

Disorderly Political Imaginations:
Comparative Readings of Iranian and Caribbean Fiction and Poetry, 1960s-1980s

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ABSTRACT

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The advent of Area Studies and Comparative Literature in US academia developed in response to (or, more aptly, as a result of) the Cold War in the 1960s, with locations such as the Middle East relegated to Area Studies due to the strategic importance that knowledge of its histories, cultures, and languages had for global (read: US) geopolitics. On the other hand, the discipline of Comparative Literature constituted the expansion of US literary studies due to the influx of European intellectual refugees, with scholars and practitioners formulating the field around texts in, primarily, German and Romance languages in conversation with Anglophone texts. Over the past two decades, this Eurocentric model of Comparative Literature has been challenged, and, to some extent, subverted. Yet more often than not, modern Persian Literature is consigned to the realm of Area Studies in general and a Middle Eastern discourse in particular.

My dissertation, “Disorderly Political Imaginations: Comparative Readings of Iranian and Caribbean Fiction and Poetry, 1960s-1980s,” addresses this gap by placing Iran and Persian literature front and center of a comparative project that includes canonical writers from the anglophone and francophone Caribbean. Additionally, “Disorderly Political Imaginations” considers intellectual figures and their literary productions that contributed to the liberation of individual and social consciousness. These figures created unique forms and languages of revolt that deviated from the prevailing definitions of committed, political, or national literature. In *The Darker Nations: A People’s History of the Third World*, Vijay Prashad sets a precedent for comparing Iran and the Caribbean in his chapter titled “Tehran,” by connecting *Gharbzadegi* (*Westoxification* or *Occidentosis*)—the cultural and socio-political manifesto of Jalal Al-e

Ahmad—and Aimé Césaire’s *négritude*. On a broader, geopolitical level, he concomitantly connects imperial schemes in the “nominally independent” Iran and Caribbean region, along with the forms of resistance to them. Yet, for a chapter titled “Tehran,” the focus is mostly the contribution of other Third World projects to that of Iran’s.

Conversely, “Disorderly Political Imaginations” centers Iran as a comparable case meriting comprehensive analysis in Third World cultural and political projects. Furthermore, rather than study the works of Al-e Ahmad and Césaire as exemplary cultural projects of resistance, I choose to investigate alternative modes of political thought and writing that move beyond the framework of “resistance”—modes that are not always considered as contributing to the political landscape. The “disorderly” politics and the “disorderly” creations of the writers under study thus take to task the idea of political literature during the decades of global decolonization, motivated by Jean Paul Sartre’s *littérature engagée* (engaged literature).

In three chapters, I study Iranian literature of the mid to late 1960s in comparison to African diasporic literature from the Caribbean of the late 1970s to mid 1980s. The oft-overlooked issue of gender in national liberation projects of the time is addressed in my first chapter, “Scarecrows and Whores: Women in *Savashoun* and *Hérémakhonon*,” as I compare the two novels by Simin Daneshvar and Maryse Condé. The multilingual female protagonists in the novels of Condé and Daneshvar act as both literal and cultural interpreters and intermediaries in the narratives. I then extend my analysis of these protagonists’ precarious positions to the equally precarious intellectual positions of their creators in political discourses. By using Condé’s delineation of disorder in “Order, Disorder, Freedom and the West Indian Writer” as a necessary marker for freedom in both thought and creativity, central arguments of my dissertation about disorderly political imaginations are also presented.

In “Disrupted and Disruptive Genealogies in the Novels of Hushang Golshiri and Édouard Glissant,” I compare Golshiri’s *Shazdeh Ehtejab* (*Prince Ehtejab*) and Édouard Glissant’s *La case du commandeur* (*The Overseer’s Cabin*). Building upon Michél Foucault’s concept of “subjugated knowledges,” I demonstrate how their protagonists’ insistence on finding answers to the political questions of the present in the historical past (of empire and slavery respectively) leads to their insanity, and how, concomitantly, the formal characteristics of these narratives (such as their in-betweenness in terms of genre, language, and mode of address) offer “noncoercive knowledge” (to use Edward Said’s phrasing from *The World, the Text, and the Critic*) in lieu of answers. While taking into consideration the world literary traditions these novelists are engaging with, my analysis moves beyond a poststructuralist critique; instead, I privilege these writers’ own historical, socio-political, and cultural contexts in literary analysis, both distinctively and in comparison with one another.

In “Poet-Travelers: The Poetic Geographies of Sohrab Sepehri and Derek Walcott,” I analyze how they both create a poetic language of revolt and liberation that, while affirming multiple literary and linguistic traditions, cannot be dismissed as derivative or unoriginal. In this comparative reading, I study their particular use of enjambments and anaphora, the combination of an autobiographical, monologic poetic voice with that of dramatic dialogues, a plethora of travel imagery and vocabulary that reflect the poets’ own multitudinous travels, the disparate religious, mythic, and folkloric traditions they draw from, and ultimately, the unique languages they create.

In comparing these texts, I consider the different and particular historical moments they were written in, which is a revolutionary moment for Iran, and for the Caribbean texts is a postcolonial moment. The political nuances of these different contexts thus effect the timbre of

the texts, and these divergences in articulation are analyzed as well. “Disorderly Political Imaginations” thus does not create a homogenizing, globalized study of literary texts. In that same vein, my research demonstrates the valence that incorporating neglected subjects (in this case, Persian language and literary studies) into Comparative Literature can have in understanding the hegemonic structures of power at play in knowledge production, both locally and globally.

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Introduction

The Origins of a Comparison

In 1953, a US-backed coup d'état in Iran overthrew the democratically elected, nationally beloved prime minister, Mohammad Mossadeq, who nationalized Iran's oil industry. This pivotal moment in modern Iran's history came on the heels of more than a century of "Western penetration,"¹ to use Ervand Abrahamian's designation in *A History of Modern Iran*. While Mossadeq was mainly protecting Iran against British imperial interests, in the early decades of the twentieth century, Russia, Germany, and Britain were all fighting to gain control over Iran and protect their regional interests. During both Iran's Constitutional Revolution (1905-1911) and World War II, Britain and Russia joined forces and divided Iran into two zones, relegating the north of Iran to Russia and the south to Britain. At one point toward the end of World War I and after the Russian Revolution of 1917, Britain saw an opportunity for fully extricating Iran from the grip of both Russia and Germany and drafted an agreement "to incorporate the whole country into the British Empire."² Both the public and the parliament immediately rejected this agreement.

Critics have described the Iran of these decades, particularly since the overthrow of Mossadeq and the empowerment of a "US Shah"³ (Mohammad Reza Pahlavi) until the

¹ Ervand Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 36.

² Abrahamian, *A History*, 60. For a full account of these events, see Abrahamian, 49-62.

³ Mohsen M. Milani, *Making of Iran's Islamic Revolution: From Monarchy to Islamic Republic* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994), 42.

Revolution of 1979, as “semicolonized,”⁴ subjected to “indirect colonialism,”⁵ or “nominally independent.”⁶ I cite the latter designation from Vijay Prashad’s *The Darker Nations: A People’s History of the Third World*; in a chapter on Iran titled “Tehran: Cultivating an Imagination,” Prashad states that, “Although Iran had never been formerly colonized, it belonged with the hungry. Indeed, much of the world that stood at the pole of the hungry had remained nominally free during the era of colonialism”; and he includes “some islands of the Caribbean” among these “nominally free” countries.⁷ Between the mid-1940s to the early 1980s, several Caribbean islands that were French, British, and Dutch colonies, gained political independence. In geopolitical terms, Anne MacPherson creates the distinct designations of “decolonized and sovereign” for the former British colonies “that participated in the West Indies Federation,” and “‘decolonized’ but non-sovereign” for the former French colonies, including Guadeloupe and Martinique.⁸ These two islands became “overseas departments” of the French government in 1946, and later “overseas regions” in 1983;⁹ hence MacPherson’s placement of quotation marks around the term “decolonized”—for these countries were not formally independent. St. Lucia, a

⁴ Ramin Jahanbegloo, “Introduction” in *Iran: Between Tradition and Modernity*, ed. Ramin Jahanbegloo (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2004), xi.

⁵ Negin Nabavi, *Intellectuals and the State in Iran: Politics, Discourse, and the Dilemma of Authenticity* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003), 85.

⁶ Vijay Prashad, *The Darker Nations: A People’s History of the Third World* (New York: New Press, 2008), 80.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Anne S. MacPherson, “Toward Decolonization: Impulses, Processes, and Consequences since the 1930s” in *The Caribbean: A History of the Region and Its Peoples*, eds. Stephan Palmié and Francisco A. Scarano (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 476.

⁹ *Ibid.*

former British colony, had “associated statehood” status between 1967 and 1979,¹⁰ and on February 21, 1979, ten days after Iran’s Revolution, became independent.

In 1962, Jalal Al-e Ahmad (1929-1969), the noted Iranian cultural critic, essayist, and fiction writer, published a slim book, titled *Gharbzadegi (Occidentosis: Plagued by the West)*.¹¹ The book was a staunch and damning attack on the infiltration of Western thought and market (by which he meant “all of Europe, Soviet Russia and North America”¹²) into the East (“Asia and Africa”¹³). In his abovementioned chapter, Prashad traces the cultural project of Al-e Ahmad’s *Gharbzadegi* from the *négritude* of the 1930s, through Aimé Cesaire’s *Discours sur le colonialisme (Discourse on Colonialism)* (1950), to the 1956 *Présence Africaine* Congress in Paris, including Frantz Fanon’s remarks in this gathering (“Racism and Culture”). Yet, in a chapter that he has titled “Tehran” and wherein he sets up Al-e Ahmad as a pioneer of the Third World cultural activity spreading in Iran, thus determining the tenor of anti-imperial resistance in the decades leading to the revolution, only about one-third of the chapter is on Iran. About *Gharbzadegi*, Hamid Dabashi writes “in formulating the most essential “anti-Western”

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Liora Hendelman Baavur provides all the translations and English renderings of the term, which include: disease of “Westernism,” “Occidentalization,” “Weststruckness,” “Weststruckedness,” “West-strickenness,” “Westities,” “Xenomania,” “Westomania,” “Westoxication,” which she states is “by far the predominant translation in English references,” and “Euromania.” About this latter term, she refers to Dabashi’s note in *Theology of Discontent* on its inefficacy to capture the true meaning of Al-e Ahmad’s project. See “The Odyssey of Jalal Al-e Ahmad’s *Gharbzadegi*—Five Decades after,” in *Persian Language, Literature and Culture: New Leaves, Fresh Looks*, ed. Kamran Talattof New York: Routledge, 2015), 260. Dabashi writes, “[the] translation of “Euromania” for “Gharbzadegi” leaves much of the weight of “Gharb”—which is “West” not “Europe”—behind. The construction of “The West” as a monolithic “Other,” quintessentially different from the historical experiences of “Europe,” is central to the ideological disposition of Al-e Ahmad and all other Muslim ideologues in modernity.” Hamid Dabashi, *Theology of Discontent: The Ideological Foundations of the Islamic Revolution in Iran* (New York: New York University Press, 1993), 534.

¹² Jalal Al-e Ahmad, *Occidentosis: A Plague from the West*, trans. R Campbell (Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1984), 27.

¹³ Ibid.

disposition of the Islamic revolutionary discourse, no other single text comes even close to *Westoxication*¹⁴ as it “captured the imagination of a generation in search of a revolutionary identity, a language of revolt.”¹⁵ Based on the subtitle of Prashad’s chapter, “cultivating an imagination,” and what Prashad argues therein, the rationale is that the imagination that was being “cultivated” in Iran stemmed from Césaire’s and Fanon’s conceptions of national culture—one that was closely tied to “material concerns of the masses.”¹⁶ Prashad, therefore, maps the political language that Césaire, Fanon, and other thinkers of the black Atlantic used onto Al-e Ahmad’s “language of revolt,” without fully expanding upon the particulars and nuances of this language in an Iranian context.

In her book titled *The Intellectuals and the State in Iran: Politics, Discourse, and the Dilemma of Authenticity*, Negin Nabavi makes a similar connection; she links translations of Césaire, Fanon, and Jean-Paul Sartre¹⁷ that were appearing in Iranian periodicals in the 1960s, “populariz[ing] the notion of third-world, anticolonial liberation movements,” to the formation of the “Iranian intellectual as the ‘third-worldist intellectual.’”¹⁸ One of these intellectuals is Al-e Ahmad, a voice of dissent in the state, and Nabavi posits his text, *Gharbzadegi*, along with his book *Dar Khedmat va Khiyanat-e Roshanfekran* (translated as “On the service and the betrayal of intellectuals”¹⁹), published in 1964, as antecedents to the concepts of “commitment” and

¹⁴ Hamid Dabashi, *Theology of Discontent: The Ideological Foundation of the Islamic Revolution in Iran*. (New York: New York University Press, 1993), 74.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 77.

¹⁶ Prashad, *Darker Nations*, 81.

¹⁷ She specifically mentions his writings on colonialism.

¹⁸ Nabavi, *Intellectuals and the State*, 84.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 70.

“committed literature” in Iran.²⁰ She maintains that these concepts “were directly adopted from the notion of “*engagement*” first discussed by...Sartre (1905-1980) in the first issue of his review *Les Tempes Modernes* in October 1945.”²¹ Nabavi attributes this fifteen-year gap in the adaptation of Sartre’s concept of *littérature engagée* by the Iranian intellectuals to the fact that translations of his work were only becoming more available to the Iranian public in the 1960s.²²

The manner in which the notion of “commitment” is adapted from Sartre and applied to the Iranian context in particular and the larger “Third World” context in general can be understood from Dabashi’s definition of the term in “The Poetics of Politics: Commitment in Modern Persian Literature.” In this essay, he first describes the issue of commitment in literature as “a political problem” and then defines it as “a presuppositional engagement with and concern for social causes, revolutionary ends, and ideological statements.”²³ Thus,

To be a political artist and to be creative in one’s ideological commitment, to address the real/perceived “social malices” when one is writing poetry, painting a picture, directing a movie, singing a song, became a commandment carved in tablets and issued forth from the modern revolutionary pulpits. This was to be the inhibitive mold shaping the modern Iranian literati.²⁴

However, Dabashi maintains that the response to commitment in literature was not monolithic and, eventually, three subgroups developed:

The first response was a literature devoted and committed to revolutionary and ideological causes...Here literature was considered a means, like a rifle, to political ends. Second, a literature developed that was atomized and isolated from society, devoted to regurgitating the old and exhausted poetic and literature modalities... Here literature was

²⁰ Ibid., 71.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Hamid Dabashi, “The Poetics of Politics: Commitment in Modern Persian Literature,” *Iranian Studies*, 118, no. 2/4 (1985): 149, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4310494>.

