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Flights From History: Gina Barkhordar Nahai and Dalia Sofer's Fiction

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# THE JEWS OF IRAN

*For Angel*

The History, Religion, and Culture of a  
Community in the Islamic World

Edited by  
HOUMAN M. SARSHAR

I.B. TAURIS

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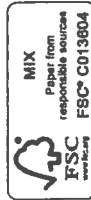
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5 Kikes [editor's note].

6 See, for example, vol. 2, pp. 317–23. For an English translation of these pages, see: Homa Sarshar, "In Exile at Home," in L. Khazoom, *The Flying Camel: Essays on Identity by Women of North Africa and Middle Eastern Jewish Heritage* (New York, 2003), pp. 123–30.

## CHAPTER 9

### FLIGHTS FROM HISTORY IN GINA BARKHORDAR NAHAI AND DALIA SOFER'S FICTION

*Nasrin Rabimiehb*

The workings of memory have been central to the emergence of Iranian American writing, and the prevalence of the genre of memoir among Iranian American writers attests to this apparent dominance of memory in the Iranian American literary corpus. The penchant toward autobiographical writing has, however, sometimes led to conflations of these memoirs and of historical realities by both readers and reviewers, resulting in heated debates about the purported political objectives of the memoirists.<sup>1</sup> The discussions surrounding these memoirs and their manner of representation of a personal or collective past underline how they are read for their reliable depiction of given moments in time.<sup>2</sup> Such readings neglect the extent to which the act of writing is itself formative of the narrating subject, or to cite Michael Sprinker, "no autobiography can take place except within the boundaries of a writing where concepts of subject, self, and author collapse into the act of producing a text."<sup>3</sup> Gina Barkhordar Nahai, a Jewish Iranian American novelist, provides a different perspective on the fraught relationship between the author, her memories, and their integration into a narrative. Addressing a question about her own relationship to memory, she challenges the

view that memory can serve as a reliable form of documentary evidence: "Memory, of course, is a selective device; it never retains the entirety of an experience. What we remember is not what was, but what we saw, and that recollection, in turn, is altered and amended over time by other subjective factors."<sup>1</sup> And yet, as Nahai points out in the same interview, her novels are means of bearing witness to the collective history of Jewish Iranians. Quoting from one of her novels, *Caspian Rain*, she states: "Memory does not often serve the truth. I have learned this. I know I might have heard a vow my father never uttered, held on to the pipe dream of a promise he never made. But imperfect as it may be, memory is all I have to help me bear witness."<sup>5</sup> Nahai's declaration highlights an alternative intersection of memory and narrative that creates a space in which the real competes with the improbable and the unreal, shifting the focus away from a direct and exclusive correspondence between fictional representation and factual reality. In Dorrit Cohn's formulation, "fiction is subject to two closely interrelated distinguishing features: (1) its references to the world outside the text are not bound to accuracy; and (2) it does not refer exclusively to the real world outside the text."<sup>6</sup> One of the possibilities opened up as a result of the decoupling of the text and the "real world" is to heighten neglected aspects of history or to create alternative and imaginative realities in which the marginalized and the abject are foregrounded. Gina Barkhordar Nahai and Dalia Sofer, two writers who will be the focus of this analysis, draw on fictional representation to develop an oblique relationship to the history of Jewish Iranian experience, to mine and interrogate communal memory and tradition, and to lay bare the mechanisms of subjection and how they reproduce themselves within the Jewish community. Disentangled from the imperative to represent the past accurately, Nahai and Sofer's works realign the power relations between and across lines of traditional authority. Their fiction, in contrast to the memoirs drawn from a similar history, sheds the yoke of the past, carving out an imaginative site of potential for change and self-transformation.

The reworking of collective history into fiction is evident in Gina Barkhordar Nahai's works. Her first novel, *Cry of the Peacock*,

published in 1991, is a historical novel that weaves together representations of Jewish Iranian life from the eighteenth century to the 1980s. In the acknowledgements that appear at the end of the novel, Nahai outlines the sources on which she drew:

I began with my own memories, and then asked questions. I spoke to hundreds of Iranians, Jews and Muslims, old and young. Through years of interviews and volumes of books, I became familiar with a history—albeit recent—that had been buried by the last of the ghetto generation "as if to wipe away three thousand years of suffering."<sup>7</sup>

