder la moindre attention à la richesse et à la beauté des multiples origines qui habitent l'Hexagone; nous nous bouchons le nez devant le patriotisme américain, qui voit ses métèques revendiquer fièrement leurs origines tout en agitant le drapeau américain, car quelque chose c'est brisé en France qui prohibe les élans sentimentaux.[479]

[478] Ibid, 22.

[479] Ibid, 148.

> We fantasize about America because we fear it, so much so that we are afraid of losing our historical melody; we take refuge behind universalism, but without paying the slightest attention to the richness and beauty of the multiple origins that inhabit the Hexagon; we hold our noses in front of American patriotism, which sees its foreigners proudly claim their origins while waving the American flag, because something has broken in France that prohibits sentimental impulses.

The challenge then lies in identifying the reasons for which French universalism as a model, as opposed to the American, has failed in practice. For Shalmani, this process was initiated at the time when she traveled to the United-States for the first time in 2019 after residing in France for thirty-four years. Upon witnessing the ease with which the United States embraces the diversity of its inhabitants, she arrived at the conclusion that Europe was "beaucoup moins hospitalière; ses rues, ses murs, ses monuments, son Histoire, sa civilisation forment une muraille imposante et à première vue imprenable, et il faut beaucoup de patience, de ruse, de culture pour la franchir" (much less hospitable; its streets, its walls, its monuments, its history, its civilization form an imposing and at first sight impregnable wall, and it takes a lot of patience, cunning, culture to cross it).[480] While Shalmani does indeed criticize France's resistance to integrating its foreigners, as implied in the aforementioned citation, her essay remains indebted to the French Enlightenment, which, as discussed in the previous chapters, has provided her with avenues through which to resolve her feelings of un-belonging, a dimension which Rushdie has also fastened upon in his description of "double-unbelonging" attributed to cultural in-betweenness.[481] The essay thus undermines not the principles and values of French republicanism and universalism but rather the institutions which fail to implement them in practice. To this end, Shalmani reconceptualizes the complex identity and experience of the immigrant to shed light on the dynamic cultural, historical, and social interactions between France and its Others. The

[480] Ibid, 149.

[481] Salman Rushdie, *East, West* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1994), 141.

fundamental issue arising from this situation is the notion that the "disparaged" immigrant, formerly the metic, is now "orphaned from their ancestry," and must therefore reclaim their identity and reputation.[482] Such an enterprise may be achieved, as Shalmani argues, by re-evaluating and re-inscribing the ethical and moral principles of the Enlightenment in today's society: "Retrouver le métèque, c'est rattacher l'immigré à l'Histoire et aux wagons de notre présent en crise de démence identitiare, à la richesse du mouvement, du métissage, de l'humanisme – celui d'un Edward W. Saïd pour qui 'l'humanisme se nourrit de l'initiative individuelle et de l'intuition personnelle, et non d'idées reçues et de respect de l'autorité'" (To reclaim the metic is to reconnect the immigrant to History and to the wagons of our present, gripped by an identity crisis bordering on madness, to the richness of movement, of cultural mixing, of humanism – humanism as envisioned by Edward W. Said, for whom 'humanism is nourished by individual initiative and personal intuition, not by preconceived ideas or deference to authority').[483] *Éloge du Métèque* thus invites the reader to engage in self-reflection given that contemporary French society has failed in self-criticism. In this regard, the vantage point of the immigrant is advantageous given that as a foreigner and as a "transgressive exterior eye," the immigrant, lacking knowledge of "[les] codes, [les] rites [… les] habitudes [, …] capte toute la poussière sous le tapis. […] Il n'a pas, lui, de secrets ensevelis dans les greniers des maisons de campagne, pas de réflexes de classes, pas de gêne vis-à-vis de l'Histoire, de la culture, de la langue; il a, en effet, laissé tout cela derrière lui" ([the] codes, [the] rites [… the] customs [, …] captures all the dust under the carpet. […] He does not have, himself, secrets buried in the attics of country houses, no class reflexes, no difficulties regarding History, culture, or language; he

[482] Op. cit., Shalmani, *Éloge du Métèque*, 28.

[483] Ibid, 28.

has, indeed, left all of that behind him).[484] Contrary to the native, the metic speculates the world around him with a "regard dérangeant, un regard capable de voir ce que l'autochtone refuse, un regard qui remet en question" (disturbing gaze, a gaze capable of seeing what the native refuses to see, a gaze that questions).[485] Accordingly, the metic goes "au-delà des règles, de la morale commune, de l'ordre social" (beyond rules, common morals, social order).[486] Shalmani's reconceptualization of the immigrant, who is "le fruit d'expériences" (the fruit of experiences), therefore resonates with Edward Said's understanding of humanism given that the metic is guided by personal reflection and "lectures subjectives" (subjective readings).[487] As discussed in the earlier chapters, for Shalmani, this process began to materialize at a young age and traces back to the early years of her exile – a time when she was immersed in the imaginative world of tales and introduced to the importance of storytelling.

The arresting power of tales and storytelling is experienced from early childhood. Before a child learns to read or write, they are introduced to the fantastical world of tales that spark their imagination, sowing the seeds of their creativity. Kwame Appiah in *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* contemplates the meaningful role of storytelling and asks why we should "care how other people think and feel about stories[.]"[488] He characterizes storytelling as fundamentally a universal experience that is "part of being human" since time immemorial, a process through which human beings align their personal and collective "values" and "responses

[484] Ibid, 105-106.

[485] Ibid, 102.

[486] Ibid, 106.

[487] Ibid, 28.

[488] Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2006), 29.

to the world. And that alignment of responses is, in turn, one of the ways we maintain the social fabric, the texture of our relationships."[489]

The early years of Shalmani's childhood were enriched by stories, which eased the transition from her life in Iran to the one in France. The disorienting whirlwind that exile brought upon Shalmani and her family compelled her to wonder, from an early age, how she may find a new compass with which to direct her in uncharted territories. During her childhood and adolescence, tales and fables emerged as anchor points through which Shalmani could find a momentary source of solace. The tales of Jerusalem, once recounted by her grandparents, were now, in exile, being narrated by the grandmother of her Jewish friend that she befriended in France. The captivating French, Iranian, and Sufi tales, along with those of the Talmud, provided her a new canvas upon which to paint her childhood and adolescent dreams and as she claims, introduced her to the world of metics. The stories that accompanied her childhood possessed a bewitching power, transforming the Paris of her youth into the ancient city of Jerusalem, "History's first fiction and collective hallucination":[490]

> Les pierres de Jérusalem murmurent constamment, s'enrichissant des fables, qui à chaque changement de dynastie, à chaque régicide, à chaque mise à sac du Temple, à chaque bouleversement d'empires, nourrissent la légende. Comme si les pierres tenaient encore debout *grâce* aux légendes, comme si le ballottement de cette ville-cité, entre les langues et les croyances, suivait son propre cours, insensible aux tentatives des hommes de la circonscrire définitivement. Jérusalem est un personnage à part entière, colérique et séducteur, renaissant sans cesse de ses cendres, narguant les tentatives désespérées des hommes de l'enserrer ou de le réduire à hauteur de leurs rêves de mortels.[491]
>
> The stones of Jerusalem constantly whisper, enriched by fables that, with each change of dynasty, each regicide, each ransacking of the Temple, each upheaval of empires, feed the legend. As if the stones still stand *thanks* to the legends, as if the shifting of this city-state, between languages and beliefs, follows its own course, indifferent to the

[489] Ibid, 29.