²⁴ Ibid., 171.

a matter of personal enjoyment and possible edification. The third was a literature produced by minds and souls unperforated by total political commitment or anachronistic apathy...Only at the third level was literature perceived as having an existence unto itself, yet organically related to other realities surrounding it.²⁵

This dissertation is a comparative study of works of literature by Iranian writers who belong to this third group, and their Caribbean counterparts. I extend the historical connections Prashad and Nabavi make between the cultural projects of Al-e Ahmad, Césaire, and Fanon in particular and the “nominally independent”²⁶ countries of Iran and the Caribbean region (in Prashad’s case) and the Third World, decolonization discourse of the 1960s (in Nabavi’s case) in general. More importantly, I will conduct comparative analyses of writers who were inheritors of the cultural environments that *Gharbzadegi* and *Discourse on Colonialism* created. If, therefore, Iranian intellectuals in the 1960s were influenced by the works of Sartre, Césaire, and Fanon, how does this influence appear in the period’s literary creations, and how is it contested? Furthermore, since Caribbean creative writers and intellectuals were also reading texts by these three figures, what kind of parallels are present between the fiction and poetry of Iran and the Caribbean by way of responses to these shared discourses? In what ways do they challenge and depart from these discourses? And given the particularities of their local histories, what are the points of divergence in these comparative readings?

The title of this dissertation is “Disorderly Political Imaginations.” In the subsequent pages of this introduction, I will provide context about the literary frameworks that existed in Iran and the Caribbean during this period of global decolonization efforts, and why the notion of literature that served a social function and has a galvanizing effect was important at the time. I

²⁵ Ibid., 171-172.

²⁶ Prashad, *Darker Nations*, 80.

will also elaborate upon what the term “disorderly” offers in my comparative readings and how it figures in the literary texts under study here, both in form and content. And finally, while Prashad’s comparison serves as a useful model for setting up corresponding comparisons in literature, there are fault lines in his argument, particularly as it pertains to the Iranian context. Addressing these issues at the outset of this comparison will allow for the creation of a compelling comparative framework in the literary context.

Prashad’s Tehran

Prashad opens his chapter with an account of the events that led to 1953 coup d’état. His account, however, both glorifies and misrepresents that role of the Tudeh Party (Party of the Masses), and grossly misinterprets Mossadeq’s allegiances. The socialist movement that led to the formation of the pivotal Tudeh Party in 1941 and later developed a “firm support for the Soviet Union,”²⁷ started with “a group of recent graduates from European universities.”²⁸ Their leader, Iraj Iskandari, “had won a government scholarship to Europe where he was influenced by the socialist and communist movements.”²⁹ Iskandari is credited with transforming the party into the first democratic, highly impactful political party in modern Iran that did not alienate the devout sector of the population and successfully advocated for equal rights for the majority of the population.³⁰ Yet, during the final years of the 1940s, this same party played “a treasonous role” in the coup d’état that overthrew Mossadeq: “As the mouthpiece of the Soviet Union’s foreign policy, the Tudeh opposed Mossadeq, labeling him the representative of the “regressive

²⁷ Ibid., 188.

²⁸ Abrahamian, *A History*, 107.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ See Abrahamian, *A History*, 107-113.

national bourgeoisie” and an anti-British aristocrat who was serving the interests of ‘American imperialism.’”³¹ The Tudeh party’s radicalism and proven ties to the Soviet Union led to its losing some of its most prominent members, including Al-e Ahmad, in the years before the coup d’état, and rendered it “formally illegal”—Mohammad Reza Shah forcefully cracked down on the party.³² Yet, during his tenure as prime minister, Mossadeq allowed them to continue to operate and subsequently play a role in his demise. About the coup itself, Abrahamian writes, “The 1953 coup has often been depicted as a CIA venture to save Iran from international communism. In fact, it was a joint British-American venture to preserve the international oil cartel.”³³ Offering a truncated history of these events, Prashad writes,

The influence of the Tudeh angered the U.S. establishment, which offered the National Front leader [Mossadeq] a choice: either crush the Communists, take U.S. aid and remain in power, or else fall under Soviet-Communist influence. On May 2, 1953, Mossadeq revealed the shallowness of his class, whose investment in nationalism and national sovereignty only went as far as it would guarantee its rule and luxury; he wrote a letter to President Dwight D. Eisenhower, in which he cowered, “Please accept, Mr. President, the assurances of my highest consideration.” Afraid of the Soviets, Mossadeq crushed the Tudeh Party, thereby destroying the most organized defenders of Iranian sovereignty, and then fell before a coup engineered by the CIA’s representative and a far more reliable U.S. ally, the Shah.³⁴

This simplified (and inaccurate) account of Mossadeq’s actions and the events leading to his coup exaggerate the role that socialist ideals played in the defining moment of modern Iran’s history. He claims that a “socially just nationalism” during that time was “guaranteed by the presence of a strong Tudeh Party.”³⁵ In the years leading to the coup, it was in fact Mossadeq

³¹ Mohsen M. Milani, *Making of Iran’s Revolution*, 40.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Abrahamian, *A History*, 118.

³⁴ Prashad, *Darker Nations*, 76.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 77.

who had created the environment for this “socially just” and democratic nationalism to flourish:

Campaigning both against the British and against the shah, Mossadeq created the National Front (*Jeb'eh-e Melli*) and mobilized within it a broad spectrum of middle-class parties and associations. The most important groups were the Iran Party, the Toilers Party, the National Party, and the Tehran Association of Bazaar Trade and Craft Guilds...The Toilers Party contained a number of prominent intellectuals who had broken with Tudeh because of the Soviet oil demands and crises over Azerbaijan and Kurdistan. Chief among them [was] Al-e Ahmad.³⁶

The crises of Azerbaijan and Kurdistan refer to their secessionist policies backed by the Soviet Union, and these crises, coupled with the Soviet oil demands, made clear that the Tudeh Party chose to publicly prioritize its partisan “leftist” values over “nationalist” ideals.³⁷ Prashad’s representation of this pivotal moment in Iranian history thus underlines socialist ideals as essential to the national struggles of Iranians. He reads Al-e Ahmad’s *Gharbzadegi* primarily in this same vein, focusing on his representation of the West as the “wealthy” and “powerful” and the East as the “hungry” and “poor.”³⁸ He also attests to the work that Al-e Ahmad does in the text to dismantle the cultural imperialism of the West.³⁹ He goes on to claim that the critiques of cultural imperialism in this text are “not original to Al-e Ahmad” and that precursors to this text can be found in the *négritude* movement, and more specifically, Aimé Césaire’s *Discourse on Colonialism*.⁴⁰ After this point, he expands upon Césaire and Fanon’s conceptions of national culture and situates them within the Third World discourse that, he contends, Al-e Ahmad is participating in; this Third World discourse of nationalism includes a focus on native cultural

³⁶ Abrahamian, *A History*, 116.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 111.

³⁸ Prashad, *Darker Nations*, 80.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 80-81.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 81.

resources while engaging with European Enlightenment on its own terms, thus not allowing its mechanization to take over local forms of labor and knowledge.

While Prashad's engagement with the Iranian context is limited, the connection he makes between the discourse of Al-e Ahmad and these anticolonial thinkers is both warranted and valid. Prashad's argument allows me to expand this connection into the literary realm, where, I will argue, this third-worldist discourse is investigated and refined, in order to make way for an aesthetics of liberation—one that is not apolitical or uncommitted; rather, it refuses to participate in what Edward Said calls “warring essences.”⁴¹ Part of the limitation of Prashad's argument stems from his somewhat essentialist characterization of the Iranian struggle for liberation from imperial forces; he identifies a leftist nationalism as the centripetal force of this struggle. But Prashad is not to blame for this essentialist reading. In *Culture and Imperialism*, Said critiques the nativism that develops as a result of “the colonial encounter” and finds its way into anticolonial, nationalist independence projects; he cites Al-e Ahmad's *Gharbzadegi*⁴² as an example of such nativism, along with *négritude*.⁴³ He cautions against “the nativist position as if it were the only choice for a resisting, decolonizing nationalism.” For him, engaging in this nativism is “to leave the historical world for the metaphysics of essences.” Said adds, “to accept nativism is to accept the consequences of imperialism, the racial, religious, and political divisions imposed by imperialism itself.”⁴⁴

⁴¹ Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 229.

⁴² He describes Al-e Ahmad's text as “An influential Iranian tract published in 1978 that blames the West for most evils in the world.” (228) His misdating of the tract suggests that he was considering Al-e Ahmad's revision of the essay that was published after his death in the late 1970s.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 228.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

A careful reading of Al-e Ahmad's text will negate its reduction to mere nativism. The nearly twenty-year period of Iran's revolutionary context, from the early 1960s to the late 1970s, is characterized as (and by) the response of its "intellectuals...to the problem of encounter with the West."⁴⁵ Al-e Ahmad's 1961 response to this problem proved to be the most prevailing and influential during the decades that lead to the 1979 Revolution. In fact, Firoozeh Kashani- Sabet claims that it "*defined the ethos* of the revolutionary movement of 1979 [emphasis added]."⁴⁶ Interestingly, Hamid Algar maintains that "some of the theses of *Gharbzadegi* ... anticipate with remarkable precision points made by Edward Said in his *Orientalism*."⁴⁷ In critiquing the essentialism in *Gharbzadegi*, Said could thus be seen as replicating some of the critiques against his own *Orientalism*. Thus, it behooves the reader of these seminal texts to move beyond their essentialisms and acknowledge their central contributions to the anticolonial, third-worldist political and literary discourses. Yet Said's contention about nativism is the political discourse's preoccupation with a nationalist struggle for independence rather than a more universal liberation. He foregrounds his delineation of the difference between the two in the poetry of William Butler Yeats:

Yeats's early poetry is not only about Ireland, but about Irishness—there is a good deal of promise in getting beyond them, not remaining trapped in the emotional self-indulgence of celebrating one's own identity. There is first of all the possibility of discovering a world *not* constructed out of warring essences. Second, there is the possibility of a universalism that is not limited or coercive, which believing that all people have one single identity is—that all the Irish are only Irish, Indians Indians, Africans Africans, and so on *ad nauseam*. Third, and most important, moving beyond nativism does not mean

⁴⁵ Mehrzad Boroujerdi, "Gharbzadegi: The Dominant Intellectual Discourse of Pre- and Post-Revolutionary Iran," in *Iran: Political Culture in the Islamic Republic*. Eds. Samih K. Farsoun and Mehrdad Mashayekhi. (London: Routledge, 1992), 31.

⁴⁶ Firoozeh Kashani- Sabet, *Conceiving Citizens: Women and the Politics of Motherhood in Iran* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 208.

⁴⁷ Hamid Algar, "Introduction," in *Occidentosis: A Plague from the West*, by Jalal Al-e Ahmad, trans. R Campbell (Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1984), 15.

abandoning nationality, but it does mean thinking of local identity as not exhaustive, and therefore not being anxious to confine oneself to one's own sphere, with its ceremonies of belonging, its built-in chauvinism, and its limiting sense of security.⁴⁸

Literature's imaginative expansiveness along with its possibilities for experimentation allow for readings and interpretations of the anticolonial discourse that exposes its fissures. In this case, it is the medium of poetry in particular that allows these critical investigations to take place, due to its multivocality and inherently complex language, thus lending itself to more diverse interpretations. Said continues:

In any case nativism is *not* the only alternative. There is the possibility of a more generous and pluralistic vision of the world, in which imperialism courses on, as it were, belatedly in different forms (the North-South polarity of our own time is one), and the relationship of domination continues, but the opportunities for liberation are open. Even though there was an Irish Free State by the end of his life in 1939, Yeats partially belonged to this second moment, as shown by his sustained anti-British sentiment and the anger and gaiety of his anarchically disturbing last poetry. In this phase *liberation*, and not nationalist independence, is the new alternative, liberation which by its very nature involves, in Fanon's words, a transformation of social consciousness beyond national consciousness.⁴⁹

Nationalist independence is not the matter of concern in this context, for the end of colonialism does not equal liberation. Indeed, the Caribbean writers in this dissertation have all produced their texts under study here after the so-called independence of their nations. The central concern in my readings is thus the liberation of the individual that could create the conditions for collective liberation.

National Culture, *Littérature Engagée*, and Committed Literature

In his definition of liberation, Said draws upon Fanon's work in *The Wretched of the Earth*, and in particular, the conditions he lays out for the creation of a true, national culture. Yet, for Fanon, the

⁴⁸ Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 229 (italics in the original).

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 230 (italics in the original).

struggle for national independence creates the conditions for the production of this culture: “First of all it is the struggle for nationhood that unlocks culture and opens the doors of creation.”⁵⁰ But, he continues, this does not mean that culture is put on hold during the struggle for liberation: “What is the relationship between the struggle, the political or armed conflict, and culture?” He answers this question as follows: “We believe the conscious, organized struggle undertaken by the colonized people in order to restore national sovereignty constitutes the greatest cultural manifestation that exists.”⁵¹ For Fanon, therefore, the national struggle for independence is not separate from the literary creations that come out of that struggle. In other words, literature is the national struggle, made manifest.