The plurality of voices that served Nahai lays the groundwork for a fictional narration that defies the strictures of historical time and the dictates of the real. For instance, in the opening chapter of the novel we are introduced to Peacock, a woman whose very appearance poses a challenge to the Islamic revolutionaries who have imprisoned her:

She had been in jail for three weeks, and still no one had decided her fate. She had arrived one summer afternoon surrounded by Guards, sitting in the back of a military jeep with her face unveiled and her hair uncovered. She had sat in her clothes that shocked the eye and defied all Islamic codes, in layers of bright chiffon and fiery silk, yellow scarves and sequined shirts and a gold-embroidered belt above a crushed velvet skirt. [...] Still, it was not her clothes that so shocked the mullahs, it was her age. Peacock the Jew was so old, they said, she remembered God when he was a child.<sup>8</sup>

The post-revolutionary Islamic dress code imposed rules of modesty on women, forbidding them to show their hair and to wear bright colors. Peacock's mode of dress and the panoply of colors in which she has enveloped her body diminish the power her captors hold over her. Moreover, as she sits in her prison cell and listens to the daily execution of prisoners, she refuses to see herself as one of their potential victims. When a guard questions her about her in the past

tense, "as if her life were over," she responds: "I am a hundred and sixteen years old... and still I intend to live."<sup>9</sup> Peacock's defiance is graphically illustrated in the closing chapter of the novel:

And there was a moment of calm, an instant when Peacock's eyes locked into the Guard's and she found herself purged of fear, understood that she must act, speak out, if only once, before she died. She stepped into the execution yard—removed and rational—picked up the machine gun with an unwavering hand, and placed the barrel on the man's chest. She did not fire.<sup>10</sup>

That Peacock holds the machine gun but does not use it against her jailor/executioner places her in a power relationship that supersedes physical might. Opting to die in defiance rather than deference to revolutionary authority is the ultimate power she wields in this moment. As in this scene, throughout the novel, the reality of the revolution and the impossibility of escaping the executioners are offset by the extraordinary power exerted by women like Peacock, descendants of Esther the Soothsayer, their foremother, whose own story begins in 1796. While anchoring female characters in a historical frame, *Cry of the Peacock* highlights their exceptional abilities to transcend the confines of time, religious taboo and the power of patriarchy.

Esther the Soothsayer is endowed with the ability to "read people's eyes, walk into their dreams when they were asleep, and probe their minds,"<sup>11</sup> and yet she is trapped in a life of servitude: "She was a Jew, born of a mother who had worked and died in the service of the Sheikh's family, inherited by him and doomed to spend her youth and desire as a slave without a face, until she was too old to work and they sent her back to die in the ghetto [...]."<sup>12</sup> When she chooses to travel to places she has seen in her dreams, she finds herself rejected by the Jewish quarter or mahalleh on the assumption that "she must have been driven out [... ]—punished by her own people and banned for a crime she had come here to hide. She must have been a thief, an adulteress, a whore."<sup>13</sup> Her supernatural powers remain her only means of transcending her fate

as a Jewish woman. Her daring to leave, her ability to insert herself in others' dreams, and her seduction of the man whom she coerces into marrying her make her suspicious in the eyes of the new community she chooses to settle in. Driven from her new home, she becomes a wanderer with a unique power to oversee generations of her offspring.

Esther the Soothsayer's unabashed desire and her forthright manner of commanding make the men of the mahalleh very nervous. In her refusal to be contained and possessed, she embodies the libidinal economy Hélène Cixous describes:

She doesn't hold still, she overflows. An outpouring that can be agonizing, since she may fear, make the other fear, endless aberration and madness is her release. Yet, vertiginous, it can also be intoxicating—as long as the personal, the permanence of identity is not fetishized—a "where-am-I," a "who-enjoys-there," a "who-I-where-delight": questions that drive reason, the principle of unity, mad, and that are not asked, that ask for no answer, that open up the space where woman is wandering, roaming (a rogue wave), flying (thieving).<sup>14</sup>

This unleashing, like Esther the Soothsayer's unauthorized roaming, questions the underlying assumption of women's inferiority, inscribed in myths, legends and cultural tradition. The "subordination of the feminine to the masculine order, which gives the appearance of being the condition for the machinery's functioning"<sup>15</sup> is repeatedly destabilized by female characters in the *Cry of the Peacock*.