[490] Op. cit., Shalmani, *Éloge du Métèque*, 35.

[491] Ibid, 35.

> attempts of men to confine it definitively. Jerusalem is a character in its own right, angry and seductive, constantly reborn from its ashes, mocking the desperate attempts of men to enclose it or reduce it to the level of their mortal dreams.

The turbulent yet enduring centuries-long coexistence of humanity in the enchanting city of Jerusalem that Shalmani became acquainted with through tales served as a poignant reminder of both humanity's vices and virtues. As Shalmani encountered these tales during the initial years of her exile, she envisioned Paris – a city renowned as a center for culture and art – embodying the plurality of Jerusalem: "En laissant la porte ouverte à toutes les musiques, toutes les langues, toutes les manières de cuisiner un poulet, toutes les contradictions, j'ai posé, pierre après pierre, les fondations de mon temple portatif, capharnaüm de rires, de passions, de belles lettres et de beaux personnages que nul ne pourra jamais me prendre" (By leaving the door open to all kinds of music, all languages, all ways of cooking chicken, all contradictions, I have laid, stone by stone, the foundations of my portable temple, a hodgepodge of laughter, passions, fine literature, and beautiful characters that no one will ever be able to take from me).[492] The values and ethical lessons learned from the stories of her childhood and adolescence reinforced in Shalmani the will and virtue necessary to surpass the obstacles of exile. One Jewish tale, in particular, resonated with Shalmani during a period in her life when she was attempting to find a sense of belonging in her host community. According to the legend, the Jewish intellectual Yohanan ben Zakkai made the decision to spare the city of "Yavne and its assembly of sages" upon recognizing the futility of saving the holy city of Jerusalem that was already in peril at the hands of the Roman enemies.[493] Following the Roman conquest of Jerusalem, the sage Yohanan ben Zakkai was received by the Roman Emperor Vespasian, who, captivated by his knowledge, granted him a single wish. The decision to save the intellectuals was a reflection of Yohanan ben Zakkai's

[492] Ibid, 35.

[493] Ibid, 33.

reverence for the power of knowledge. For Shalmani, who, like other exiles, refused to pledge allegiance to any particular land, the wise judgment of the Jewish sage offered a lesson that she would carry throughout the years in exile. The principles and values learned from the legend resonated with Shalmani, as she repeated to herself the following words: "On ne bataille pas pour des pierres. On bataille pour des idées, pour de la poésie, on abandonne les pierres quand elles nous enserrent dans un linceul, on marche vers une autre terre, où les idées peuvent s'entrechoquer et grandir, les vers s'épanouir. On ne bataille pas pour des pierres, car seule la pensée est immortelle et permet de survivre à leur disparition" (We do not fight for stones. We fight for ideas, for poetry. We abandon the stones when they encircle us in a shroud, we walk toward another land, where ideas can clash and grow, where verses can flourish. We do not fight for stones, for only thought is immortal and allows us to survive their disappearance).[494]

In the Parisian neighborhood of La Roquette (in the eleventh *arrondissement*), where Shalmani spent her early years of exile, the immigrant population found refuge not in the native communities that they left behind but in their collective solidarity.[495] Shalmani asserts that this was not a matter of forgetting their origins nor remaining confined by them but instead of creating a sense of community through their shared experience as foreigners.[496] Life in this *arrondissement* was teeming with intercultural exchange, which contributed to Shalmani's sense of belonging in her host community: "Je n'étais plus seulement d'Iran, j'étais ce que j'apprenais, ce que je mangeais, ce que je dansais. Nous passions d'une culture à une autre avec une aisance qui me paraît, aujourd'hui, miraculeuse" (I was no longer just from Iran, I was what I learned,

[494] Ibid, 33.

[495] Ibid, 36-37.

[496] Ibid, 37.

what I ate, what I danced. We moved from one culture to another with an ease that seems, to me today, miraculous).[497] For the immigrants she frequented and lived alongside, the 1980s were, as Shalmani claims, "exceptional" years that eventually witnessed many transformations after the inauguration of the Opéra Bastille and the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989, which led to the "réveil d'un autre totalitarisme" (reawakening of another totalitarianism).[498] Prior to these events, the immigrant communities lived as if they were "[p]réservés des différences qui éloignent, pour ne conserver que ce qui enrichit" [p]reserved from the differences that separate, to keep only what enriches).[499] Their collective unity manifested itself in the harmony they shared and in the unique relationship they had with their past, embodying what Shalmani calls the "temperament" of the metic – in other words, "l'art du saltimbanque" (the art of the entertainer) or "un art de la fugue et un jeu de masques" (an art of fugue and a game of masks).[500] The years that were to follow seemed to call into question this temperament that the community of displaced subjects embraced and found refuge in.

By drawing upon these metaphorical references, Shalmani underscores the challenges of maintaining the identity of the metic, which for the immigrant, remains an ongoing issue to grapple with. *Éloge du métèque* thus contemplates the ways in which this "fragile" identity could be preserved and negotiated without merely glorifying one's origins or assimilating without safeguarding the memory of the past.[501] To this end, Shalmani makes a distinction between three "categories" of metics: "le métèque actif" (the active metic), "le métèque passif" (the passive

[497] Ibid, 37.

[498] Ibid, 37.

[499] Ibid, 37.

[500] Ibid, 37 and 41.

[501] Ibid, 37.

metic), and "le métèque sans illusion" (the metic without illusion). The migrants who resist assimilation by slavishly holding onto their origins are those whom Shalmani refers to as the active metics, while those who assimilate with ease, without consideration of their past, the passive metic. The third category, which Shalmani refers to as the metic without illusion, abides to neither description given that they remain within a continuous state of liminality by way of "wearing masks" to conceal their "terribles contradictions" (terrible contradictions).[502] The "category" of metic that is of interest to Shalmani is the "metic without illusion:" [un] être batard et instable [qui] trouve sa cohérence dans les masques" (a bastard and unstable being who finds his coherence in masks) and establishes selfhood through a process that views life as a daily creation, thereby enabling their "survival" and the attainment of freedom through "creative subjectivity."[503] In bringing together cultural, historical, and literary figures whom Shalmani argues embody this "temperament," the essay reconceptualizes the complex and paradoxical nature of the migrant identity.[504] By elucidating and commemorating the experience of metics, particularly in the context of French history and from the perspective of France's Others, Shalmani draws our attention to the often silenced and omitted histories of the marginalized, who, during moments of "bouleversement politique [et] crise économique [… sont] transform[é] en bouc émissaire" (political upheavel [and] economic crisis [… are] transform[ed] into a

[502] Ibid, 38.