Eleven years before Fanon’s book was published, Césaire published his *Discourse on Colonialism*, and five years before it came out, the first issue of *Les tempes modernes* was published. In his introduction to the English translation of *Discourse on Colonialism*, titled “A Poetics of Anticolonialism,” Robin D. G. Kelly writes, “Aimé Césaire’s *Discourse on Colonialism* might be best described as a declaration of war.”⁵² This characterization of the text aligns with what was meant by *engagé* in the context of literature. When Sartre first used the term in his introduction to *Les tempes modernes* in 1945, he wrote of the “legacy of irresponsibility” of the traditional “man of letters”: “The man of letters writes while others fight.”⁵³ He writes of the

⁵⁰ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (Paris: F. Maspero, 1961; New York: Grove Press, 2004), 177.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 178.

⁵² Robin D. G. Kelley, “A Poetics of Anticolonialism,” in *Discourse on Colonialism*, by Aimé Césaire, trans. Joan Pinkham (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000), 7.

⁵³ Jean-Paul Sartre, *What Is Literature? And Other Essays*, trans. Steve Ungar (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 250.

“social function of literature,”⁵⁴ a function that would be carried out by the journal he was introducing, whose “more distant goal...is a *liberation*”⁵⁵ and speaks of a “collectivity” that they were hoping to “serve...by attempting to give it the literature it deserves.”⁵⁶ Two years later, in response to critics who disparaged what they perceived to be Sartre’s espousal of socialist propaganda in lieu of literary aesthetics, he wrote “Qu’est-ce que la littérature?” (What Is Literature?) and in the first line, in quite stark terms, he indicates what he does *not* mean by *engagé*: “Si vous voulez engager, écrit un jeune imbécile, qu’attendez-vous pour vous inscrire au P.C.? (‘If you want to commit yourself,’ writes a young imbecile, ‘what are you waiting for? Join the Communist Party.’)”⁵⁷ *Engagé*, which has been translated as commitment, then, is decidedly not utilitarian in that sense; it is not a call to a particular form of political action—or more precisely, it is not a call to join *a particular party*—in this case, the Communist party. Rather, “Parler c’est agir” (To speak is to act)⁵⁸: “The ‘committed’ writer knows that words are action (L’écrivain “engagé” sait que la parole est action). He knows that to reveal is to change and that one can reveal only by planning to change.”⁵⁹ This, therefore, is Sartre’s notion of “utilitarian” literature: to represent the social reality of the world with an intention to change that reality. This literature does not require a call to action, for it is a form of socio-political activism in and of itself. “Prose,” he

⁵⁴ Ibid., 255.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 260 (italics in the original).

⁵⁶ Ibid., 267.

⁵⁷ Jean-Paul Sartre. *Qu’est-Ce Que La Littérature?* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), 11; Sartre, *What Is Literature*, 23.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 27; Ibid., 36.

⁵⁹ Sartre, *What Is Literature*, 37; Sartre, *Qu’est-Ce Que La Littérature*, 26.

maintains, “is, in essence, utilitarian (La prose est utilitaire par essence).”⁶⁰ Accordingly, language has an inherent ability to serve as action, as long as the writer knows how to use it. However, while Sartre was of the opinion that (French) poets do not have that ability due to the aesthetic expectations that accompany poetic work, poets who were contributing to the Iranian and Caribbean (and more broadly, African diasporic) discourses I’m studying, did not share that view. In the early 1960s, an Iranian journalist, Ali Reza Meybodi, spoke of changing poetry “from a private means of communication into a weapon.”⁶¹ Ahmad Shamlou, arguably the most celebrated poet of the revolution, spoke about his preference for poetry to “be a trumpet.”⁶² Maryse Condé provides a description of Césaire’s *Cahier d’un retour au pays (Return to my Native Land)* that is almost identical to Kelly’s description of his *Discourse on Colonialism*; she writes of the poem containing “the violence of a declaration of war.”⁶³ And finally, in *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon speaks of the necessity of a “poetry of revolt” in which “the beat of the poetic drum bursts onto the scene.”⁶⁴ He gives as an example of such poetry a piece by Keita Fodeba, a Guinean artist and writer, and minister of internal affairs in Guinea at the time: “In his little-known poetical work there is a constant obsession with identifying the exact historical moment of the struggle, with defining the place of action and the ideas around which the will of the people will crystallize.”⁶⁵

⁶⁰ Ibid., 34; Ibid., 25.

⁶¹ Nabavi, *Intellectuals and the State*, 73.

⁶² “Sohrab Sepehri’s Poetry from the Viewpoint of his Critics and Friends” [in Persian], *ISNA*, February 14 2016. <https://www.isna.ir/news/92071408688/>.

⁶³ Maryse Condé, “Order, Disorder, Freedom, and the West Indian Writer,” *Yale French Studies*, no. 97 (2000): 128. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2903218>.

⁶⁴ Fanon, *Wretched*, 162.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 163.

There is an unmistakable desire to use poetry as a galvanizer for revolutionary action in this discourse and to weaponize literature.

In *The Politics of Writing in Iran: A History of Modern Persian Literature*, Kamran Talattof describes Iran's corresponding literary movement in a chapter titled "Revolutionary Literature: The Committed Literary Movement before the 1979 Revolution." Talattof writes about the development of this literary movement in the 1940s and its continuity through the 1970s, during which literature was divided into two categories: "one that defended the people and was committed to their cause, and another that disregarded serious social and political issues and remained 'pure' literature."⁶⁶ Talattof claims that "as a result of these authors' tendencies toward Marxism, a socialist realism became a distinctive feature of literature in this episode, and Committed writers deemphasized form, as opposed to content, arguing that the latter has a larger capacity to serve the people."⁶⁷ A description that permeates discussions of Iranian fiction at the time is "socialist realism" or "social realism."⁶⁸ The latter term in particular has been used by both Ehsan Yarshater⁶⁹ and Dabashi,⁷⁰ among others, to describe Al-e Ahmad's fiction.

In her essay "Order, Disorder, Freedom, and the West Indian Writer," Condé describes a similar "theory of social realism" pervading the foundational order of West Indian literature that

⁶⁶ Kamran Talattof. *The Politics of Writing in Iran: A History of Modern Persian Literature* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000), 66.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 70.

⁶⁸ It seems that the former term is more prominent in discussion the literature of the 1940s, while the latter term is used mostly to describe the fiction of the 1960s and 1970s. For the former, in addition to Talattof, see Arta Khakpour also writes about the "socialist realism and political commitment in the 1940s" (452). For the latter, See <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/golsiri-husang>; and Nafisi, 993.

⁶⁹ Ehsan Yarshater, "The Modern Literary Idiom," in *Iran Faces the Seventies* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1971), 308.

⁷⁰ See Dabashi, *Theology of Discontent*, 51.

was “influenced by Sartre.”⁷¹ She explains that she writes this essay as an attempt to “analyze the various commands decreed about West Indian literature, all of them contributing to the edification of an order very few writers have dared to transgress to introduce disorder” (121). And the “foundations of [this] order were laid,” she claims, with Césaire’s *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal* (ibid.). The establishment of these conditions that enforced an order of literary production for liberation, Condé argues, started with the publication of the “Légitime Défense” manifesto in 1932 and *Cahier* in 1939:

they [Martinican and Guadeloupean intellectuals] were inspired by the theory of social realism which was favored in some quarters...They were also influenced by Sartre... 1. Individualism was chastised. Only the collectivity had the right to express itself. 2. The masses were the sole producers of Beauty, and the poet had to take inspiration from them. 3. The main, if not sole, purpose of writing was to denounce one’s political and social conditions, and in so doing, to bring about one’s liberation. 4. Poetic and political ambition were one and the same. (123)

With the publication of *Gouverneurs de la rosée* (*Masters of the Dew*) by the Haitian writer Jacques Romain in 1946, Condé writes,

Like *Return to my Native Land*, *Masters of the Dew* became a sacred text, a fundamental text. According to a Guadeloupean critic, every West Indian novel is nothing but the rewriting of *Masters of the Dew* and *Return to my Native Land* ... *Masters of the Dew* established a model which is still largely undisputed to this day.⁷² 1. The framework should be the native land. 2. The hero should be male, of peasant origin. 3. The brave and hardworking woman should be the auxiliary in his struggle for his community. 4. Although they produce children, no reference should be made to sex. If any, it will be to male sexuality. (126)

Finally, with the publication of *Eloge de la Créolité* (*In Praise of Creoleness*) in 1989 “the new order” of *créolité* presented a formula for literary production that was “even more restrictive than the existing one” (130). It is in response to these restrictions that Condé advocates disorder as a

⁷¹ Condé, “Order, Disorder,” 130. Subsequent references will be indicated parenthetically in the text.

⁷² Condé’s article was published in 1993.

necessary component for creativity and for “modify[ing] existing [objects]”; and this disorder stems from the activity of women (ibid.). “Whenever women speak out” she writes, “they displease, shock, or disturb. Their writings imply that before thinking of a political revolution, West Indian society needs a psychological one” (131).

Disorderly Political Imaginations

I use the term “disorderly” rather than “disordering” to indicate how the writers studied in this dissertation are not predominantly positioning themselves *against* the third-worldist discourse outlined above. Rather, their “disorderly imagination” demonstrates the manners in which they question and challenge these discursive frameworks, without completely dismantling them. They are, indeed, participating in the socio-political discourse of their time, but on their own terms. In other words, their works are political, but in a disorderly fashion, when read in the context of the pervasive modes of cultural resistance that were promoted. Beyond the thematic content of their works, the aesthetic values and innovations that these writers developed similarly challenge the prevailing practices of their time, including the aforementioned social realism in the realm of fiction. In the poetry of Sepehri and Walcott, I focus on the trope of travel in their texts as well as their own travels as part of their disorderly creations. In “Walcott’s Traveler and the Problem of Witness,” Jeffrey Gray asks, “Can the Caribbean poet-traveler speak for home?”⁷³ This question could be asked about the Iranian poet-traveler as well. In their revolutionary poetics, Sepehri and Walcott complicate this straightforward notion of home and the politics of speaking for it.

In using the term “revolutionary,” I refer not merely to the ideals that permeated Iran in the 1960s and 1970s and led to the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Rather, Nabavi describes what it

⁷³ Jeffrey Gray, “Walcott’s Traveler and the Problem of Witness,” *Callaloo* 28, no. 1 (2005): 118. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3805535>.

meant to be revolutionary in a third world discourse (or what she refers to as “Third Worldism”), exemplified by the writings of Frantz Fanon, Albert Memmi, and Césaire and expanded upon by Iranian intellectuals.⁷⁴ “...in the context of this third-worldist discourse, to be revolutionary meant to be anti-imperialist and increasingly anti-Western on one hand, and on the other, ideas could only be powerful if they were revolutionary.”⁷⁵ In this dissertation, I challenge the exclusivity with which the term “revolutionary” was applied and question its above-mentioned definition in the cultural productions of the time. My readings of the works presented in this dissertation demonstrate alternative ways of defining revolutionary thought and action, both by the writers and their protagonists, presenting an anti-imperialism that is not by default anti-Western, and underscores how the nation mustn’t always be prioritized for a work of art to be political and revolutionary.

In my first chapter, “Scarecrows and Whores: Women in *Savashoun* and *Hérémakhonon*,” I address the legacies of the socio-political language that emerged in the aftermath of the cultural productions of Al-e Ahmad and Césaire; I do so by studying the first novel of Simin Daneshvar, Al-e Ahmad’s wife—a towering literary figure in her own right whose work was nonetheless always read in the shadow of her husband—in comparison with Maryse Condé’s novel. These female authors, I argue, challenge the masculinist narratives of that socio-political language and unsettle the gendered, anticolonial nationalist discourses of their time. In my second chapter, “Disrupted and Disruptive Genealogies in the Novels of Hushang Golshiri and Édouard Glissant,” I demonstrate how the narratives of Glissant and Golshiri seek to trace their respective genealogies (not only in terms of a lineage, but also, and more

⁷⁴ Nabavi, *Intellectual and the State*, 83-9.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 89.

importantly, in terms of the socio-political and historical systems of knowledge production in their countries) only to have them disrupted. I thus look at the way their novels' formal qualities (for example, switching between narrators, modes of address, and language) mirror their protagonists' attempts to find straightforward answers to their political and historical questions— attempts that backfire and lead to their insanity. I read this insanity as a textual subversion of the role that native history plays in the development of an anticolonial, national culture. Kelly Baker Josephs connects madness to nation-building; and while she is writing specifically about an anglophone Caribbean context, she confirms that “representations of madness were prevalent in Caribbean literature across anglophone, francophone, and hispanophone traditions throughout the twentieth century.”⁷⁶ Examining the trope of madness in Caribbean literature in the context of nation-building will offer a framework through which the representation of madness in Golshiri's text can be read in comparison. Finally, in “Poet-Travelers: The Poetic Geographies of Sohrab Sepehri and Derek Walcott,” I study their poetic language of revolt and liberation that is necessarily transnational and comparative, while ignoring entirely the frameworks of “committed” literature and the preexisting West Indian literary models. In *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*, Glissant draws a table of “The Process of Literary Production” in the Caribbean. The last two columns of this table are “Written work” and “Cultural resistance.” For the period of 1946-1960, the “written work” marks the “End of an imitative literature” and its modes of “cultural resistance” are “Elite protest literature (negritude)” and “Militant literature (Fanon).”⁷⁷ While Walcott is writing from an anglophone Caribbean context, his work is implicated in the

⁷⁶ Kelly Baker Josephs, *Disturbers of the Peace: Representations of Madness in Anglophone Caribbean Literature* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2013), 1.