The female character that best epitomizes the tension between the male domination and female resistance is Taraneh the Tulip. Daughter of a rabbi in Shiraz, she learns the price of disobeying her father when she tries to look at her likeness in a block of melting ice. Her father punishes her by shaving her head. To hide her shame, she locks herself away in the basement of their house where she discovers a *santur*,<sup>16</sup> musical instrument, which she takes up playing and continues to play secretly for ten years. When her secret is discovered, this time at the hands of her husband, Taraneh the Tulip leaves home

never to return. Her flight from home is a first step toward her self-transformation into a musician and performer:

She traveled across Persia, chased from one ghetto and into another, and in every place she learned the people's music and dances. When she arrived in Juy Bar she was twenty-six years old and resolved to stay. The first time Raab Yahya attacked her at his Sabbath sermon, warning the people against "the stranger with the wicked instrument," Taraneh the Tulip realized she must fight. That night she appeared in the ghetto square, dressed in a scarlet gown, her hands and face painted crimson, her hair glowing red. She waited for an audience to gather, took a bow, and then began to dance—a slow, graceful performance that lasted twelve minutes, and in the course of which she managed to re-create a tulip's life from inception to end. No one ever called Taraneh "whore" again.<sup>17</sup>

Taraneh the Tulip's transformation empowers her not only vis-à-vis the inhabitants of the mahalleh, it entitles her to act on her desires and to disrupt the order of life both in the Jewish and the Muslim communities. In 1869, when she is asked to perform at the wedding of the governor's son to the daughter of Esfahan's Friday prayer leader, she becomes the source of the wedding's disruption:

It was an unprecedented event, the greatest wedding in a hundred years, and every person of rank and reputation was invited. The groom was twenty years old, educated in Baghdad, and so rich he had waived his right to a dowry. The bride's family were so eager to form the union, they had insisted on a wedding only two weeks after the courtship had begun. The night of the celebrations, they were outraged to find a Jew among the performers. Still, not wishing to spoil the festivities, they had allowed Taraneh to make her appearance. Halfway through her Tulip act, the governor's son annulled the wedding. He had fallen in love, he said, with the Jew in the scarlet gown.<sup>18</sup>

Her dreams are realized with her marriage to the governor's son and the move into a "house with rooms full of music."<sup>19</sup> Taking possession of her own desires, Taraneh the Tulip becomes a symbol of resistance to a history that condemns Jews and women, as the narrator of the novel indicates, to a life of abnegation:

The Jews, as anywhere else in Persia, were considered impure and untouchable. They were not allowed to live and work outside their ghetto, to plant their own food or drink from public waters. The men wore red or yellow patches on their clothes, the women covered their faces with thicker veils than those reserved for Muslims. Anything a Jew touched became soiled forever. If accused of a crime, a Jew could not testify in his own defense. He could not even step out of the ghetto on a rainy day for fear that the rain may wash the impurity off his body and onto a Muslim's.<sup>20</sup>

Against such historical imperatives, the novel posits the seemingly unreal women capable of crossing barriers and taboos and altering their fate. The women's potential for transformation is even more pointedly inscribed in Nahai's 1999 novel, *Moonlight on the Avenue of Faith*.

If *Cry of the Peacock* moves across centuries, *Moonlight on the Avenue of Faith* is concerned primarily with Jewish life in twentieth-century Iran and the migration of Iranian Jews to the United States in the aftermath of the 1979 revolution. The double movement between confinement and self-actualization is equally pronounced in this novel, as is one of the central character's seemingly unreal attributes. The novel begins with such an improbable predicament faced by the first-person narrator, Lili's mother, Roxanna the Angel:

As I watch her now, three hundred and ninety pounds and gaining by the day, her frame so vast she has not been able to pull it upright in more than two months or to fit through any doorway without first having to take the door off its hinges, her breath so stormy it makes the dogs bark all the way up



and down the street where she now lives with her sister in Los Angeles, and sets the piano in their neighbor's house playing mad tunes at odd hours of the night, it is impossible to believe that my mother, Roxanna the Angel, was once a young woman with watercolor eyes and translucent skin, that she could strop the world with her laughter and compel men, my father among them, to follow her across an entire city without knowing why they chased her or what they could do if ever she stopped and answered their calls, that she had been so light and delicate, so undisturbed by the rules of gravity and the drudgery of human existence, she had grown wings, one night when the darkness was the color of her dreams, and flown into the star-studded night of Iran that claimed her.<sup>21</sup>