[503] Ibid, 38 and 41.

[504] Some of the metics Shalmani references in her work are Alain Mabanckou, Apollonie Sabatier, Aristotle, Bahman Mohasses, Chagall, Charles Baudelaire, Chevalier de Saint-George, Conchita Perez, Edward Said, Esmeralda, George Moustaki, Gustave Courbet, Hercule Poirot, Herodotus, Iraj Pezeshkzad, Jeanne Duval, Khalil Gibran, Martin Eden, Marie de Régnier, Modigliani, Pierre Louÿs, Romain Gary, Shaïtana, Soutine, Zohra ben Brahim, among others.

scapegoat).[505] To investigate this claim, Shalmani intersperses the stories and trajectories of others – both real and fictional – with personal accounts.

Representations of the Other: Healing Trauma through Art Therapy

Shalmani initially becomes cognizant of her status as exile during early adolescence, an experience which she describes as an "explosion of the monster."[506] The physical manifestations of exile become apparent to Shalmani the day after her grandparents return to Iran, and these continue to affect her mental and physical health for the next decade. Prior to their departure, as Shalmani's grandfather bids his farewell, he reveals to her the internal conflicts that are to arise as a result of her family's exile in France, an event that would require Shalmani to grapple with an in-between, liminal identity: "Il me disait que je ne serais plus jamais iranienne, mais que je ne deviendrais jamais française. Il prophétisa la fin de l'harmonie, mais aussi la joie d'être le monde entier à moi toute seule. Il répétait qu'il n'y avait pas de hiérarchie qui tienne dans le cœur, pas de langage qui vaille plus qu'un autre, pas davantage de grandeur là-bas plutôt qu'ici et que les monstres n'étaient pas toujours monstrueux" (He told me that I would never again be Iranian, but that I would never become French either. He prophesied the end of harmony, but also the joy of being the entire world all to myself. He repeated that there was no hierarchy that could hold sway in the heart, no language more valuable than another, no greater grandeur over there than here, and that monsters were not always monstrous).[507] The morning after the grandfather expresses to Shalmani his final words, she wakes up to find red blotches that cover her entire

[505] Op. cit., Shalmani, *Éloge du Métèque*, 38.

[506] Ibid, 41.

[507] Ibid, 40.

body and suffers from an inflammation that impairs her ability to breath and to move. For many years, the diagnoses provided by doctors were to no avail, attributing chronic stress to the sporadic flare-ups that debilitate Shalmani. She, herself, could decipher the reason why her body responded in this particular way until the moment she encounteres Jean-Jacques Schuhl's novel *Ingrid Caven*. Much like Shalmani, the German actress and singer Ingrid Caven, who is the subject of Schuhl's novel, experienced similar allergic reactions. Upon reading the story of Caven's life, Shalmani discoveres that she, too, is to be cured by the therapeutic power of art. While Caven found solace in Picasso's *Portrait of Dora Maar*, Shalmani would, in turn, be healed by a passage she reads in Schuhl's novel: "'(Le peintre) avait donné une forme à ce qu'elle croyait être une honteuse, une innommable anomalie, il plaçait en pleine lumière, avec éclat, insolence, souveraineté, aux yeux de tout, de tout l'univers, les monstres de sa nuit à elle'" ((The painter) had given form to what she believed to be a shameful, unspeakable anomaly, he brought into full light, with brilliance, insolence, and sovereignty, for all to see, for the entire universe to witness, the monsters of her own night).[508] As Caven and Shalmani's experience suggests, Picasso's surrealist painting possesses a transformative capacity to engage the viewer in a manner that enables one to confront and reconcile the lack of self-acceptance. Shalmani, previously an "unfinished puzzle" who would never find her "missing pieces" due to "la perte de la cohérence, la fin des certitudes, l'effacement des racines" (the loss of coherence, the end of certitudes, the erasure of roots), now perceived herself as a "monstre présentable [parce] que l'imaginaire [l]'a aidée à [se] fabriquer un masque, l'amour à [se] bâtir un temple, la foi à raconter des histoires" (presentable monster [because] imagination helped [her] craft a mask, love helped [her] build a temple, and faith helped [her] tell stories).[509] Akin to the fragmented

[508] Ibid, 39.

[509] Ibid, 40 and 41.

woman represented in Picasso's painting, Shalmani begins to cultivate feelings of acceptance by way of art, empowering her to subject herself to her "anomalous" identity: "Mon *vrai* visage est celui de mon adolescence: distordu, flou, difforme. Mon *vrai* visage est à l'image du puzzle que mon grand-père avait entrevu. Le masque de métèque me permet d'être présentable aux yeux des Autres, il aplanait mes aspérités, corrige mes imperfections nées de l'exil, révèle une harmonie qui n'existe plus en moi depuis longtemps" (My *true* face is that of my adolescence: distorted, blurred, deformed. My *true* face is like the puzzle that my grandfather had glimpsed. The mask of the metic allows me to be presentable in the eyes of Others; it smooths out my rough edges, corrects the imperfections born of exile, and reveals a harmony that has not existed in me for a long time).[510]

Representations of the Other: The Aesthetics of the Transgressive Metic

Shalmani's emotional and psychological anxieties as an immigrant, notably her concern for the way she would be perceived by Others, are framed not only as a personal and socio-cultural issue but as one profoundly linked to French History. In *Éloge du métèque*, Shalmani further elaborates on the notion of the "exterior gaze" to highlight the complex dynamics between the binaries of Self and Other, East and West, colonizer and colonized. Although Iranians have not historically been subjects of French colonial rule, the experience of the Iranian diaspora in France has partially been shaped by what Shalmani refers to as France's "tendance à réduire tout métèque à un colonisé, incapable de faire la différence entre un Persan et un Algérien, entre un Sénégalais et un Congolais. Figure familière, héritée des fables coloniales,

[510] Ibid, 41.