⁷⁷ Édouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1989), 95.

larger discussions surrounding a Caribbean or West Indian literature, and could be read against the above-mentioned modes of “cultural resistance” outlined by Glissant. In fact, in his discussion of history in the Caribbean context, Glissant starts with a reading of Edward Baugh’s “The West Indian Writer and His Quarrel with History,” which is specifically about the anglophone Caribbean and in which Walcott is featured extensively. In a footnote, Glissant explains that “the meeting points between Caribbean literatures (anglophone, francophone, hispanophone, Creole) do not result from a decision on the part of those who produce this writing: they are still hidden traces of the same historic moment, of an adherence to the culture.”⁷⁸ Using Glissant’s notion of a meeting point between the disparate anglophone and francophone Caribbean contexts that I am studying in this dissertation, without erasing or flattening their differences, I consider the larger discussions of what a West Indian literature might entail, the starting point for which was Césaire’s *Cahier*, the history of the land, and the land itself as part and parcel of this history and its native literature. Similarities between the critical thought of Glissant and Walcott pertaining to Caribbean history, land, and language become clear in my analyses of their work and thus can provide an additional, shared framework for reading.

Reza Baraheni, a poet, critic, and staunch defender and writer of committed poetry, was a relentless critic of Sepehri. About his poetry, he wrote,

While from a cultural standpoint, Sepehri has created a new boundary of poetic intimacy, with regards to his poetic content he is not a man of these times. For he asks a friend’s address from his beautiful ivory tower, dreams of gentle nothingness, and sees truncheon-wielding constables as pen-wielding poets.⁷⁹ But outside of his ivory tower, crimes are

⁷⁸ Ibid., 61.

⁷⁹ These are all references to lines from Sepehri’s poetry.

taking place.⁸⁰

Baraheni belonged to the first group of writers that Dabashi outlines in “The Poetics of Politics,” those who adhered wholeheartedly to the formulaic literature of commitment. For Baraheni, Sepehri was on the opposite spectrum of this committed literature. I argue that Sepehri and the others writers in this dissertation, similar to the third category that Dabashi outlines, disrupted this binarism of literature versus politics. The reality that these writers represent in their texts does not purport to have a strict correspondence with the social reality of their time; but this does not mean that they are not situated within their time. Rather, by creating a fictional reality and with a commitment to aesthetic innovations, they contributed to the enhancement of the literary landscapes while offering, in their unique ways, ideas for liberation of the individual—an individual that is thoroughly located within their particular cultural and socio-political contexts, but is not, by any means, an allegorical representation of the “Third World” individual and his or her function within the nation.

⁸⁰ Reza Baraheni, *Gold in Copper: On Poetry and Poetics* [in Persian] (Tehran: Zaman Publications, 1992), 521-522.

Chapter 1

Scarecrows and Whores: “Spineless” Women in Political Literature

The fact that you're born in Asia is geographical determinism; / the fact that you're in limbo and your breakfast is tea and cigarettes.
--- Mohsen Namjoo, “Geographical Determinism”

I want the aroma of coffee. I want nothing more than the aroma of coffee. And I want nothing more from the passing days than the aroma of coffee. The aroma of coffee so I can hold myself together, stand on my feet, and be transformed from something that crawls, into a human being.
--- Mahmoud Darwish, *Memory for Forgetfulness*

In a pivotal scene in Simin Daneshvar's *Savushun* (1969), Yusof slaps his wife, Zari, in the face. While Yusof is the “hero” of the novel, Zari is the protagonist and the woman through whom we see the events of the novel unfold, while having access to her interior monologues and thought processes. The novel takes place between 1943 and 1944 in Shiraz, a southern Iranian city, where the Allied forces (and in particular, British and Indian soldiers) have camped and are exploiting the country's resources. Yusof, an anti-imperial landowner and a person of high moral character, refuses to sell his goods to the soldiers, as his fellow countrymen are experiencing the worst case of famine and disease in modern Iranian history as a result of British interference in the south and Russian interference in the north. The city's governor, an autocrat, similarly exploits the residents; in the very first pages of the novel, at the wedding of the governor's daughter, Zari is forced to take off the emerald earrings she is wearing and “lend” them to the bride. In the aforementioned pivotal scene, Yusof is livid because Zari has once again bowed to the wishes of the governor, giving away her son's beloved horse, Sahar, to the governor's daughter. Upon learning this, their son, Khosrow, has taken a gun and disappeared, and Zari and Yusof are heading to the governor's house to find him; Zari explains the situation to Yusof, who was not aware of the situation, as he had been away on business:

Zari said, “You go ahead; I’ll sit here. If you don’t bring my son back, I’ll die right here. I’ll put my head on this rock and die. Khan Kaka [Yusof’s older brother] forced us to send Sahar to the Governor’s daughter. I guess Khosrow has gone to steal Sahar from the Governor’s garden. There are gendarmes guarding that place. They have killed my son.” And she began to scream.

Yusof slapped his wife, the first time he had ever done so. Zari did not know that it would also be the last time. He said, “Shut up. In my absence, you are spineless.”⁸¹

The literal translation of the original Persian would be, “In my absence, you are like a scarecrow on a field.” Zari’s attempts at avoiding conflict and maintaining peace in—and for—her household earn her the label of scarecrow. In her husband’s view, she is spineless because she is not willing to stand up to injustice and fight for what is rightfully theirs. A scarecrow’s ability to scare away intruders is not the point of comparison here; rather, Yusof compares Zari to a scarecrow because he sees her as a lifeless object that is placed in a field by the farmer who does the actual work of protection and cultivation. The scarecrow is merely a contingency—one that isn’t always effective.

In a pivotal scene in Maryse Condé’s *Hérémakhonon* (1976), Ibrahima Sory, a Minister of the West African state where the novel takes place, slaps Veronica, his lover and the novel’s protagonist, in the face. In the very first pages of the novel, Veronica Mercier, the Caribbean woman of African descent who lived in Paris prior to this trip, is speaking to one of her future students in this African country she has visited to “search...out herself”⁸² and proclaims that she is “not involved in politics” (9). Her student, Birame III, is incredulous—he claims that “It’s not possible” to not be involved in politics (*ibid.*). The aforementioned pivotal scene takes place towards the end of the novel, and in the interim, we discover that Sory is a key player in the

⁸¹ Simin Daneshvar, *Savushun: A Novel about Modern Iran*, trans. M.R. Ghanoonparvar (Washington, D.C.: Mage Publishers, 2001), 130.

⁸² Maryse Condé, *Heremakhonon*, trans. Richard Philcox. (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2000), 3. Subsequent references will be indicated parenthetically in the text.

violence perpetrated against local activists and students and the disappearance of Birame III and Saliou, her friend and another political activist. Before Sory slaps her, they have just made love and she's massaging him when he starts asking about "the white man who was [her] lover in Paris": "I wonder how one can love a white man. After all they did to us. ...For me, only whores should deal with white men" (145). Veronica is not exactly taken aback by this; she ponders, "...perhaps in his jealousy, let's say retrospective jealousy, he is trying to destroy, despoil a part of me that escapes him" (ibid.). But it's also perhaps because she's used to being referred to as a whore in this West African country. She talks about how her students in the National Institute had called her that, after they found out about her relationship with Sory: "And not in words that vanish into thin air. In writing on the blackboard, in capital letters in red chalk" (146). We realize that she is saying these sentences (or at least a version of them) out loud, for Ibrahima asks her why she didn't tell him, to which she (apparently) responds:

What would you have done? Sent your soldiers into the Institute again to terrorize defenseless children, take away the bravest, have them recite a concocted self-criticism on a platform decorated with the national flag, make them tar the roads in the north, and kill them like you killed Birame III? You killed him, didn't you. Stop lying.

"Lying!"

He slaps me. (ibid.)

In a preface to the 1988 edition of her novel, Condé describes her narrator:

Véronica, narcissistic, egotistical, indecisive, at times even spineless (*même veule*), is the witness of the drama. A witness who first wants to remain indifferent, but who little by little finds herself dragged into the heart of the action. Her pathetic states of mind, her cynical, engaged and often shocking reflections are a parasite in the narrative (*parasitent le récit*), exasperating even the reader who would like to indicate to her the correct behavior.⁸³

Veronica, then, earns a slap from her lover for finally overcoming her characteristic

⁸³ Maryse Condé, "Avant-propos" in *En attendant le bonheur: Hérémakhonon* (Seghers, 1988), 12. This unpublished translation of Condé's preface was kindly provided by Brent Hayes Edwards, and for the sake of clarity and accuracy, I opted to use his personal translations instead of mine.

indecisiveness and cowardice, while Zari earns a slap from hers because she is—or better yet, has *become*—spineless; Yusof claims that he married Zari because of her bravery and courage and wonders why she has changed.⁸⁴ While it is twelve years after the novel first came out that Condé refers to her “negative heroine (*héroïne négative*)”⁸⁵ as interfering with the narrative with behavior that would not be deemed “correct” by her reader, I would argue that this negative heroine was a necessary component missing from the Caribbean literary landscape of the time—one that pointed out the limited ways in which an anticolonial literature was being defined and promoted, and how this literature excluded the female subject (and female writer). The literary discourse of prerevolutionary Iran was no better.

In these narratives, the political involvement of the protagonists, or lack thereof, results in verbal abuse and physical violence perpetrated against them by men with whom they share their most intimate selves. But the framework for comparing these two novels does not simply stem from these moments of similitude in the narratives. Parallel to this and other shared narratological aspects in the novels that will be analyzed in this chapter, the literary contexts in which Daneshvar and Condé were producing these works resembled one another as well. Prioritizing aesthetics (or at the very least, not deemphasizing it, as committed writers of her time advocated) is one way in which Daneshvar digresses from her contemporary, committed writers. Having received her PhD in Persian Literature from the University in Tehran, her doctoral dissertation with its focus on aesthetics in ancient Persian literature made clear the importance that literary form had for Daneshvar. In 1952, she attended Stanford as a Fulbright scholar and studied creative writing for two years with Wallace Stegner. Continuing to hone her

⁸⁴ Daneshvar, *Savushun*, 142.

⁸⁵ Condé, “Avant-propos,” 12.

craft, in the summer of 1963 she traveled to Boston to attend Harvard University's International Summer Session and took part in a series of classes, workshops, and conversations. Being the only woman in a group of forty attendants from around the world, she engaged in conversations with Truman Capote and Ralph Ellison, recounting their interactions in detailed letters to her husband and laying out all that she was learning from these central figures of creative writing in the United States. Before she published *Savushun*, she had translated George Bernard Shaw's *Arms and the Man*, Anton Chekhov's *Enemies* and *The Cherry Orchard*, Arthur Schnitzler's *Beatrice*, William Saroyan's *The Human Comedy*, Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlett Letter*, and Harold Courlander's *Ride with the Sun: An Anthology of Folk Tales and Stories from the United Nations*. Daneshvar was, therefore, highly invested in different modes of storytelling and in ensuring that the cultural milieu to which she was contributing was inherently multifaceted and diverse.

In "Iranian Women's Literature: From Pre-Revolutionary Social Discourse to Post-Revolutionary Feminism," Kamran Talattof divides novels written by Iranian women into a pre-revolutionary category that emulated the committed literary movement and a post-revolutionary literary discourse, created specifically by female writers—including Daneshvar—in which the works "commonly manifest a remarkable sensitivity toward women's issues and gender relations."⁸⁶ *Savushun* is listed as one of the works written by women writers prior to the revolution that "emphasize sociopolitical issues more than specific gender issues. To be sure, there were themes related to women, but they were often presented in the context of socially

⁸⁶ Kamran Talattof, "Iranian Women's Literature: From Pre-Revolutionary Social Discourse to Post-Revolutionary Feminism," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 29, no. 4 (1997): 531, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/164401>.

conscious yet male-dominated committed literature.”⁸⁷ As limiting and limited as this characterization of Daneshvar’s novel is, it is indeed on par with how her work was perceived at the time, always under the shadow of her husband’s towering figure. Al-e Ahmad died a short while after *Savushun* was published. In critiques and discussions of Daneshvar’s novel, the influence of her husband’s manifesto in particular and his thought in general is emphasized to such an extent that she deems it necessary to pronounce, “I have always been aware that I am Simin Daneshvar, and Jalal, is Jalal Al-e Ahmad. Two people, not one.”⁸⁸

If Daneshvar’s work was seen as an extension of Al-e Ahmad’s thought, Condé’s work and that of other Caribbean female writers were consistently read in the shadow of Césaire. Their novels, then, must be read in light of discursive frameworks of committed literature outlined in the introduction in order to understand how they are unsettling the status quo, not only in terms of their generic innovations, but also in terms of the thematic content of their works. It perhaps will not come as a surprise that in response to the shared frameworks of literary production that dominated their writing discourses at the time, there are parallels in form and content in these two works that merit a comparative reading of the two texts. Their focus on the interiority of their female protagonists, along with their sexual desires (particularly in the case of Condé’s novel) and their manner of perceiving the politically tumultuous events around them, demonstrate the importance of what Condé refers to as a psychological revolution before the political one—and more importantly, that this psychological revolution must be represented in and by women.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Hushang Golshiri, *The Struggle between Image and Painter in the Works of Simin Daneshvar* [in Persian] (Tehran: Niloufar Publications, 1998), 181.

A Persian Requiem

English translations of *Savushun* have different titles.⁸⁹ Roxane Zand has translated the title as *A Persian Requiem*. This translation attempts to elucidate the novel's original title, which is the southern pronunciation of *Siyavashun*—a mourning ceremony for the mythical figure of Siyavash who was unjustly killed. Al-e Ahmad died unexpectedly at the time that Daneshvar's novel was being published. The epigraph to her novel thus reads, "In memory of my friend Jalal, who was the glory of my life, and whose death I have mourned as a Savushun mourner."⁹⁰ This is followed by a line from one of Hafez's lyrics, whose language, Daneshvar claims, "is the most complete language."⁹¹ The Hafez lyric reads, "The King of the Turks listens to the words of pretenders / Shame on him for the cruelty of spilling the blood of Siyavash."⁹² On the one hand, therefore, it becomes clear why so many readings of *Savushun* have read Yusof, the morally upright, politically active, and anti-imperial hero of the play as a representation of Al-e Ahmad—Yusof dies for his cause and Zari, his wife, decides to hold a Sivavashun memorial ceremony for him. Zari, on the other hand, is read as the dutiful housewife who takes care of the children, manages the house, and stands in the shadows—quite literally—while her husband discusses modes of resistance to the British army with his male compatriots; when they come over for these discussions, Yusof always finds ways to indirectly ask his wife to leave the room, and she tries to hear their conversations from behind closed doors or pretends to tend to work in the room that they are conversing. On the other hand, from the outset, what the epilogue and title of the

⁸⁹ In M.R. Ghanoonparvar's translation (that I have consulted for this chapter) the novel's original title, *Savushun*, is followed by the following subtitle: "A Novel about Modern Iran."