Roxanna the Angel's immobility signals a reverse transformation, from a woman capable of taking flight to one shackled by enormous weight. Roxanna's condition literalizes the metaphor of the weight of sorrow she has accumulated in the process of fleeing her home and leaving her five-year-old daughter behind. Her sister Miriam spells this out for Lili, Roxanna the Angel's daughter, pointing the way to a possible cure:

She is dying of guilt, you see. Over what she did to you, and to your father before you. She is dying of Sorrow, over the life that she wasted, that she could have fixed but didn't. So much pain bottles up in you, so many tears, and after a while it has nowhere to go, and it begins to kill you. There is a word for it in Farsi: *Degh*, 'to die of Sorrow.' I figure Roxanna never got the chance—gave herself the chance—to go back and ask for forgiveness. I figure if she did that—with you, at least, if not with Sohrab—she might release some if those tears and start to recuperate.<sup>22</sup>

Roxanna's inability to give voice to the sorrow she has buried deeply within her is reflected in the inner monologue we witness as she watches her daughter prepare the ritual cure of almond tears:

*There is a sorrow within me so deep, I have not been able to give it a name, I want to tell Lili.*

*It is my mother's sorrow, and her mother's—the tears that they shed in the tear jar, that they drank alone, inconsolable.*

*I did not want my daughter to have this sorrow. I did not want to leave you those tears.*

*That is why I left: to take the sorrow out of your eyes.*

*It is not as if I sacrificed myself to save you. It was not your needs I was thinking of, but my own. More than anything else, more than the need to be with my child or the love I felt for Teymur, more than the instinct to simply live, I wanted to end the sorrow.*

*I came back and saw that I had lost.<sup>23</sup>*

Roxanna's condition, as revealed in her own words, is caused not only by the weight of guilt: it also stems from self-betrayal. She runs away from home to suppress her desires, mimicking the edicts of tradition and male authority. Her exile thus becomes a self-banishment that renders her immobile and silent.

While Roxanna the Angel gives up her ability to fly, her daughter Lili turns exile into a potential for freeing herself from the weight of the past. Lili's recollection of her first encounters with the waves of Iranian exiles arriving in Los Angeles encapsulates her own sense of exile and the newcomers' malaise with their sense of being in limbo:

Often in those days, I saw Iranians who had come to Los Angeles to escape the riots that would turn into a revolution. They always walked in groups, the men wearing business suits even in the August sun, as if to prove to themselves and to others that they were not exiles, that they had had important work to do all their lives, that their jobs and offices were still waiting for them. They walked ahead of their wives, hands clasped behind their backs and heads lowered in conversation with their friends. They spoke of the latest news from Iran—the banks that had shut down, the companies that had burned to the ground, the exchange rate of the rial.<sup>24</sup>

The purposefulness with which the newly displaced Iranians comport themselves attests to their unwillingness to let go of the idea of an imminent return. By continuing to situate their gaze toward the home they have unwillingly left behind they maintain the ties Roxanna deliberately severs. Her daughter Lili's reaction is initially to envy her compatriots: "I watched them—travelers in a foreign land, exiles waiting to go home. As lost and homesick as they were, they clung together and managed to recreate, every day that they spent away from home, a sense of belonging, a community that I had never known. I was the real exile, I thought on those afternoons in the park—the traveler who would never find her destination."<sup>25</sup> But the sense of loss is quickly replaced by the recognition of a mobility she has acquired through painful ruptures and losses: "But on other occasions, watching my compatriots and how they had brought with them not only their sense of home and community but also their pasts loaded with failed hopes and lost expectations — on these occasions I would remember [...] that Sohrab might have done me a favor by sending me away."<sup>26</sup> What we see in Lili's grappling with her position vis-à-vis her past is a movement away from the hold the past has on her to a present of her own making. A similar movement has been foreclosed in her mother's self-imposed exile.

Other forms of immobility are captured in Nahai's latest novel, *Caspian Rain*. The novel is the story of Yaas, the single daughter of an unlikely couple. Her mother, Bahar, whose name means spring, is born into a poor family in Tehran's Jewish quarter. True to her name, Bahar is filled with exuberance, but mistakenly assumes that beyond the mahalleh lie mobility and freedom. She imagines that love and marriage will provide her with an entrée to a new life, and she believes that marrying a man from a higher class will allow her to pursue her dream of studying and becoming a teacher.