le métèque version occidentale est toujours un drame esthétique […] confiné dans une image qui nous dit précisément le malaise de l'Occident face à un Orient qu'il refuse de considérer comme capable de Beauté" (tendency to reduce every metic to a colonized person, incapable of distinguishing between a Persian and an Algerian, between a Senegalese and a Congolese. A familiar figure, inherited from colonial fables, the Western version of the metic is always an aesthetic drama […] confined to an image that precisely expresses the discomfort of the West in the face of an Orient that refuses to consider it as capable of Beauty).[511] Shalmani demonstrates that the conflation and othering of migrants is inextricably linked to late eighteenth century Western Orientalism, which is best defined by Edward Said as the "corporate institution for dealing with the Orient – dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: […] a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient."[512] While Orientalism as a discourse might be dismissed as a thing of the past in contemporary contexts, Shalmani avers that present-day mentalities, prejudices, and stereotypes are directly influenced by the West's Orientalist enterprise according to which "[la] femme orientale est facile, l'Occidentale difficile. L'Orientale aime la chair, l'Occidentale craint Dieu. L'Orientale est sauvée par l'absence de civilisation, elle est l'état de nature avant que l'interdit religieux et le puritanisme ne la gâtent, la transformant en un parangon de vertu incapable de spontanéité et de jouissance" ([t]he Oriental woman is easy, the Western woman difficult. The Oriental loves flesh, the Western woman fears God. The Oriental is saved by the absence of civilization, she is the state of nature before religious

[511] Ibid, 83.
For additional insights into the Iranian diasporic experience in France from the 1980s onward, see: Esfaindyar Daneshvar, *La littérature transculturelle franco-persane: Une évolution littéraire depuis les années 80* (Leiden: Brill, 2019).

[512] Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, 25th anniversary ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 2003), 3.

prohibitions and puritanism spoil her, turning her into a paragon of virtue incapable of spontaneity and pleasure).[513] Historically speaking, this irreconcilable divide between the East and West has not only been a question of *representing* the Other but also of the West granting itself the authority to *subject* and *claim* the Other. In the essay, Shalmani draws parallels between France's colonial expansion and the infantilization and feminization of colonial subjects: "Ce qui est *ici* réglementé, caché, est *là-bas* en libre-service, sans interdit. La *différence culturelle* devient le *droit de prendre*, sans aucune forme de précaution oratoire ou physique, la femme orientale" (What is regulated and hidden here is *there* freely available, without prohibition. *Cultural difference* becomes the *right to take*, without any form of rhetorical or physical precaution, the Oriental woman).[514]

Shalmani's personal experience in France has served as an example of the West's recourse to discriminatory Orientalist ideologies in its treatment of immigrants as marginalized, inferior subjects. Her mother's advice, which were given out of care and protection to ensure that Shalmani upheld a good reputation among her new friends, expressed her mother's unease and lack of sense of belong in the cultural and social milieu of their community: "'Tu es déjà mal aimé du fait de ton statut, fais en sorte de ne pas donner prise à davantage de critiques, de mépris, voire de haine.' […] 'N'oublie pas qu'ils te voient comme une arriérée: les seules images qu'ils connaissent d'Iran, ce sont les femmes laides en tchador et les barbus tout de noir vêtus'" ('You are already disliked because of your status, make sure not to give them more reasons for criticism, contempt, or even hatred.' […] 'Don't forget that they see you as backward: the only images they know of Iran are of ugly women in chadors and bearded men dressed entirely in

[513] Op. cit., Shalmani, *Éloge du Métèque*, 142.

[514] Ibid, 140.

black').[515] Within the confines of home, the relentless preoccupation with "l'œil du voisin, de la rue, [qui] vous juge sans pitié" (the eye of the neighbor, the street, which judges you without pity), reflected her mother's cultural values and was considered to be a means of representing one's own image and that of the native country.[516] For instance, this was expressed through clothing, which, in exile, transformed into an "arm défensive et offensive" (defensive and offensive arm).[517] Despite the financial circumstances of the family, attention to clothing was of utmost importance, as it was a representation of one's good reputation, respect for oneself and others: "On ne se présente pas aux yeux d'autrui mal fagoté, on ne laisse pas d'espace à la critique du pays natal" (One does not present oneself to the eyes of others poorly dressed, one does not leave room for criticism of the homeland).[518] Maintaining elegance and propriety, especially in a foreign country, is described by Shalmani as a "caractéristique d'Orientale, cette importance accordée à l'esthétique, au bien-paraître" (characteristic of the Oriental, this importance accorded to aesthetics and looking good).[519] The immigrant's exterior image and its representation are thus framed as an "acte éminemment politique […] une question morale" (eminently political act […] a moral question) given that the immigrant must continuously remain preoccupied with the watchful gaze of the "superior" Other.[520] Her mother's overwhelming concern for exhibiting eloquence, in clothing and in behavior, has evoked within Shalmani paradoxical emotions since "[ê]tre élégante [lui] rappelle l'immensité de l'amour

[515] Ibid, 78.

[516] Ibid, 78.

[517] Ibid, 79.

[518] Ibid, 79.

[519] Ibid, 78.

[520] Ibid, 81.

maternel, mais aussi [son] exile" ([t]o be elegant reminds [her] of the immensity of maternal love, but also of [her] exile).[521] It would take her numerous years to understand the origins of this issue, which was deeply embedded in the fabric of her everyday life and in the pages of French history.

In 2019, the year during which Shalmani was writing *Éloge du Métèque*, fire set ablaze the historic Notre-Dame de Paris cathedral, a twelfth-century Catholic church that has stood as a symbol of France and its cultural identity. Renowned for its exceptional beauty and Gothic architecture, across the centuries the cathedral has become the bedrock of Paris, a source of inspiration that fueled Victor Hugo's imagination to produce the monumental nineteenth-century novel *Notre-Dame de Paris* (1831). The fascination the book instilled in Shalmani for France – a nation she believes offered her the possibility to emancipate herself from the dictatorial regime of Ayatollah Khomeini – is described as being akin to the infatuation Esmeralda's enchanting beauty instilled in the world around her:

> Chacun des personnages du roman évolue dans un costume trop étriqué, réduit à sa condition sociale et morale, sans possibilité de s'échapper. C'est la bohémienne, l'étrangère, la danseuse, l'Égyptienne, la sorcière et sa chèvre (liée dans l'imaginaire collectif aux cérémonies de sabbat) qui vont être le déclencheur de la crise, rabattant les cartes et poussant tous les personnages, étouffant de désir ou malades d'amour, à commettre l'irréparable, à dévoiler leur visage, à crier leur vérité. […] La Esmeralda, victime expiatoire de sa beauté, victime du désir de l'Autre, de l'amour de l'Autre, victime de sa sincérité, […] est le seul personnage qui dit son amour, qui assume son désir, qui ose la compassion.[522]
>
> Each character in the novel evolves within a costume that is too restrictive, confined to their social and moral condition, with no possibility of escape. It is the Bohemian, the foreigner, the dancer, the Egyptian, the sorceress, and her goat (associated in the collective imagination with Sabbath ceremonies) who become the trigger for crisis, reshuffling the cards and driving all the characters, suffocating with desire or sick with love, to commit the irreparable, to reveal their true selves, to cry out their truths. […]

[521] Ibid, 80.

[522] Ibid, 151-152.

> Esmeralda, the sacrificial victim of her beauty, the victim of the Other's desire, the victim of the Other's love, the victim of her sincerity, […] is the only character who speaks of her love, who embraces her desire, who dares to show compassion.