⁹⁰ Daneshvar, *Savushun*, xix.

⁹¹ Golshiri, *The Struggle*, 196.

⁹² Daneshvar, *Savushun*, xix.

novel point to are Daneshvar's ability and desire to incorporate various modes of Persian storytelling, whether it be folklore or classical poetry, into her narrative. Her in-depth knowledge of Persian literature is something that she must remind her critics of, in order to underline the attention and effort that has gone into her craft. In a conversation with Houshang Golshiri about her novel, they discuss the critique that he has written of *Savushun*; while, overall, the critique is thoughtful, generous, and substantial, one of its pitfalls is his recognition of Al-e Ahmad as a central element in the novel's creation. Granted, Golshiri criticizes those who continued to see Daneshvar as "the black-clad widow of Jalal" despite her dominance in her own right in the Iranian literary and cultural scene both during and after Al-e Ahmad's life.⁹³ Yet he refers to Al-e Ahmad as the "image-maker" [*naghsh-gozaar*] based on which Daneshvar writes her novel, and he traces his "masculine I" everywhere in her narrative (8-13). In their discussion, he attempts to uncover the source of her particular language in the novel, claiming that she has "cut ties with the dominant prose of the time," which, he acknowledges, is "Al-e Ahmad's prose" (190). She responds by saying that she would like to explain something about her language, and she prefaces this by maintaining that she is a very humble person and that Golshiri knows this; after he responds that he is sure of this, she adds, "However (without being an exhibitionist), you know I have a PhD in Persian literature, and I've had to read the most difficult prose and emulate them" (188-9). To Golshiri's credit, he maintains that Al-e Ahmad's "main preoccupation was not art," that he was always discussing politics, and he credits Daneshvar for transcending Al-e Ahmad's thought and the "enforced framework" that had permeated all of the Iranian cultural scene (179). Yet, the prevalence with which Daneshvar's work is read *in relation to* or intrinsically connected to that of Al-e Ahmad is a hindrance to readings of the novel that would

⁹³ Golshiri, *The Struggle*, 9. Subsequent references will be indicated parenthetically in the text.

instead attend to it as a product of Daneshvar's *own* response to her time. She describes her novel as a combination of "documentation" and "imagination" (181)⁹⁴ and says "I wanted to be a witness to my own time and assure my reader that what I have testified to is not a lie" (182).

In my reading, I highlight the title "Persian Requiem," therefore, for two reasons: I underline what the term "Persian" signifies in Daneshvar's creation, not only in terms of the unique language and prose she creates—one that is peppered with southern dialect, the occasional remarks of the Indian soldiers in their native tongue and their broken English, translations of English, and British people speaking in Persian with English accents—but also in terms of its investment in creating a unique Persian aesthetic, drawing from a myriad of Persian literary traditions. In other words, I investigate what she is contributing to the Persian literary landscape, part of which is, according to her, a testimony. Daneshvar thus does not associate with the committed writers who prioritized form over content. Her novel demonstrates that writers at the time could be socially motivated and politically conscious while contributing to the creation of an innovative literary tradition—a tradition that, in fact, transcended the East-West binarism that prevailed as a result of her husband's work. In fact, as Farzaneh Milani contends in "Power, Prudence and Print: Censorship and Simin Daneshvar," "[she] has not only refused to accommodate her work to the dominant standard of 'political engagement,' she has also never surrendered to the established prescriptions of serious themes and concerns."⁹⁵ She adds that, "Art has always been her overwhelming concern, though she is not uninspired by ideological

⁹⁴ Daneshvar uses the English terms for both these words.

⁹⁵ Farzaneh Milani, "Power, Prudence, and Print: Censorship and Simin Danashvar," *Iranian Studies* 18, no. 2/4 (1985), 331. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4310499>.

convictions or untouched by the many ailments of her society.”⁹⁶ More importantly, her creation negates claims such as those by Azar Nafisi who portends that “the Persian novel is an imported literary form” and that “it hasn’t risen out of Iran’s literary traditions, but rather, it has appeared in the Persian literary convention primarily as a product of translation.”⁹⁷ While Daneshvar translated widely and read extensively in other languages, her novel is definitively *not* a product of translation and cannot be reduced to transported methods of story-telling from non-Persian literary traditions.

Secondly, while Al-e Ahmad’s presence certainly *can* be traced in the pages of the novel, in my reading I lay to rest assumptions that he *should* be located therein, and I read the narrative against the committed literary movement and language with which he was associated, along with the revolutionary ideals that were part and parcel of the discourse of Westoxification that he created. This is not to say that Daneshvar completely disregarded those ideals or did not share a version of them; rather, to use Condé’s articulation, her literary creation disorders the straightforward guidelines that this discourse offered, both in terms of the formal creations that are espoused as well as the thematic concerns of those creations. She, instead, offers a complicated, personal narrative of an educated woman in her thirties who married a man ten years her senior when she was eighteen and has three children (a teenage son and two young twin girls), becomes pregnant with a fourth in the course of the narrative, was educated in a British schooling system and speaks perfect English. She lives in Shiraz, in southern Iran, at a time that it is, for all intents and purposes, occupied by the British; the north, on the other hand,

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 332.

⁹⁷ Azar Nafisi cited in Akbar Bashiri, *A Sociological Analysis of the Novel Savushun* [in Persian] (Tehran: Arvij Publications, 2014), 47.

is occupied by the Russians. While the country is thus nominally independent during this period,

From 1941 to 1945 Iran was reduced to the most abject state of dependence in its modern history The occupying powers subordinated everything to the economic and political objectives of supplying the eastern front and winning the [Second World] war, with disastrous results for Iran's small economy. The worst of the results was widespread famine, especially in 1942-1943 [the setting of the novel], triggered by a poor harvest the previous year The influence of the occupying powers had a Christian-religious extension in the south.⁹⁸

Zari maneuvers this complicated socio-political climate with diligence. She acts as a literal and cultural interpreter between the British and the Iranians, attempting to establish peace when necessary, without giving up her integrity. In her household, however, where she is referred to as Zari (as opposed to Ms. Zahra [*Khanoom Zahra*], her denomination outside the realm of her home), she is patronized by her husband, his brothers, and occasionally, her son. Interestingly, one other person who is not a next-of-kin refers to her as Zari, and that is MacMahon.

(Against) A British Education

As mentioned in the introduction, the novel opens with the wedding ceremony of the governor's daughter. In that ceremony, we are first introduced to MacMahon, "Yusof's friend...an Irish war correspondent who carried a camera around."⁹⁹ The motif of his camera and the occasions in which he takes pictures have added significance in the narrative when one considers these lines from Daneshvar's conversation with Golshiri: "Literature is not instant photography with a polaroid camera, immediately taking the photo and developing it. This type of photography is propaganda, not poetry."¹⁰⁰ This claim is striking when one reads it in the context of her remarks

⁹⁸ Brian Spooner, "Introduction," in *Savushun: A Novel about Modern Iran*, trans. M.R. Ghanoonparvar (Washington, D.C.: Mage Publishers, 2001), xiv.

⁹⁹ Daneshvar, *Savushun*, 23.

¹⁰⁰ Golshiri, *The Struggle*, 208.

about Al-e Ahmad's prose. Golshiri asks her about the performative prose of their generation of writers and claims that this performativity stems from immaturity. Daneshvar, in response, separates Al-e Ahmad from that generation, and claims that performative prose is for those who have nothing to say; Al-e Ahmad's prose, on the other hand, becomes enriched by all that he has to say: "The important thing in Al-e Ahmad is that he would honestly and speedily reflect his direct interpretation of the world around him and his prose stems from this speed; it's like he knew that he didn't have much time."¹⁰¹ Daneshvar would be the last person to claim that her husband's work was propaganda. Yet, perhaps unknowingly (or more aptly put, subconsciously), the manner in which she describes Al-e Ahmad's prose maps on to her description of photographic text as propaganda, just a few pages later. Reading part of MacMahon's work in the text as propaganda gives us valuable information about the work that Zari does in the same section of the narrative. We witness the first indication of her role as a cultural interpreter in her first interaction with MacMahon in the narrative. He approaches Zari at the wedding and asks her to "explain the wedding layout."¹⁰² We are given a description of everything that is present in the ceremony, without any explanation; in other words, we only see what Zari is seeing in the wedding layout, yet we don't hear how she's explaining this layout to MacMahon. The freedom with which Zari interprets, therefore, is made clear from the outset, for the only thing that she does explain is related to the horse that the bride rides into the ceremony: "Zari lifted the cashmere cloth from the horse's saddle and said, "The bride sits on the saddle so she will always be riding her husband." Everybody laughed and MacMahon clicked pictures" (ibid.). There is a spontaneity and mischief in her form of interpretation that cannot be picked up by MacMahon's

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 194.

¹⁰² Daneshvar, *Savushun*, 23. Subsequent references will be indicated parenthetically in the text.

camera; he merely records, instantly and without nuance. This documentation will not contain the creative commentary from Zari about the woman's role in the household. This scene gives us, then, an apt representation of the narrative that Daneshvar has described as a combination of documentation and imagination. And what's missing, for the most part, from the male characters' perspective in the novel is this imaginative aspect of thought.

A bit later in the wedding, MacMahon sits next to Zari and Yusof, so inebriated "that he could barely keep his eyes open" (28). He claims that Ireland and Iran are "kin": "Both are the land of Arians [*sic*].¹⁰³ You are the ancestors and we are the descendants!" (29). The increasingly complicated position of MacMahon is attested to in these lines, as he distances himself from the English by reminiscing about a free Ireland and identifies with Yusof's cause, yet he has come to Iran as part of a British mission. His intimacy with Zari, along with her in-depth knowledge of English language and literature, to the extent that she understands him better than anyone else when he speaks in English, therefore, become telling signs in the narrative, upending a simplistic, anti-Western (or, more particularly, anti-British) reading. MacMahon is a self-proclaimed poet, and announces that he wants to write a poem about their city, Shiraz; pointing to the lime in his drink, he says, "The lime, with its delicate green skin and odor that combines all the scents in the meadow, and the cypress, so free-spirited and restrained, are among the major plants in this city, and humans must naturally resemble the plants of the region in which they are born. Delicate and restrained. They have sent me to ask you why you are not delicate and moderate" (28). By "they" he means the British who are also present at the wedding, and he is referring to Yusof's decision not to sell his crops to the British soldiers. Yusof has refrained from doing so over the past two years, yet his older brother, who approaches them after

¹⁰³ The correct translation would be "Aryans."

MacMahon is gone, claims that this year the army's needs are more dire and that Yusof's brothers and friends who had been compensating for him in the past, can no longer support the army's needs without Yusof's products. Contrary to MacMahon, who continues to poetically compare Yusof to rare and strong elements of the natural landscape in order to "soften [him] up" (30), Yusof's brother, Khan Kaka (whose denomination literally translates to "big brother"), minces no words: "Brother. You're being stubborn for no reason... Even if we don't give it to them willingly, they'll take it by force. They're not deterred by the locks and seals on your warehouses. And besides, they don't want it for free. They'll pay cash for it." Yusof does not mince his words, either:

There is nothing surprising and new about the foreigners coming here uninvited, Khan Kaka. ... What I despise is the feeling of inferiority which has been instilled in all of you. In the blink of an eye, they make you all their dealers, errand boys, and interpreters. At least, let one person stand up to them so they think to themselves, 'Well, at last, we've found a real man.' (31)

Resistance to quasi-colonial forces is decidedly masculine; and Yusof sees himself as the only "man" who is willing to stand up to these forces. With the famine and poverty that has plagued his community as a result of the mismanagement and appropriation of the country's resources by said forces, he prioritizes feeding his fellow townsmen. While there is no indication that feeding the army would translate into lack of food for the local population, Yusof's idealism and refusal to sell his goods to the British on principle is underlined. At the same time, the expectation on the part of the British that Yusof be like the plants in his homeland, "free-spirited" yet "restrained," reveals their inherent hypocrisy and sanctimoniousness—a quality that Zari had picked up on years before she married him. Before turning to this latter point, however, it's important to note that Zari's role as an interpreter is distinct from the kind of interpretation that Yusof condemns in his brothers and those whom he claims are pandering to the British. For, as indicated above, there's a freedom in Zari's interpretation that can be traced to her power as a

storyteller as well as her interpretation of stories in the text. It's also important to note that for Yusof, Zari's stories are seen as a means to an end, as opposed to storytelling as an end itself. More specifically, Zari's *role* as a storyteller for Yusof is merely instrumental. At a moment in the novel when Zari is poetically describing their garden and neighborhood for Yusof, he smiles and responds: "Your voice is soft as velvet, like a lullaby. Tell me more." Zari asks, "'Tell you what? About the people in my city? About you? About the children, their aunt and our neighbors?' Yusof added, laughing, 'About Haji Mohammad Reza, the dyer'" (41). While Yusof's remark about the dyer is made in jest, it does signify his simple desire to listen to Zari's voice, without caring about the content, for it will help soothe him after he's had a difficult conversation with his older brother about the British. Regardless, Zari takes the act of storytelling seriously; she notices everything and includes even the most minute details in her story about the dyer, including where he hangs his drapes, "under the sun along poles in the street and his arms that are purple to his elbows" (42).