When she first meets her future husband, Omid, she overlooks all that separates her from Omid's affluent family. In Persian Omid means hope, and on him Bahar pins all her hopes. Class differences between Bahar and Omid's families prove insurmountable:

It is true that the Arbabs are Jews, but that's where the similarities end between them and Bahar's family. Mr. Arbab's wealth makes him a person who deserves to be admired and envied. His wife's life of comfort makes it inevitable that she would have nothing but disdain for Bahar's mother—look at this woman, she probably isn't so old, but she looks decades older than I, her skin is cracked like the desert floor and she obviously hasn't heard of hair dye or she would have done something about that gray; it's people like her who give Jews a bad name.

Not for them—no thanks—these trappings of ghetto life.<sup>27</sup>

Living with the Arbabs introduces Bahar to a whole new set of internalized taboos. For instance, while she can and must dress the part of the modern and fashionable woman, she cannot go to school.

Instead of gaining access to higher education and a professional life, Bahar enters a circle of women preoccupied with the latest fashions and interminable dinner parties. The city's elite, she discovers, flaunt their wealth, mimic Western norms but continue to view women as extensions of their husbands. The women appear to have internalized the society's image of themselves: "Every woman I know, even the ones who refer to themselves as 'thinking people,' which means they understand more than most women but not as much as men, believes that girls are like weeds; they grow anywhere, survive illness and misfortune, even if you don't want them to."<sup>28</sup>

There is little room for women to maneuver outside the bounds of marriage. In an attempt to gain control through her marriage, Bahar succumbs to the expected role of motherhood, but her daughter is born with a debilitating genetic disease, leading to yet another disappointment:

So she lived in a state of perpetual loss—the runner who gives her all to the race and always comes short. She couldn't give up the fight and couldn't quite win and so she was caught between the pride of battle and the shame of defeat. And in that state, in that place where rest was impossible and wanting led

only to more sorrow, she bore me expecting that I, at least, would not fail.

What if you bet your whole life on a single wish, and lost?<sup>29</sup>

While Bahar is caught between these two contradictory impulses, Yaas observes and internalizes her parents' anguish. When her father broaches the possibility of divorce with his own father, he receives a lesson from his father in the social, cultural and religious taboos that he, like generations before him, have upheld:

"Like it or not," he says, "there are things we allow ourselves, and boundaries we don't cross. No one is telling you to give up your mistress, but you have to realize you're a Jew and she's a Muslim, you have a name to honor and she's the child of an opium addict and a woman who whored herself for a new husband. I don't like your wife and I don't know what you're going to do with your kid but they're *your* burden to bear and I won't have the stigma of divorce haunting us in this town."<sup>30</sup>

The power structures close in on themselves, re-consolidating the very order Bahar had hoped to escape through her marriage.

The only moments of resistance and defiance we find in the novel are experienced by women who do not fit the expected norms and stand on the margins of society. For example, we find a character called the Tango Dancer: "Every afternoon at the hour of sleep, the woman in the yellow house opens all the windows and plays her wild, breathless music on a giant gramophone till she has awakened every soul on the Alley of the Champions and June Street. She plays the music at other times too, without regard for her neighbors or for the Islamic calendar that forbids music and dance and other displays of immorality during certain parts of the year,"<sup>31</sup> and the Kurdish servant Ruby who has the "presumptuous manners and earsplitting laugh of a rebel who has, by sheer resolve, made a life for herself in Tehran."<sup>32</sup> Omid's paramour, Niyaz, represents the possibility of escaping the margins. Niyaz, whose name means "need," defies the

norms with no apparent harm to her standing: "So she lives with him in sin without bothering to hide herself, and yet, instead of being stoned or spat on or at least shunned for her immoral ways, she is the darling of Tehran's high society and the object of admiration by both men and women, and there is no telling how she pulls this off, no way to make sense of it except to say that God loves some people more than others."<sup>33</sup> Niaz's figurative authority is encapsulated in her name: needs whose dictates, when disregarded, stand in opposition to social conventions, mores and taboos. Omid, Bahar and Yaas all succumb to the laws that delimit social conduct between men and women, among members of different religions, and across class distinctions. But Niyaz imposes herself on the accepted and the normative, wreaking havoc in the social order.