For Shalmani, the "enfant exilée à Paris" (exiled child in Paris), Notre-Dame and the fictional world it inspired were more than just a French cultural and collective site of memory, the cathedral was a sacred and mythical place that made her dream, a symbolic landmark where the "bâtards, des orphelins, des à-côtés, des êtres entravés et pourtant libres, lutt[aient] contre la violence de l'immobilisme social" (bastards, orphans, outsiders, beings both shackled and yet free, [fought] against the violence of social immobilism).[523] Notre-Dame and its cultural and historical legacy were a source of enchantment but also disillusionment, a fiction in which there was the possibility for Shalmani to "confondre la Esmeralda, et ses longs cheveux noirs et bouclés, ses robes colorées, ses yeux de braise, sa danse exotique, avec une Iranienne, pour [la] rassurer et [lui] donner un modèle d'intégration" (conflate Esmeralda, and her long curly black hair, her colorful dresses, her smoldering eyes, her exotic dance, with an Iranian, in order to reassure her and provide her with a model of integration).[524]

As Shalmani watched on television the embers reduce the cathedral to ashes from across the Atlantic, it was as if she witnessed Esmeralda vanish into thin air, taking down with her the admiration she once deeply felt for France.[525] Feelings of disenchantment are expressed in the following passage:

> […] peut-être que mon historie d'amour avec la France est en train de s'achever, peut-être que je n'avais pas le temps, la disponibilité, le courage de remarquer à quel point la France n'aimait pas ses métèques, trop occupée que j'étais à ma survie, à mon appropriation de la langue, des codes. Dans ma folle course pour me faire accepter, je ne

[523] Ibid, 151.

[524] Ibid, 151.

[525] Ibid, 150.

> savais pas qu'il était possible d'être, dans un même mouvement, fière de tous ses morceaux, les originaux comme les adoptés … […] Je ne peux plus me mentir, je ne peux plus me cacher derrière Victor Hugo, je ne peux plus faire semblant de me croire une métèque heureuse en France, alors que ce pays me regarde encore de traviole tout en m'invitant à sa table – en me plaçant au plus près de la sortie.[526]
>
> ([…] Perhaps my love story with France is coming to an end, perhaps I did not have the time, the availability, the courage to notice how much France did not love its metics, too preoccupied that I was with my survival, with my appropriation of the language and the codes. In my frantic race to be accepted, I did not realize it was possible, in the same movement, to be proud of all one's parts, the original ones as well as the adopted… […] I can no longer lie to myself, I can no longer hide behind Victor Hugo, I can no longer pretend to believe I am a happy metic in France, when this country still looks at me askance even as it invites me to its table – placing me as close as possible to the exit).

Shalmani's visit to America is undeniably a turning point, an eye-opening experience which corroborates the "consensus [that] has emerged in recent years among historians, sociologists, and political and critical theorists that the French universalism set in place by the Revolution of 1789 and consolidated throughout the nineteenth century is in crisis, discredited, and that the Republican model will not hold."[527] Today, the question of immigration plays a central role in this issue, contributing to what Naomi Schor once referred to as "'spectral Universalism,' the shadow of a formerly vigorous and dynamic ideology that once functioned as a powerful force that ensured social cohesion, now reduced to an empty rhetoric in whose cozy and familiar terms present-day ideological battles are fought."[528] According to Schor, the immigrant "has emerged as the prototypical Other of this new French *fin de siècle*" and the "recent reflections on the Other and otherness have been provoked by what [she calls], […] the 'new immigrant,' that is, one who claims the privileges of French citizenship while refusing to renounce his or her cultural

[526] Ibid, 150.

[527] Naomi Schor, "The Crisis of French Universalism," *Yale French Studies*, no. 100 (2001): 48, https://doi.org/10.2307/3090581.

[528] Ibid, 48.

or religious otherness."[529] While "[m]editations on the Other have in recent years occupied some of France's leading intellectuals" due to shifting migratory patterns, its origins can be traced back to the nineteenth century, a period during which France was experiencing the heyday of its colonial expansion.[530] France was not only setting sail to the far reaches of the Orient to fulfill its *mission civilisatrice* (civilizing mission) but was also going to great lengths to assert its dominance in the Western hemisphere – "[c]ulture, and more specifically, a certain idea of cultural greatness, also lie[d] at the core of the republic's mission both inside and outside of its frontiers."[531] France's grandeur was "'deeply embedded in the nation's self-image. […] It reflect[ed] the conviction that France ha[d] an exemplary, universal role as a civilizing force, that its aspirations [were] those of humanity at large'."[532] Although more than two centuries have passed, "[a]cess to the universal, which at least since the French Revolution has defined France's singularity, it's 'exception,' stubbornly remains a key phrase in France's discourse of national self-representation and identity."[533]

While France continues to maintain an immutable attachment to this national narrative even in the present-day, the "crisis" arising from it can be traced back to the mid-nineteenth century, a period defined by "the conservative and status-driven French society […, which was] far from the ideology of the egalitarian society imagined by the partisans of the 1789 French Revolution."[534] Although "French exceptionalism," be it cultural, linguistic, scientific, or

[529] Ibid, 49 and 51.

[530] Ibid, 49.

[531] Roger Célestin, and Eliane Françoise DalMolin, *France from 1851 to the Present: Universalism in Crisis* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 4.

[532] Ibid, 2.

[533] Op. cit., Schor, "The Crisis of French Universalism," 48.

[534] Op. cit., Célestin and DalMolin, *France from 1851 to the Present: Universalism in Crisis*, 11.

political, had reached its apogee in the mid-nineteenth century, "the ideal universalism originally defined as a political principle of inclusiveness seemed more and more unattainable and questionable as it was increasingly overshadowed by exclusion."[535] To analyze this phenomenon, in *France from 1851 to the Present: Universalism in crisis*, Roger Célestin and Eliane DalMolin identify the mid-nineteenth century as the starting point of their study for various crucial reasons. In the introduction, they explain that this a choice that "is dictated by the need to delineate the passage from the republic that emerged from the revolution of 1789, which bequeathed universal principles that were philosophical, civic, and political, to a period when, at the onset of the conservative regime of the Second Empire (1852-1870), the notion of universalism went beyond this essentially political and ideological arena to become an overwhelmingly cultural force."[536] As the title indicates, the primary focus of the book is to explore the notion that French universalism is, indeed, in crisis, which can be explained by the "disappearance of *compatibility* between French universalism and the world."[537] This observation is supported by the claim that France is no longer a "major political and cultural power" unlike the United States, which has offered alternative models that also presented themselves as "universal."[538] Due to the economic and political decline of France after WWII, Célestin and DalMolin argue that it "could no longer sustain or enforce the principles of French republican universalism on a planetary level."[539] They elaborate on this perspective in the following passage:

> […] we locate in the aftermath of WWII, it has become increasingly difficult for the republic to apply policies based on its claimed universalism. This is the phase where,

[535] Ibid, 12.