Zari's freedom and power in interpretation and story-telling, her ability to understand the aforementioned hypocrisy and sanctimoniousness of the quasi-colonial British forces, and the courage she demonstrated in the face of these powers are all evident from the scene described below. As mentioned in the introduction, Yusof wonders where Zari's pre-martial courage has gone, and consequently, Zari starts remembering times that she had stood up to her headmistress in the British school she had attended. In one such example of the bravery she had before she had married Yusof, because of her perfect command of English, she is chosen by the school's headmistress to recite Rudyard Kipling's "If" when a group of Catholic nuns come to visit their school. The students are all asked to wear white, but Zari refuses, because she is mourning her father's death. When the headmistress screams at her for not following orders, Zari explains that

she is wearing black in mourning for her father. The headmistress becomes enraged that Zari “answer[s] back” and refers to Zari’s practice of wearing black in mourning as “superstition” (165). Then, “The headmistress took the matter into her own hands. In front of all the students, she carefully removed Zari’s plaid uniform, but when she got to the black blouse, she pulled it so hard that she tore off a sleeve. Then, careful again, she put the white blouse on her” (166). The headmistress’s treatment of Zari and her beliefs is an example of the epistemic violence inherent in colonialist agendas (Another such example of this epistemic violence [accompanied by physical violence] is when the headmistress forces one of Zari’s classmates to break her fast in the month of Ramadan by forcing water into her mouth [145]). Zari, however, cleverly responds to this violence not with aggression, but by defying the imposed authority of the British in an understated manner. When the time comes for her to recite Kipling’s “If,” she blurts out lines from John Milton’s “Samson Agonistes”—in particular, the beginning of the text where Samson is lamenting his blindness and abject state in prison: “Oh dark, dark, dark, amid the blaze of noon” (167). The Catholic nuns are funding this missionary school, and it is thus important that the school children demonstrate the efficacy and success of this missionary project. And while she’s been instructed to kiss one of the nuns’ hand, when the nun arrives and holds her hand out to Zari, Zari shakes her hand instead (166). In an instant, with an insightful assessment of the situation, Zari changes the narrative that the nuns are meant to receive. Instead of reciting a poem about human resilience and humility in the face of adversity and the ethos of hard work without expectation (written, arguably, by a would-be colonialist), she offers a narrative of blindness, suffering, and despair, and refuses to supplicate. Zari’s command of British literature and her prompt interpretation of narrative and context allows her to provide a substantially different testimony of the school and its project for the nuns. And she does so using the teachings of the

school. On a metatextual level, a reader who does not have literacy in British literature is unable to understand the significance of this textual replacement. In order to grasp the full meaning of Zari's act of subversion, the reader, like Zari (and Daneshvar), must possess knowledge of these texts and their contexts and how they relate to the context of this missionary school in southern Iran during World War II. Daneshvar's "Persian" requiem, therefore, creates a network of texts that incorporates an anglophone textual tradition—the knowledge of which is necessary to properly understand and engage with the British presence in Iran. Instead of shunning this language and literature like her husband, Zari makes use of it at opportune times; more importantly, this education is what has given her a semblance of autonomy in a life in which she "suffers from repeated curtailment of her free, natural self."¹⁰⁴ In *Conceiving Citizens: Women and the Politics of Motherhood in Iran*, Firouzeh Kashani-Sabet writes that the economic hardship in the early twentieth century compelled some Iranian women to turn to "Christian missionaries, who organized a 'class in needlepoint, in which such poor women might be trained so they could at least earn their bread,' although such classes were accompanied by 'prayer and a gospel talk.'"¹⁰⁵ Zari later concedes that their in-school training with Singer sewing machines imported by the British merchant, Zinger (who we later understand is in fact a key member of the British army) was not done for altruistic reasons:

Zinger kept making us feel indebted to him because he was teaching us sewing, so we would be able to make a living on our own. Khanom Hakim [the British female doctor] would say our recovery and cure was in her hands, but I knew in the bottom of my heart that they were only telling half the truth and that there was always something rotten somewhere.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ Milani, *Power, Prudence*, 339.

¹⁰⁵ Kashani-Sabet, *Conceiving Citizens*, 122-123. She is citing from the Presbyterian Historical Society papers.

¹⁰⁶ Daneshvar, *Savushun*, 142.

She attests to the rottenness of the British education system and we later understand that she was also a careful reader of English texts and contexts, understanding the power dynamics enforced on the minds of these young Iranian women. But she also acknowledges that the knowledge that has provided them with opportunities to make a living was not inherently devalued because of that rottenness. She does, after all, speak of half-truths, implying that there was some modicum of truth to be grasped from this education—something that, as I shall demonstrate, is only graspable by someone with imaginative perception, such as Zari.

But Yusof is precisely against the *British* education that Zari has received. In other words, Yusof isn't against Zari being educated, for he desires a wife who is his equal in intellect; his qualms are with the fact that this education has been bestowed upon her by the British. At the wedding, when MacMahon is making a case about the Irish and the Iranians being one and the same, he claims, "You said the people in your city are born poets. You can see that the people of Ireland are the same."¹⁰⁷ When Yusof is recounting his conversation with MacMahon to Zari later at night, he tells her that he responded, "Yes, friend, the people of this city are born poets, but you have stifled their poetry...You have emasculated their heroes. You haven't even left them with the possibility of struggle so that they can write an epic and sing a battle cry...You have stifled poetry, and in its place, the *droshky*¹⁰⁸ drivers, whores, and dealers have learned a few words of English. All MacMahon had to say was, 'Don't tell me these things. I, for one, have a heavy heart because of this war.'¹⁰⁹ Shiraz is the birthplace of Hafez and Sa'adi, central figures of classical Persian poetry (and prose, in Sa'adi's case), and Yusof, equating MacMahon with the

¹⁰⁷ Daneshvar, *Savushun*, 31.

¹⁰⁸ The translator's note explains that this is "a low, four-wheeled open carriage." *Ibid.*, 311.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 33-34.

British forces that have taken over the city, attacks him personally for the English language and the poverty that his fellow Shirazi's are experiencing. A little over a decade after this book was published, Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o would write "language was the means of spiritual subjugation"¹¹⁰ in *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. Yusof would definitely agree. The value of language for a people who were once all poets has now merely become transactional, as those on the lower rungs of society use English to sell their services (and, in the case of the "whores," themselves) to the British soldiers. Yusof's reference to the emasculated heroes who can no longer sing or write epics adds a gendered aspect to his idea of language, and in particular, that the enforcement of English robs the nation of an epic of masculine heroism. This contention about the enforced language of the colonizer and the manner in which it hinders the creation of a national liberation project brings to mind Frantz Fanon's designation of a national culture in *The Wretched of the Earth*. The native intellectual, Fanon writes, must have "muscle power"¹¹¹ and "To fight for national culture first of all means fighting for the liberation of the nation."¹¹² For Yusof, also, the liberation of his people from British command goes hand in hand with their liberation from the English language, for this language does not allow them to create their masculine national culture that would include Fanon's notion of muscle power—a power that would stem from their ability to challenge the army's presence. Yusof uses every opportunity he can to disavow the British education that his wife has received. In a visit to a tribal area to meet their friends and tribal leaders Malek Sohrab and Malek

¹¹⁰ Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (Zimbabwe Publishing House, 1981), 7.

¹¹¹ Fanon, *Wretched*, 167.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 168.

Rustam—both of whose names are references to heroes of the Persian national epic, Abolqasem Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh (The Book of Kings)*—Zari and Yusof come across some images. One such image is

the picture of a severed head in a basin full of blood. Tulips had grown around it, and a black horse was sniffing them...Zari said, "I bet this one is John the Baptist."
... [Malek Sohrab] then called Yusof and showed him the picture. "Your wife thinks this is John the Baptist."
Yusof smiled and said, "Forgive her. My wife has come to her husband's home straight out of school. Her mind is still full of the Bible stories she had to read every morning in school."
"Wait, I know," Zari said. "It's the severed head of Imam Hoseyn¹¹³...and that horse..."
"Don't embarrass me more than you have, dear." Yusof said. "This is Siyavash."¹¹⁴

Zari's perceived lack of knowledge of Persian folklore is what embarrasses Yusof. This speaks to my earlier point about how Yusof is not against his wife being educated—in fact, his wife's erudition is one of the reasons why he chose her. But what is lost on Yusof in this particular encounter is Zari's ability to connect these different mythological and historical stories. When it comes to literary studies, her comparatist and imaginative capability serves her well in seeing junctures across socio-political borders that others, including her husband, are not able to see. What is construed as an error on Zari's part is in fact an intelligent articulation of correspondence between different secular and spiritual revolutionary figures in Eastern and Western literary traditions; they are, as Daneshvar points out in her interview with Golshiri, one and the same.¹¹⁵

Yet a distinction must be made between what Zari perceives and what the narrative is demonstrating to the reader in terms of how this perception can be taken further; in other words, the narrative is identifying these cross-cultural and transnational connections in the struggle for

¹¹³ The third Shi'a Imam, and a symbol of martyrdom and political resistance.

¹¹⁴ Daneshvar, *Savushun*, 58.

¹¹⁵ Golshiri, *The Struggle*, 174.

human dignity and liberation in a manner that superimposes itself both on Yusof's occasionally circumscribed view of liberation as well as the role that Zari plays in this circumscription.

Gendered Nationalisms and Motherhood

After Yusof recounts his conversation with MacMahon about the British stifling Persian poetry and poets, Zari starts crying. Yusof "asked with surprise, 'Are you crying because of what I've done? I can't be like everybody else. I can't watch my peasants go hungry. A country can't be completely without men.'"¹¹⁶ To which Zari responds: "Let them do whatever they want, except bring the war to my nest. What business is it of mine that the city is like the Mordestan District¹¹⁷? This home is my city, my country, but they even drag the war to my home."¹¹⁸ Zari limits her domain to that of the home, which is a common trope in colonial literary productions. This trope was challenged by Fanon in "Algeria Unveiled." In this essay, Fanon writes about the integral role that Algerian women played in the Revolution, yet he writes about their role in the context of veiling. When the colonizer sees the veiled Algerian woman, he believes her to be restricted and wishes to liberate her; once she is unveiled, his sexually deviant desires toward this exotic black or brown woman are revealed.¹¹⁹ On the other hand, those women who do not remove their hijab, but were forced to unveil in order to assist the revolutionary cause, had to face the wrath of the men in their community.¹²⁰ Ultimately, during the course of this fight for

¹¹⁶ Daneshvar, *Savushun*, 33.

¹¹⁷ Translator's note: "literally, the Dead District, the red-light district in Shiraz. Mordestan is probably a corruption of the word Murdestan, literally "myrtle garden." Ibid., 314.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 34.

¹¹⁹ Frantz Fanon, "Algerian Unveiled," in *Mimesis, Masochism, and Mime: The Politics of Theatricality in Contemporary French Thought*, Ed. Timothy Murray (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 262-3

¹²⁰ Ibid., 270.

national independence, Fanon maintains that, “Removed and reassumed again and again, the veil has been manipulated, transformed into a technique of camouflage, into a means of struggle. The virtually taboo character assumed by the veil in the colonial situation disappeared almost entirely in the course of the liberating struggle.”¹²¹ He concludes, “After May 13,¹²² the veil was resumed, but stripped once and for all of its exclusively traditional dimension.”¹²³ An issue as personal and private as a woman’s decision to veil or unveil is thus only meaningful insofar as it affects the nationalist struggle. About this text, in “‘No Longer in a Future Heaven’: Gender, Race, and Nationalism” Anne McClintock maintains, “Women’s liberation is credited entirely to national liberation, and it is only with nationalism that women ‘enter into history.’”¹²⁴ Without national liberation, women of the nation-state would remain confined to the boundaries of the home, and it would seem that Zari is complicit in this restriction by mapping the boundaries of *her* country onto the boundaries of her household. A short while later, while Zari and Yusof are walking in their home, Zari’s articulation of her nation and/or city-state is referenced one again: “When they reached the veranda, Yusof stopped, looked at the garden and said, “Your city is beautiful. It’s a pity that summer is coming and I won’t have time either for you or your city.””¹²⁵ While Zari had referred to her home as her country and city earlier, when Yusof verbalizes it, it formalizes her citizenship in the household. Moreover, his work outside of this domain is more

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² The date of a popular uprising in Algeria in 1958 that became a watershed moment in their struggle for independence.

¹²³ Ibid., 272.

¹²⁴ Anne McClintock “‘No Longer in a Future Heaven’: Gender, Race, and Nationalism,” in *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation, and Postcolonial Perspectives*, eds. Anne McClintock, Aamir Mufti, Ella Shohat (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 99.

¹²⁵ Daneshvar, *Savushun*, 41.

important; therefore, he does not have time for his wife's domain of citizenship or for its citizen, his wife. Zari's role as a citizen, both of the larger nation-state as well as her own personal nation-state, thus becomes undermined. I use the term nation-state here in the same manner as Ranjoo Seodu Herr in her article "Reclaiming Third World Feminism: Or Why Transnational Feminism needs Third World Feminism." She explains that while nation-state "typically means a nation with internationally recognized boundaries," she uses the term "generically to refer to a political and territorial entity to which "nationalism"—understood broadly as a political movement to protect and maintain an independent national culture—is relevant."¹²⁶ This is what McClintock would refer to as the "uneven gendering of the national citizen."¹²⁷ Zari's realm of influence and activity becomes restricted, even though the work that Zari does in the community (regularly visiting the insane asylum and the prison and bringing them food, reading material, and other goods) is a far more tangible and affecting presence for the community than the political activism of her husband and his male compatriots. Far too often, in the text, Zari's work is undermined, as she's told by Yusof and other male figures in the narrative that she shouldn't be making these visits, since they make her upset or give her a headache. Not only is her work not deemed important enough for her to persevere through the hardships that it imposes on her, but more importantly, she's perceived as not being strong enough to handle these hardships in the first place. The unequal characterization of the work that this husband and wife perform with regard to their socio-political surroundings can once again be explained with the help of McClintock: "A woman's political relation to the nation was...submerged as a *social* relation to a

¹²⁶ Herr, Ranjoo Seodu. "Reclaiming Third World Feminism: Or Why Transnational Feminism Needs Third World Feminism," *Meridians* 12, no. 1 (2014): 7. doi:10.2979/meridians.12.1.1.