Women like Niyaz, Esther the Soothsayer and Taraneh the Tulip embody the potential to disrupt the order of things. Like the revolution that looms over three of Nahai's novels, they represent the potential for turmoil, but they also tap into a mobility that is otherwise foreclosed within the limits of Jewish Iranian tradition and lore. Drawing on fiction as a means of writing about the past positions, Nahai's novels speak against a tradition of women's marginalization. In the new diaspora setting, Barkhordar Nahai takes charge of how to redraw the lines between a past marked by marginalization and victimization and a present in the making.

In Dalia Sofer's novel *The Septembers of Shiraz*, the revolution also occupies a central position. The novel begins with Isaac Amin's imprisonment and ends with the family's escape from Iran. Despite the novel's depiction of the ordeal of a Jewish Iranian family caught in the early days of the revolution, it too captures the potential to wrest mobility and change from turmoil and loss. The final passage of the novel, narrated from Isaac's perspective, encapsulates this potential: "But for now he looks at his wife, with whom he has shared an education in grief, and at his daughter, who is falling asleep standing up. Later in Istanbul they will sit by the Bosphorus, squirting lemon on their grilled fish, remembering the Caspian and imagining all the waters that await them elsewhere."<sup>34</sup> This time of possibility and the "elsewhere" is inscribed throughout the novel so thoroughly

that it engulfs the past and makes the memory of the past pregnant with a loss that is yet to come.

Shirin, Amin's daughter, anticipates their departure and imagines a "not being"<sup>35</sup> she projects onto her home:

What happens to a house full of nonbeings? What if, like her father, she, her mother, and Habibeh would one day disappear also? The house, of course, would not know it. That would be the sad part. The house would continue to exist. Its walls would remain in the same place, the doors ready to be opened and closed. The plates and glasses too, would stay, even though there would be no one to eat or drink out of them. The chairs would stand still, their laps ready to serve. And the clocks' needles would continue moving forward, and at midnight starting all over again, as though the day that just ended have never been.<sup>36</sup>

By imagining that the movement of time and life would continue without the inhabitants of the house, Shirin removes herself and her family not only from the home that has become associated with her father's absence and the revolutionary guards' intrusions, but also a history of herself that had seemed irrevocably linked to this site. Seeing her family home devoid of the family members, she takes the first step toward moving to the "elsewhere" her father embraces at the end of the novel.

The psychological disorientation Shirin practices conditions her moment of departure. This moment, too, is filled with a conscious self-possession:

Looking out the window, she realizes that they will never travel on this road again. Miles of asphalt disappear under their wheels, bringing them closer to the sea and to the end of their lives here. Yet it is not sadness she feels, but an emptiness, a certain guilt even, for not feeling sad enough. A departure like this, so definite, should devastate her. It doesn't. She tries to memorize her surroundings—the ridges on the rocks, the color

of the sun as it illuminates the road, the stretches of sea coming in and out of view according to the curves of the road—knowing that someday she will miss them. But there are too many details to remember, too much to record in a single viewing, and she wishes now that she had paid more attention back when she believed that, like the mountain, and the sun, and the sea, she would always be there.<sup>37</sup>

Interestingly, the overabundance of the details do not overwhelm her, and even the awareness that some day she might look back nostalgically is rationalized and put into a perspective she has already mastered.

The novel's thematization of a refusal to become caught up in the imperative of nostalgia and its alternating chapters between Iran and New York, where one of Amin's sons lives and studies, complicates the conflation of the narrative with historical specificity. This is not to say that *The Septembers of Shiraz* eradicates any links with the fate of Iranian Jews after the revolution, but rather that it makes the relationship to the past secondary to the creation of a new imaginative landscape that anticipates and carves out an "elsewhere." This is signaled in the tropes of movement and mobility in Sofer's novel, aligning it with Nahai's works.

Nahai and Sofer's respective works move further beyond the imperative of Iranian American memoirs and autobiographies, which in Gillian Whitlock's words are

narratives of trauma that remain preoccupied with an experience of estrangement, a "little death" of the self and a painful loss of the known world. The intensity of this death of a self and its habitus engenders resurrection through memoir as a Western metropolitan intellectual, and a Diasporic subject, with a troubled and ambivalent relation to a lost homeland and, it follows, to contemporary Iranian society and culture.<sup>38</sup>

If Nahai and Sofer's novels represent loss and estrangement, they situate this loss and estrangement not as a "little death," but rather as

an integral factor in a movement and process of becoming. To counter the power of a past laden with painful memories, Nahai and Sofer make memory and history into material to be reworked through representations that locate the possibilities for alternative histories that signal the path to what is to come.