[536] Ibid, 4.

[537] Ibid, 3.

[538] Ibid, 3 and 6.

[539] Ibid, 6.

> internationally, it no longer dominates and, nationally, has to contend with the appearance of either previously repressed or newly emerging identities claiming their place. In order to maintain a hold on its founding principles in this second phase, the republic has had to make an increasing number of adjustments in its recognition of differences.[540]

To build on this observation that Shalmani echoes in the essay, it will be important to delve into a few points addressed up by Célestin and DalMolin. Two elements, in particular, support the claims made by all three authors. The first pertains to France, more specifically Paris, emerging as an artistic and cultural center in the second half of the nineteenth century, and the latter, the modernization or "what could be called the structural '(r)evolution'" it underwent during that period, which was achieved by the Haussmannization project that ultimately led to the exclusion and disenfranchisement of the underclass.[541] Architect Baron Haussmann was tasked by Napoleon III in 1853 with the renovation of Paris, a project intended to bring about the "universal improvement of all mankind."[542] Despite these positive efforts, the many radical advancements of the urban space also brought disadvantages, which "ended up segregating the classes by empowering the bourgeoisie and excluding a number of others, most notably the working class and the poor" as they were relegated to the peripheries of the city.[543] The project that resulted in the transformation of Paris in ways that rendered it unrecognizable, was to be a representation of France's grandeur, "reflecting the economic and industrial prosperity of the time."[544] The modern urban space unequivocally created a new social geography, one that "affect[ed] and alter[ed] the lifestyle of the people of this era, turning them into modern citizens, mostly bourgeois in nature, living in renewed cities ideally designed and ostensibly built for the

[540] Ibid, 7.

[541] Ibid, 45.

[542] Ibid, 44.

[543] Ibid, 44.

[544] Ibid, 43.

betterment of their lives."[545] In what could be characterized by the "Second Empire's architectural idealism" and its appeal to the universal, the effects of such "advancements" are further highlighted in the following citation. Célestin and DalMolin write:

> We […] begin with the premise that 1851 may well be the pivotal year in the rise and establishment of a ubiquitous and already growing universalism, a universalism marred with exceptions and contradictions but filled with renewed cultural energy both within France's borders and beyond. It was the year when the Universal extended its far-reaching powers to the public, cultural, and artistic spheres of a French society in full industrial expansion, to citizens, who were now in the process of moving from predominantly agrarian and local ways to more urban and worldly lives.[546]

In the years that followed, the economic and socio-cultural objectives and outcomes remained unaltered despite the transition from the Second Empire to the Third Republic. Célestin and DalMolin assert that although the "Third Republic's claim to universalism was […] simultaneously a claim to modernization and progress[, t]hose forces that could not be assimilated in the process were relegated to categories that bore a variety of names: the backward, the unhealthy, the mad, and in one uniform category, the 'different.'[547] These categories uncannily relate to those whom Shalmani refers to in the essay as metics.

As Paris became a cultural hub during the latter part of the nineteenth century, one artist, in particular, was gaining attention for reshaping the landscape of art and its institutions – "carried by the same wave of sweeping universalism, the art world would likewise come to a crucial juncture in 1851. This was the year when Gustave Courbet's famous painting 'Burial at Ornans' – painted in 1849 but exhibited in the winter of 1850-1851 – became the subject of a roaring controversy on the universality of man in artistic representation."[548] Thanks to Courbet's

[545] Ibid, 43.

[546] Ibid, 13.

[547] Ibid, 5.

[548] Ibid, 23.

painting, which came to be regarded (with much hesitation) as the prototype of realist art, "ordinary humanity entered the exclusive world of Art," rendering his masterpiece a deviation from the artistic and socio-cultural conventions of his contemporaries.[549] This was a period when "the world of fine arts, [was] defined by the old and venerated Academy of the Arts, founded in 1648 during the reign of King Louis XIV, [according to which] not all creatures were created equal. In academic terms, only historical figures, men and women of the highest social consideration, or mythological characters were worthy of being represented on canvas."[550] "Burial at Ornans" transgressed all of the aforementioned artistic and socio-cultural standards, given that it was a tremendously large-scale painting depicting ordinary men of a modest provincial town, partaking in a common worldly ritual – a burial. These factors contributed to his painting being rejected for display at the 1855 Paris Universal Exposition, an incredibly important event organized to set France apart from the rest of the world, especially from its long-standing competitor, the United Kingdom. Following the 1851 London World's Fair, "the French realized that the concept of gathering national and international industrial and cultural novelties during an international event would lead to world recognition of their newly developed industry on the one hand and of the status of French culture on the other."[551] Despite Courbet's artwork being rejected by the jury, he gained much popularity and "intellectual attention" with the support of his contemporary Champfleury, who insisted Courbet's painting be recognized as a work of Realism, thereby setting it apart from the school of Romanticism.[552] Champfleury's valuation of "Burial at Ornan" was, indeed, highly criticized because "[a]s long as Courbet's

[549] Ibid, 4.

[550] Ibid, 23.

[551] Ibid, 14-15.

[552] Ibid, 24.

commonplace representations were believed to be of a Romantic nature, no real offense to institutional art was deemed to have been committed."[553] However, this did not turn out to be the case since "his alleged Romanticism all of a sudden became an unacceptable form of realism, identified and recognized by many conventional art critics with whom he quickly fell out of favor. In their eyes, art was a much too elevated cultural form to accommodate representations of everyday life, of 'real' life from all of its inconsequential angles."[554] For the bourgeois society, art was to be the "exclusive domain of high culture, classical and preserved in its ivory tower by the strict censors of the academy."[555] Irrespective of the censure Courbet received, "[f]ar from vindicating himself or responding to attacks from the press, Courbet always endeavoured to turn any reproach to his advantage, transforming every criticism into a reassertion of his identity."[556] It is this said quality in Courbet's artwork and "temperament" that Shalmani appeals to in order to exemplify the transgressive nature and impact of his artistic enterprise, and, more importantly, to emphasize the significance of the specific moment during which Courbet was actively engaged in the socio-political climate. While France, as a colonial power, was asserting its dominance in all realms and claiming recognition for its exceptionalism, Courbet's masterpiece was going against the current of the Empire's artistic, social, and political trends by "allow[ing] a universal sense of freedom to enter the composition and interpretation of the painting [, … giving] artistic considerations to all socioeconomic classes of human beings—all villagers from Ornans regardless of their social status, simple people and notables […] gathered to pay their last

[553] Ibid, 24.

[554] Ibid, 24.

[555] Ibid, 25.