¹²⁷ McClintock, "No Longer," 99.

man through marriage. For women, citizenship in the nation was mediated by the marriage relation to a man through marriage.”¹²⁸ Zari’s primary responsibility in terms of her citizenship is in the realm of her marriage—and, as we’ll see shortly, in terms of what (or whom) she can offer to the nation by way of giving birth. And if indeed she is entitled to a form of citizenship of the larger nation, it is because Yusof is doing the real work of national liberation for her to receive that citizenship. The work she is performing does not constitute action that is central to this liberation, even though her body is subjected to pain and the risk of contracting disease when she visits these socio-economically fraught locations.

In “The Female Body and Nationalist Discourse: *The Field of Life and Death Revisited*,” Lydia Liu maintains that “Whatever happens to the nation, it is always the female body that suffers most.”¹²⁹ As mentioned earlier, Zari becomes pregnant in this novel; in fact, at the beginning of the first chapter, we have the only reference to a sexual encounter between Zari and Yusof, and we later find out that encounter is what led to Zari becoming pregnant with their fourth child. At the time that Yusof slaps Zari and refers to her as a scarecrow, he does not yet know that she is pregnant. Daneshvar has shrewdly and artistically set up the novel, from its outset, in a manner that one can trace integral elements in this climactic scene of argument (and, therefore, central contexts of the narrative) back to the very beginning of the novel, with MacMahon at the wedding of the governor’s daughter. This goes back to my introductory points about Daneshvar’s desire to create a structurally and aesthetically sound literary artifice, as the conversations with MacMahon construct the axis of the narrative, and it is with his words that

¹²⁸ Ibid., 91.

¹²⁹ Lydia Liu, “The Female Body and Nationalist Discourse: *The Field of Life and Death Revisited*,” in *Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practices*, eds. Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 55.

the narrative ends. While one could argue that framing the novel around MacMahon's presence and words negates what I call the Persianness of Daneshvar's creation, it is in fact in line with the overarching narratives in the text. These overarching narratives tie the nationalist, anti-British positioning in the novel, represented through the figure of Yusof, to the gendered nature of this positioning and the manner in which, at times, it reduces Zari to her pregnancy, and at other times, expects her to grow a spine, as it were, and stand up to the British forces. MacMahon's entangled position as an Irishman serving on a British mission, and the deep understanding he seems to have of Zari's relationship with her daughters, compelling him to create a story about it for the girls—a story that Zari finds moving and true to their relationship¹³⁰—must be taken into consideration when reading his role in the novel.

Daneshvar wrote this novel about the early forties in the mid-to-late sixties, but in her conversation with Golshiri, she explains that Yusof epitomizes Mohammad Mossadeq. In fact, she had to change the date of Yusof's death at Al-e Ahmad's request, because originally, the date of his death was Mordad 28 [August 19], the same day that the CIA-backed coup d'état toppled the democratically-elected prime minister, Mossadeq—a national hero; Al-e Ahmad was worried about the consequences that the overtly political nature of this auspicious death would have for Daneshvar, even though the events of the coup had taken place roughly ten years before the events of the novel, and more than thirty years before the novel's publication. So, Daneshvar changes the date of Yusof's death to take place two days later, on the 30th of Mordad, to circumvent the censors.¹³¹ The coup, while largely orchestrated by the US government, was in fact instigated by the British government's outrage over Mossadeq's act of nationalizing Iran's

¹³⁰ Daneshvar, *Savushun*, 31-33.

¹³¹ Golshiri, *The Struggle*, 171.

oil industry, effectively dismantling the Anglo-Iranian oil company—an arm of British Petroleum (BP). Yusof references BP in a scene where he has visited the soldiers camp with Zari and his older brother. Zinger, a British sergeant, who had come to the country with the pretext of selling Singer sewing machines, is showing them around the camp. Yusof sees a map of Iran on a table that has been marked extensively with confusing and colorful pins. Yusof laments that they've "torn it apart (*lat-o par-esh kardeh-and*)."¹³² A conversation about Yusof not selling his produce to the British gets heated, and Zinger comments that this is "for everyone, for humanity, and it's too much for you, you don't need it," at which point Yousef laughs and responds: "Like BP."¹³³ Ten years after the British government had effectively torn apart the country, permanently recasting its political landscape, they continue to commandeer its geographical landscape and resources; later on, we read that the map of Zari's abdomen has also been torn apart by a British doctor—an abdomen whose sole purpose, as I'll explain below, is to give birth to a nation.

In this first and perhaps most important encounter between MacMahon and Yusof at the wedding of the governor's daughter, Zari is the silent interlocutor and narrator of the conversation. A scene that Zari witnesses is two Indian soldiers entering the wedding accompanied by a British colonel and Zari's former headmistress, and they're "bearing a basket of carnations shaped like a ship. When they reached the Governor, they put the basket down by his feet next to the pool. The Governor, who was busy kissing the British lady's hand, did not notice the flowers."¹³⁴ A short while later, MacMahon, referring to this basket and addressing

¹³² Simin Daneshvar, *Savushun* [in Persian] (Tehran: Kharazmi Publications, 1968), 34.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 35.

¹³⁴ Daneshvar, *Savushun*, 26.

Yusof, says, “Let’s go over there and sit on that bench next to that ship of flowers which has anchored at the grassy shore. Zari, you come too. The presence of a beautiful woman is always exciting. This warship with its cargo of flowers is a gift from the General Command of our troops.”¹³⁵ Putting a poetic spin on the unacknowledged basket of flowers, while acknowledging the absurdity that this ship carrying a “gift” from the British is in fact a warship, the inebriated MacMahon invites Yusof to what he hopes will be a constructive conversation about Yusof’s resistance; at the same time, he tells Zari to accompany them in her capacity as an alluring accessory. Despite MacMahon’s claim, I characterize Zari as the silent interlocutor, for later that night, when they’re in their bedroom, we understand that Yusof has not understood all that MacMahon has said, asks Zari if she understood it all, to which she replies, “Yes, I’ve become used to his Irish accent.”¹³⁶ Zari, therefore, completes parts of the conversations that would otherwise remain misunderstood or leave gaps in the men’s knowledge of said conversations. And she is able to do so because of her command of the English language. When they return home from the wedding, before their encounter in their own bedroom, Yusof checks on their children; Zari can see him from their bedroom:

He was standing by the twins’ bed, watching them. Then he moved out of sight, but she knew he was straightening the pillows... She knew that he would kiss them and that he would say, “My cutie dolls.” When she heard the door, she knew that Yusof had gone to Khosrow’s room. She knew that he would pull up his cover, kiss his forehead and say, “My son, if I don’t succeed, you will. You are dearer to me than my life. If I don’t see you one day, I’ll feel like a chicken with its head cut off,” or words to that effect.¹³⁷

Afterwards, Yusof enters their bedroom and they have the conversation about MacMahon and

¹³⁵ Ibid., 28-9.

¹³⁶ Daneshvar, *Savushun* [in Persian], 17.

¹³⁷ Daneshvar, *Savushun*, 32-33.

poetry, at which point Zari starts crying and refers to their home as her country. It is not coincidental, therefore, that the only instance in the book where we read a sexual encounter between the two, is immediately after this conversation. And we later understand that this encounter leads to Zari's pregnancy. Yusof tells Zari to wash her face: "Get up, dear. I want you." And afterwards: "His large hand caressed her breasts, and as it reached lower, she forgot everything...in her imagination, she could hear the quiet flow of water from a waterscape over bright red flowers, and she could see a ship full of flowers which was not a war ship."¹³⁸ In opposition to the British ship, offered as a token and disregarded, Zari's ship full of flowers is not a warship—the flowers, we later understand, represent her children.

In "Women, Gender, and Sexuality in Historiography of Modern Iran," Mana Kia, Afsaneh Najmabadi, and Sima Shakhsari argue that in early twentieth-century Iran, "socially, sons constituted the nation."¹³⁹ In particular, this claim is made with regard to the decades of the Constitutional Revolution, when Iran was going through "modern" reforms in terms of its legal institutions as well as its merchant class, and the country's first parliament came into place during these years. About the "cultural language" of the Constitution, Najmabadi writes that it "was deeply male-centered, as was the sociopolitical public domain."¹⁴⁰ It is this male-centered domain that prompts an Iranian journalist to write in 1909 that Iranian women mattered less than "the animals of other nations." In reviewing this journalist's article, Kashani-Sabet adds that according to this journalist, "Although granted various privileges through Islamic law, or sharia',

¹³⁸ Ibid., 34.

¹³⁹ Mana Kia, Afsaneh Najmabadi, and Sima Shakhsari. "Women, Gender, and Sexuality in Historiography of Modern Iran," in *Iran in the 20th Century: Historiography and Political Culture*, ed. Touraj Atabaki (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2009), 188. <https://doi.org/10.7916/D8XH01FT>.

¹⁴⁰ Afsaneh Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 214.

[women] lacked “human rights” (*huquq-i bashari*).”¹⁴¹ While she acknowledges that framing those decades of the constitutional revolution on “this sour note would miss the historical progression of women’s social activism” (122), she maintains that “For sure, Iranian women lacked many basic political and social privileges” (121). These are the decades in which, according to Kashani-Sabet, a “social ideology known as maternalism” dominated the Iranian nationalist discourse. About this ideology, she writes,

While maternalists strove to improve the health of women, especially pregnant women, and to prolong the lives of women and children, they did not all wish to establish gender equality or to combat patriarchy. The reproductive responsibility of women to the nation was simply too critical a matter to entrust to ordinary citizens, and overturning the status quo could inadvertently jeopardize national interests In other words, maternalist priorities for Iranian policy makers mattered because they advanced the state’s political ideology. (5)

Zari’s reduced role as a citizen thus becomes clearer in this context. Khosrow, their son, constitutes the nation, whereas the daughters are reduced to “cutie dolls.” While, historically, Daneshvar places *Savushun* in the early 1940s, much of what is written about the Iranian women during the early decades of the twentieth century (particularly during and after the Constitutional Revolution) persists in her narrative *in combination with* socio-political reformations and changes of the forties. In 1941, when Mohammad Reza Pahlavi replaced his father, Reza Shah, and became the new king of Iran, “the number of educated women grew, so did their campaign for political parity. Feminism, as opposed to maternalism, became a rallying point for women activists” (ibid, 167). In fact, one could read the positioning of the different men in the narrative as a reaction to this “political parity” of Iranian women’s feminism in the 1940s. While reading Zari as a feminist activist would be a stretch, one can see her revolt against the abuse of her

¹⁴¹ Kashani-Sabet, *Conceiving Citizens*, 121. The news article that she is citing is *Nijat*, No. 22, 19 Ramadan 1327/ 5 October 1909, 4. Subsequent references will be indicated parenthetically in the text.

maternalist tendencies for political gain. In a way, their act of sexual intimacy can be read as portraying Zari in a submissive role—her husband lets her know that he “wants her” which leads to the act; however, in the aftermath of this act, which leads to her pregnancy, she takes on a proactive role regarding said pregnancy. Moreover, neither Zari nor the reader are aware at the time that their sexual encounter will lead to her pregnancy, allowing her to fully immerse herself in the experience as a woman, and not as a mother, “forget[ting] everything,”¹⁴² taking full pleasure in the moment, with the sound of the water possibly indicating the peak of this pleasure. But, shortly after, we are reminded of the physical toll that her pregnancies have on her body, and how her body is indeed a repository for the nation. We learn that all of her babies were delivered by Caesarean section, and the doctor who delivers her children is a British doctor, Khanom Hakim (a translation of Ms. Doctor—yet the term “hakim” also indicates one who is wise), who “was quick with the knife. She would cut and sew...Khanom Hakim ripped open my belly and spread out my insides. On my belly, she drew a map.”¹⁴³ The marks from her C-section have created a map, and this map on her belly is torn apart in the same way that the map of Iran has been torn apart by Zinger. Giving birth to the children of this nation has left visible scars on her body—scars that were implemented by a British “doctor,” indicating the violence that is perpetrated against these children and their carriers from the outset. It becomes clear, therefore, why Zari attempts to save her home, which is effectively not only *her* nation-state, but the nation-state writ large, from the violence that she knows will be perpetrated against it as a result of Yusof’s resistance.

In the aftermath of the slap, Yusof and Zari locate their son, Khosrow, at the gendarmery

¹⁴² Daneshvar, *Savushun*, 34.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 35.

and find out that he was trying to covertly retrieve his beloved horse from the governor's house with the help of his cousin. On their walk back home, Zari is unable to take the shortcut home as it requires her to climb a hill, so she walks down a main street alone, unbeknownst to the men who "were paying no attention to her" and continued to walk uphill. She walks by a group of Indian soldiers who were urinating, and one of them turns around, exposes himself to her and says, "Lady need!"¹⁴⁴ Sexually harassing her in broken English, this Indian soldier's act is part of a problematic pattern that existed at the time, according to Kashani-Sabet. She states that the

foreign occupation as a result of the Allied invasion...spilled into the realm of gender relations. Iranian officials could not handle the misconduct of occupying ... troops even when the rights, lives, and dignity of Iranian women were at stake. This emasculation of Iranian men was reflected in their lack of control over Iranian women, an imbalance in power that generated unease.¹⁴⁵

During this encounter, we read that Zari "was hoping against hope that either her son or her husband was behind her. When she reached the side road where their garden was located and saw no one following her, on second thought, she was glad that she had gotten there on her own."¹⁴⁶ Ghanoonparvar's translation of this final sentence misses an important fact about Zari's happiness in this situation; the original text mentions that Zari was happy "that she would not be indebted to them (*mennati bar ou nakhahand dasht*)."¹⁴⁷ At first, therefore, Zari is depending on the masculinity of her husband or son to extricate her from this situation. Not only would they protect her from unwanted advances, but more importantly, they'd feel that they were to be thanked for preserving the dignity of their woman. Yet, upon further reflection, Zari decides that

¹⁴⁴ Daneshvar, *Savushun*, 133.