### Notes

- 1 The most well-known example centers on Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, which has been the subject of extensive discussion. For detailed discussions, see Gillian Whitlock, *Soft Weapons: Autobiography in Transit* (Chicago, 2007), particularly Chapter 7, "The Pangs of Exile: Memoir Ouy of Iran;" and Sharareh Frouzesh Bennett and Nasrin Rahimieh, "Representations: Memoirs, Autobiographies, Biographies: Writing in Another Language: Iranian Women Writing in English," in *Encyclopedia of Women and Islamic Cultures* [online] <[http://joseph.uclavis.edu/Images\\_1/homepage/ewic/preview-of-ewic-online-supplement-1-2](http://joseph.uclavis.edu/Images_1/homepage/ewic/preview-of-ewic-online-supplement-1-2)>, first published spring 2010, last accessed on July 2, 2014.
- 2 As Amy Malek reminds us in her 2006 article on memoir as Iranian exile cultural production, many issues are integral to the analysis of memoir writing: "The fact that [...] women have gained more commercial success for their memoirs than their poetic anthologies, novels, or academic articles, points, I would argue, to the implicit reason behind their writing in memoir genre: the command of the market economy and the commercial inaccessibility of non-memoir genres to Iranian women. It appears that, while Iranian women's voices may appeal to readers in this particular moment for a variety of reasons, they are still confined and pigeonholed within the memoir genre by an industry—unable or unwilling—to recognize them beyond their perceived status as 'formerly oppressed Third-World women,' and rather for their real intellectual, literary, or artistic talents. This only perpetuates several frustrations in Iranian exile culture within the larger Western culture: memoir and film have become the only two creative vehicles through which mainstream Western consumers can view Iran and Iranians outside of the one-dimensional view provided by commercial news outlets." Amy Malek, "Memoir as Iranian Exile Cultural Production: A Case Study of Marjane Sarrapi's Persepolis Series," *Iranian Studies*, 39 (2006), pp. 353–80; see p. 364.
- 3 Michael Sprinker, "The End of Autobiography," in James Olney (ed.), *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical* (Princeton, 1980), pp. 321–42; see p. 342.
- 4 Jasmun Darznik, "Dreaming in Persian: An Interview with Novelist Gina Barkhordar Nahai," *MELUS*, 33:2 (2008), pp. 159–67. See p. 160.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Dorrit Cohn, *The Distinction of Fiction* (Baltimore, 1999), p. 15.

- 7 Gina Barkhordar Nahai, *Cry of the Peacock* (New York, 1991), p. 341.
- 8 Ibid., p. 5.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Ibid., p. 332.
- 11 Ibid., p. 10.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Ibid., p. 14.
- 14 Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, "Out and Out: Attacks/Ways Out/Forays," in *The Newly Born Woman*, tr. Betsy Wing, Theory and History of Literature, 24 (Minneapolis, 1991), pp. 63–132; see p. 91.
- 15 Ibid., p. 65.
- 16 Hammer dukcimer.
- 17 *Cry of the Peacock*, p. 92.
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 Ibid., p. 13.
- 21 Gina Barkhordar Nahai, *Moonlight in the Avenue of Faith* (New York, 1999), p. 5.
- 22 Ibid., p. 356.
- 23 Ibid., p. 367.
- 24 Ibid., p. 261.
- 25 Ibid., p. 262.
- 26 Ibid.
- 27 Gina Barkhordar Nahai, *Cashian Kain* (San Francisco, 2007), p. 20.
- 28 Ibid., p. 111.
- 29 Ibid., p. 107.
- 30 Ibid., p. 148.
- 31 Ibid., p. 89.
- 32 Ibid., p. 128.
- 33 Ibid.
- 34 Dalia Sofer, *The Septembers of Shiraz* (New York, 2008), p. 338.
- 35 Ibid., p. 114.
- 36 Ibid.
- 37 Ibid., p. 306.
- 38 Gillian Whitlock, *Soft Weapons: Autobiography in Transit* (Chicago, 2007), p. 165.