[556] Frédérique Desbuissons, "Courbet's Materialism," *Oxford Art Journal* 31, no. 2 (2008): 255, https://doi.org/10.1093/oxartj/kcn011.

respects."[557] Moreover, the aesthetic attributes of the painting also rendered Courbet's work unconventional given that he represented his subjects in "life-size, a privilege until then reserved for religious, royal, and bourgeois figures." To this end, Courbet's "Burial at Ornans," which a "famous quotation of 1861" "interprets […] as the "burial of romanticism," could be considered a precursor to a new tradition and form of art – one that enables the representation of France's Others in a manner that depicts them in their true form and "temperament" given that for Courbet, paintings were "'an essentially concrete art form …consist[ing] only of representation of real and existing things [, …] an entirely physical language that is composed, by way of words, of all visible objects. An abstract object, not visible, nonexistent, is not within the domain of painting'."[558]

In *Éloge du métèque*, Shalmani draws attention to an equally important painting of Courbet: "The Painter's Studio". The artwork is a self-representation depicting the painter himself seated before his easel in a studio, painting a landscape while encircled by a number of people from all walks of life. Behind him, at the very center, stands a bare woman observing the artist at work over his shoulder, admiring his creation as he applies brushstrokes to the canvas. The grim background and colors of the studio seem to merge with the natural scenery depicted on the canvas, while the multiple figures surrounding the artist appear to be seemingly out of place, positioned in proximity to one another. While, at first glance, the painting appears to represent a collective whole, the nude woman with a long shawl held to her breast diverts the attention to her pale skin, fostering a sense of separation. What further creates a divide between the assembled people is the artist himself, the one envisioned by Courbet painting a landscape

[557] Op. cit., Célestin and DalMolin, *France from 1851 to the Present: Universalism in Crisis*, 24.

[558] Op. cit., Desbuissons, "Courbet's Materialism," 255.

"qui s'y déploie, insistant sur la liberté de l'artiste et la force de l'imaginaire" (which unfolds there, emphasizing the freedom of the artist and the power of the imagination).[559] Much like the painter, some of the individuals are recognizable figures, namely, Alfred Bruyas, Proudhon, Champfleury, and Baudelaire, whereas the others, to a lesser extent. Opposite to them, some of whom are Courbet's friends, and others his contemporaries, is a cohort consisting of both men and women in various postures, representative of "le monde trivial, le monde réel qui inspire et limite le peintre: un chasseur, des paysans, un prêtre, un ouvrier, un mendiant, une guitare posée à terre, une dague, mais aussi le poseur, symbole de l'art académique" (the trivial world, the real world that inspires and limits the painter: a hunter, peasants, a priest, a worker, a beggar, a guitar lying on the ground, a dagger, but also the poser, a symbol of academic art).[560] While many of the aforementioned figures featured in the painting have often been the subject of discussion by academics, Shalmani believes that one person in particular has received less critical attention. In the essay, she draws attention to the presence of the enigmatic woman, who is facing her back to the group of esteemed men and women. Shalmani is referring to the courtesan and salon hostess Apollonie Sabatier, the painter's very own muse and the object of desire and inspiration for many men. Courbet's artistic portrayal of Apollonie, who kept herself in company with talented artists like Théophile Gautier, Balzac, Flaubert, Delacroix, Gérard de Nerval, Henry Murger, and Baudelaire, was symbolic of:[561]

> [l]'idéalisation [qui] est la grande affaire du XIX^{e} siècle, qu'elle soit politique ou artistique, amoureuse ou charnelle, et si le poète aime cette lointaine beauté, elle perd ses pouvoirs d'attraction dès l'instant où elle se fait chair. Courbet la représente, détachée du

[559] Op. cit., Shalmani, *Éloge du Métèque*, 134.

[560] Ibid, 134.

[561] Ibid, 135.

> groupe, au premier plan, en insistant sur la lumière qu'elle dégage à travers le châle qui recouvre ses épaules, soulignant sa place privilégiée.[562]
>
> idealization, which is the great concern of the nineteenth century, whether political or artistic, romantic or sensual, and if the poet loves this distant beauty, it loses its power of attraction the moment it becomes flesh. Courbet represents her, detached from the group, in the foreground, emphasizing the light it radiates through the shawl covering her shoulders, highlighting her privileged position.

What interests Shalmani more is not just Courbet's representation of a courtesan at center stage, but the history behind the person who was to initially be represented in the painting. The woman replaced by Apollonie is argued to be Jeanne Duval, a mixed-race woman born in Saint-Domingue, a former French colony now known as Haiti. Shalmani explains that Duval's presence in the painting was overridden by Apollonie's as a result of the convoluted relationship between her and Courbet's friend, Baudelaire, who demanded that he remove the already painted figure of Duval.[563] Shalmani asserts that to this day, some contend that it is she who is the rightful subject of Courbet's painting and not Apollonie. Apart from the conflicting perspectives related to the painting, the legacy left behind by Duval has remained enigmatic and uncertain. Although she, like Apollonie, was a source of inspiration to Baudelaire and to many other artists across the centuries, her true identity has remained symbolic of a "métèque silencieuse, toile vierge, sur laquelle chacun peut écrire ses fantasmes, […] déformée, démultipliée, dépositaire d'un ailleurs. Aussi lointain que son pays natal" (silent metic, a blank canvas on which anyone can write their fantasies, […] deformed, multiplied, a bearer of another world. As distant as her homeland).[564] For Shalmani, it comes as no surprise that Duval was effaced from the painting, given that, to begin with, she had no place in the studio. As if, it is only *beneath* Apollonie's

[562] Ibid, 135.

[563] Ibid, 136.

[564] Ibid, 139.

shawl (extended across the canvas) that the occluded presence of a metisse woman so longed-for yet concealed can be arduously traced, a process which brings to mind France's relationship to its own historical past – hauntingly present yet often erased from its collective memory. Shalmani writes, "[l]e châle raconte une histoire. Il raconte les débuts de l'expansion coloniale et ses richesses, la naissance de l'orientalisme avec ce que cela charrie d'images d'indolence, de sensualité, de luxe, de lointain, d'exotisme, qui ne cessera plus de fasciner – et de repousser –, mais surtout il me raconte une absente" ([t]he shawl tells a story. It tells of the beginnings of colonial expansion and its riches, the birth of Orientalism with all the images it carries of indolence, sensuality, luxury, the distant, and exoticism, which will continue to fascinate – and repel – but above all, it recounts to me of an absence).[565] Despite Courbet's efforts to conceal Duval's identity, for reasons unknown, some believe that "les couches de peinture qui l'ont effacée l'ont fait réapparaître au fil du temps" (the layers of paint that erased her made her reappear over time).[566] Could this perspective lend credence to Shalmani's interpretation of the painting? One point remains certain: like Duval, the enigmatic figure of the metic, has continued to remain a national myth, an absence, a misrepresented figure who must continuously grapple with forces that attempt to diminish and undermine the vital role he or she plays in their adoptive communities. Similar to Duval's "absent" presence in Courbet's painting and in the pages of History, the metic reorients itself in a liminal place – "Il y a toujours une période d'en être et la volonté de fuir. C'est dans cet interstice que se loge peut-être la seule réelle identité du métèque: le manque. Il est ce qu'il ne peut être, il est ce qu'il ne peut que fantasmer. Monstre à mille têtes créé par ses propres parents, il est le souvenir de ce qui ne sera plus et le seul espoir d'une tribu

[565] Ibid, 135-136.

[566] Ibid, 136.

dont il est censé redorer le blason" (There is always a period of being and the desire to escape. It is in this interstice that perhaps the only true identity of the metic resides: absence. He is what he cannot be, he is what he can only fantasize about. A monster with a thousand heads created by his own parents, he is the memory of what will no longer be and the only hope of a tribe whose reputation he is meant to restore).[567]

Shalmani's compelling essay is a testament to the power of storytelling, achieved by interlacing a rich tapestry of cultural, historical, and literary figures and their trajectories to narrate the universal condition of metics, in other words, those who live where they are not born. Each individual, both fictional and real, that Shalmani references in the essay belongs to a distinct culture, history, time period, and origin, collectively illustrating a wide range of backgrounds. However, what unites them is a shared "démarche esthétique […] qui n'entend rien à l'ordre, au respect de la perspective, aux règles communes et qui, sur la toile, ou avec des mots, dessine un monde où la gravité n'existe pas" (aesthetic approach […] that understands nothing of order, with respect to perspective, to common rules, and that, on the canvas, or with words, draws a world where gravity does not exist).[568] Gravity for the immigrant *cannot* exist because he or she treads along, crossing boundaries, with no intention of settling down their roots since "[l]e retour au bercail lui est interdit, l'appropriation du pays d'adoption a ses limites – les limites du sang, en particulier celui qui a largement coulé" ([t]he return to the homeland is forbidden to him, the appropriation of the country of adoption has its limits – the limits of blood, particularly that which has flowed abundantly).[569]

[567] Ibid, 174.

[568] Ibid, 99.

[569] Ibid, 174.

In *Khomeiny, Sade et moi*, *Les exilés meurent aussi d'amour*, and *Éloge du métèque*, Shalmani highlights the importance of self-love, self-acceptance and testifying to the truth in the long and arduous process of integration. The current condition of the immigrant in France demands that one assume this perspective. For Shalmani, reaching this conclusion was achieved not by slavishly attaching herself to the past or to an unknown future but by what she describes as assuming the present to be a daily creation. She writes, "il faut des années pour s'autonomiser et oser avancer d'un pas solitaire vers l'avenir en gardant un œil sur un passé qui vous échappe sans que vous puissiez le renier. Le métèque est un équilibriste" (it takes years to become autonomous and dare to take a solitary step toward the future while keeping an eye on a past that eludes you yet cannot be denied. The metic is a tightrope walker).[570] Experiencing the plurality of America during the symbolic moment when the Notre-Dame was set ablaze became an important junction that compelled Shalmani to testify to her own experience and reveal her truth, much like Victor Hugo's Esmeralda. While Shalmani's lived experience in France and her literary enterprise demonstrate that her intent is not to disparage France or undermine the gratitude she feels toward her adoptive country, the essay urges the social and political institutions of France to re-evaluate both its past and present so that the French nation may have an opportunity to engage in introspection and to redress the flaws of its political system. The following passage extracted from one of her latest essays entitled *Laïcité, j'écris ton nom* (2024), reiterates the socio-political tensions of contemporary France, depicting what may be characterized as insoluble culture wars. Shalmani urges the reconciliation between two opposing perspectives, one that cannot move past France's former glory, and the other that ceaselessly

[570] Ibid, 172.

castigates France for its past, thus enslaving the nation in self-hate and denying it of a future where intercultural compassion and diversity may thrive:

> […] un nombre considérable d'intellectuels français qui voient dans l'amour de la France le signe du fascisme, dans l'enthousiasme pour la culture française la preuve d'un nationalisme rance. La haine de soi brouille la réalité historique, détruit l'altérité et ouvre la porte à une flagellation sans fin, où tout aspect positif de la République est renié, au nom de la seule colonisation. L'histoire de France ne peut pas se résumer ni aux Lumières, ni à Napoléon, ni à l'esclavage, ni à de Gaulle, ni au Conseil national de la résistance, mais à un ensemble complexe d'avancées et d'érreurs, d'aspects lumineux et de choix condamnables. Aimer la France n'est pas souscrire à la colonisation, nier la réalité de la collaboration, ou applaudir le Code noir. Aimer la France, c'est reconnaître, dans le même mouvement, ses lumières et ses errements, ses incroyables révolutions et ses lamentables contre-révolutions.[571]
>
> […] a considerable number of French intellectuals who see in the love for France a sign of fascism, and in enthusiasm for French culture, proof of a rancid nationalism. Self-hatred distorts historical reality, destroys otherness, and opens the door to endless self-flagellation, where every positive aspect of the Republic is denied in the name of colonization alone. The history of France cannot be reduced to the Enlightenment, Napoleon, slavery, de Gaulle, or the National Council of Resistance, but rather to a complex whole of advancements and errors, of luminous aspects and condemnable choices. Loving France does not mean endorsing colonization, denying the reality of collaboration, or applauding the *Code Noir*. Loving France means acknowledging, in the same gesture, its lights and its failings, its incredible revolutions and its lamentable counter-revolutions.

Like its immigrants, who rely on their own resources and creative initiatives to address their bureaucratic, economic, and social challenges, France, as a nation, must look within its own borders and its own history – both past and present – to find solutions to the internal divisions among its diverse populations. After all, as Shalmani maintains, it has not been a big deal to "passer pour une hystérique nationaliste aux yeux de ceux qui ne comprenaient rien ni à la France, ni aux réfugiés, ni à la douleur d'avoir perdu son pays d'origine[.] […] [C]e n'était pas grave d'être seule avec son amour pour le pays d'adoption et sa nostalgie éternelle du pays de naissance. […] Heureusement que la France pouvait compter sur ses exilés, ses immigrés, ses pauvres, ses sans-terres pour recevoir un peu d'amour" (pass for a hysterical nationalist in the

[571] Abnousse Shalmani, *Laïcité, j'écris ton nom!* (Paris: Éditions de l'Observatoire, 2024), 31-32.

eyes of those who understood nothing about France, nor about refugees, nor about the pain of having lost one's country of origin […] [It] was not a bit to be alone with one's love for the country of adoption and the eternal nostalgia for the country of birth. […] Fortunately, France could count on its exiles, its immigrants, its poor, its landless to receive a little love).[572] As Shalmani eloquently demonstrates across all her literary works, it has only been through cultivating love, toward oneself and humanity, that she has been afforded the chance to ward off ignorance.

[572] Abnousse Shalmani, *Khomeiny, Sade et moi* (Paris: Éditions Grasset & Fasquelle, 2014), 287.

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