¹⁴⁵ Kashani-Sabet, *Conceiving Citizens*, 167.

¹⁴⁶ Daneshvar, *Savushun*, 133.

¹⁴⁷ Daneshvar, *Savushun* [in Persian], 121.

she could do with what Kashani-Sabet refers to as the Iranian man's emasculation, of not being able to protect their women from the troops' misconduct. Zari has, in effect, protected herself and retained control in this particular situation, and the power balance has been restored, even if for a few moments. It is thus through these seemingly small pockets of female autonomy in the narrative that Daneshvar challenges masculinist notions of resistance that permeated the literary landscape. These pockets of self-determination are what Chandra Talpade Mohanty views as "marginal and resistant modes and experiences" that are effectively erased by Western feminist discourses¹⁴⁸ in "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses."

Daneshvar's narrative is filled with such marginal spaces of thought and activity that demonstrate how Zari is responding to the male-dominated order of political action she's surrounded by, which is why careless readings of the text focus on what is conceived as Al-e Ahmad's masculine "I" establishing the novel's discourse. If and when Zari takes on the maternalist cause and protects the nation, she does it on her own terms. Once in the home, arguments between Zari, Yusof, and Khosrow about Zari's lack of courage in dealing with the governor's wishes escalate; Zari gets fed up with all the attacks on her, and finally yells that she's pregnant: "Today, damn it, I went to have this one aborted. Wasn't I courageous to keep it? When you give birth to a child with so much hardship, you can't endure losing it so effortlessly. Every day I... every day I turn like a pulley on a well to water my flowers. I can't stand to see anyone trample them."¹⁴⁹ In this context, then, keeping her child becomes a revolutionary act. She is decidedly not a scarecrow, with "her body...emptied of its contents and reduced to a

¹⁴⁸ Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," in *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, eds. Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Ann Russo, and Lourdes Torres. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991, 73.

¹⁴⁹ Daneshvar, *Savushun*, 143.

signifier of predetermined functions.”¹⁵⁰ The reader realizes now that the ship of flowers Zari had imagined during intercourse with her husband foreshadows her pregnancy, as she compares her children to flowers. This simile, read in conjunction with her comparison to a scarecrow, adds meaning to her garden being her city. The representation of the nation as an entity of nationalist masculinity shifts, instead, to a natural landscape—one that is still taken care of by the mother, not as a spineless entity or object, but as a caregiver with the utmost responsibility; for she still is, for better or worse, taking care of the nation. And while her initial decision to abort her unborn child could indicate that she wants to rid herself of the responsibility of bearing and rearing the nation—and thus, in a sense, ridding herself of the nation—she ultimately, and courageously, decides against it. Therefore, while the maternalism that Kashani-Sabet refers to is still present, Zari indicates that she does not want her nation to be used for political gain. But her request falls on deaf ears; the main point that Yusof and Khosrow take away from her outburst is her declaration that she is pregnant. This causes father and son to immediately soften their tone, apologize for attacking her, and treat her with a tenderness that is almost overbearing.

Locating Courage beyond Political Resistance

Before this revelation, Zari is accused of being a coward and a pushover by the two men in her life. We learn that Khosrow has been influenced by “Comrade Fotuhi,”¹⁵¹ his socialist teacher.

About the political make-up of the 1940s, Kashani-Sabet writes,

¹⁵⁰ Liu, “The Female Body,” 53. In her aforementioned essay, Liu reads the simile of the woman as scarecrow in Xiao Hong’s novel, *The Field of Life and Death*. Writing about Golden Bough, the peasant woman in Hong’s novel who has become pregnant before getting married, Liu describes her fear upon realizing that she is pregnant, and thus quotes the novel, “She was seized with terror. Golden Bough seemed to have become a scarecrow in a rice field.”¹⁵⁰ About this reference that is conspicuously similar to Yusof’s characterization of Zari and what he perceives as her cowardice, Liu writes, “Like a scarecrow, her body is emptied of its contents and reduced to a signifier of predetermined functions” for “the patriarchy desires her body, demands her chastity, and punishes her for her transgressive acts” (53).

¹⁵¹ Daneshvar, *Savushun*, 141.

Political parties mushroomed with the leftist Tudeh Party garnering unrivaled populist support. The impact of maternalism became reflected in the platform of political parties that appeared during this time. One group, Hizb-i Iran-i Naw (New Iran Party), included in its charter the following points: the mandatory education and behavioral training of Iranian women, provisions for public sanitation in an attempt to increase the population, mandatory participation in athletics, and battling substance abuse. Regarding family life, Hizb-i Iran-i Naw even waged war on celibacy by stipulating the need to create families, as well as to protect existing families, in order to combat prostitution and to promote population growth.¹⁵²

The education that the Iranian socialist parties at the time were advocating were a far cry from the education that Zari had received. The focus, as it can be gleaned from the passage above, is for the women to become strong and knowledgeable so they'll know how to take care of themselves during pregnancy and to increase the population. Education in this context becomes another tool for the suppression of women's individual rights. This does not mean, however, that the British education Zari received was *not* a tool of oppression. My reading of Yusof has focused on his mistreatment of Zari, and rightfully so, for most readings—even the most recent ones—construct him as the hero and Zari as the wife who is holding him back from his fight for freedom. For example, in the essay “Modern Iran through its Novels” in the Michigan Quarterly Review that is meant to recommend “good representations of modern Iranian writing,”¹⁵³ Kaveh Bassiri writes, “The narrator, Zari, is a wife and mother who is concerned about the safety and happiness of her family while her patriotic husband gets involved in the greater community against imperialism, tribal politics, and corruption. It is a story of the growing social and political awareness of Zari, as well as a growing revolutionary social consciousness.”¹⁵⁴ Characterizations

¹⁵² Kashani-Sabet, *Conceiving Citizens*, 170.

¹⁵³ Kaveh Bassiri, “Modern Iran Through Its Novels,” *Michigan Quarterly Review* (blog), February 23, 2017. <https://sites.lsa.umich.edu/mqr/2017/02/modern-iran-through-its-novels/>. Paragraph 4.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, Paragraph 13.

such as these would thus have the reader view Zari as unpatriotic and as one whose contributions to her immediate community are meaningless when compared to her husband's involvement in the "greater community." It paints Yusof's mode of struggle against imperialism as the only valid mode of struggle, with Zari's subversive acts at the British school (among others) completely disregarded. The reading conducted here, however, should not be misconstrued as a complete disavowal of Yusof's character, viewpoints, and values. I would argue that Daneshvar's decision to place most of the novel's critical, ideological posturing in Yusof's character represents the political reality of the time; namely, that the ideological foundations of Iran's revolutionary discourse were created by male intellectuals—the most prominent of which was Daneshvar's husband. Placing Zari in confrontation with these ideological formations does not entirely negate them. Rather, it offers a crucial voice that is not consulted in these formations: an Iranian woman.

In this vein, part of Yusof's disavowal of the missionary school's method and tools of education is justified. When Zari argues with her son about his rebellious method of wanting to take his horse back, Khosrow quotes Mr. Fotouhi in that "Bridges must be destroyed so there will be no way to turn back."¹⁵⁵ Zari becomes angry at her son's immaturity and mentions that she didn't want her children to be raised in a "quarrelsome and violent environment"¹⁵⁶ and "to keep peace in the family."¹⁵⁷ Once again, Khosrow accuses her of being a manipulative coward, but his father intervenes:

"Your mother is not at fault. The situation here is such that the best school is the British school, the best hospital is the missionary hospital. And when they want to learn

¹⁵⁵ Daneshvar, *Savushun*, 139.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 140.

embroidery, it is on a Singer sewing machine, the salesman for which is Zinger. Your mother has only known instructors and teachers who have tried to keep her away from reality [the truth] and instead teach her politeness, etiquette, conformity, coquetry, embroidery, and how to smile. She always talks about peace...” And suddenly, turning to Zari, he shouted, “Woman, what use is a peace based on deception? ... Woman, think a little. When you give in so easily, everybody pushes you around.”¹⁵⁸

Yusof suggests that his wife is unable to understand the imperial tools that her so-called educators have used in their methods of instruction. In other words, Zari has blindly followed what she had been taught and she doesn't know any better. Furthermore, in his mind, it is precisely because of this British education that Zari has lost her courage and thinks only about maintaining peace. The British have taught her to be a docile housewife, and by extension, a docile citizen. Ideologically speaking, therefore, Yusof does not want a docile housewife—he cares about having a wife who can “think a little.” But Yusof merely cares about thought that aligns with his own. His definition of courage is limited, as it only pertains to a radical form of courage in the face of political authority. It is at this juncture that we hear from Yusof's widowed sister, Fatemeh, who lives with them, and who points out that Zari's perceived lack of courage is indeed what allows for Yusof's radicalism. Before turning to her interjection, it is important to note that, in addition to Zari, there are only two other people who have an entire chapter dedicated to their personal narrative. In other words, in two cases, Daneshvar makes the decision to shift the narrative voice and allows these voices to narrate a central event: one is Fatemeh, and the other is a military captain. While Golshiri believes this shift is a shortcoming in the novel, especially as it pertains to the captain and MacMahon's storytelling¹⁵⁹—a claim that Daneshvar

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 140-1.

¹⁵⁹ Golshiri, *The Struggle*, 98-99.

does not adequately push back against¹⁶⁰—I would argue that these voices are integral to understanding Daneshvar’s disorderly political project.

As the only other direct female voice in narrative, Fatemeh speaks of her personal pain—one that she’s “always kept...to [herself]”¹⁶¹ and that Zari had never known until then. She speaks of the death of her son at the age of six, the premature death of her husband, and her mother’s abandonment by their father for a younger woman, her hard work, and ultimate death at the age of forty-four. The other voice we hear is that of the military captain who has miraculously escaped a guerilla attack on his convoy by tribal forces (including Malek Sohrab). For this narrative, Daneshvar combines two historical events that took place in the mountainous region of Semirom (now part of the province of Isfahan) during World War II. About the tribal situation during this time, Ervand Abrahamian in *Iran Between Two Revolutions* cites a report by the British consul in Shiraz:

With the fall of Reza Shah, his much-prided infantry and armies lost morale and were overthrown by the tribes. The nomads rejoiced in the reaccession of freedom, and buried arms saw light again and were carefully cleansed. New rifles were bought and acquired, some sold by the army or arms traffickers, others seized in daring raids on outposts of the army. Added to these were the many rifles of the deserters, some of whom had been conscripted from the tribes and were quick to return to their tents. The rearmament race had begun.¹⁶²

One of the two incidents conflated in Daneshvar’s narrative is the violent attack by the southern Qashqayi tribe on an outpost in Semirom during one of the raids described above, which lead to the death of hundreds of army men and a competent, brave, and beloved colonel. In her interview

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 199-202.

¹⁶¹ Daneshvar, *Savushun*, 82.

¹⁶² Ervand Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions* [Electronic Resource]. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 173.

with Golshiri, Daneshvar confirms that she was thinking of this man, Colonel Shaghaghi, when she wrote this episode and the colonel mentioned in the narrative by the military captain is indeed Shaghaghi.¹⁶³ Yet, Daneshvar decides to add to this event a development that took place a year later, namely, the involvement of the British with the Qashqayi tribe, in an effort to incite ethnic rivalries; this would ensure a distribution of power among them that would allow for “temporary peace” in Iran during British involvement.¹⁶⁴ This involvement was welcomed and in fact pursued by the tribes.

Placing both these elongated narratives that take up an entire chapter in quotation marks, Daneshvar shrewdly separates the inner thoughts of Zari from these isolated stories; Zari does not interject or editorialize at all. At the same time, the importance of these narratives and the care with which Zari listens to them (indicated by her silence) demonstrate to the reader how these points of view complement that of Zari’s. In other words, putting together the readings of the novel that I have presented thus far with the significance of these two narratives, a fuller picture of Daneshvar’s literary project emerges. The military captain who has sought refuge in Yusof’s house, narrates the deadly ambush on their military outpost for the family in a manner that is clearly meant to elicit the reader’s compassion. The tribesmen are described in vicious language, the soldiers are inhumanely killed, and those who are struggling to keep the post and stay alive, anxiously wait for army assistance that never arrives. The colonel manages to keep his unit standing for ten days, and believes that they will receive help; but when his captains point out to him that they should surrender in order to prevent being thoroughly massacred and that reinforcements will never arrive, the colonel replies, “I can’t force you to stay, but I myself will

¹⁶³ Golshiri, *Savushun*, 205.

¹⁶⁴ Abrahamian, *Iran*, 174.

stay.”¹⁶⁵ The idealism of the colonel maps on to the idealism of Yusof—an idealism that Zari understands only after the death of her husband, and subsequently embodies it. But the narrative also makes it its purpose to point out the high price that must be paid for this idealism and the voices that aren’t heard in this idealism. Consequently, those whose voices are not considered in the idealistic and ideological formulations of a revolutionary consciousness are precisely those who suffer the most. More importantly, we witness where the immediate dangers of British imperialistic efforts lie: Zari’s intellectual capabilities allowed her to parse her British education for elements of it that would work to her benefit, and simultaneously to negate those aspects that she understands are meant to suppress her thought and culture. But the case of the Qashqayi tribe’s cooperation with the British to gain leverage in internal conflicts leaves little room for equivocation. On the one hand, the British forces’ utter disregard for real, longstanding peace in the country becomes evident. And on the other hand, the cost of tribalism on the lives of Iranian soldiers (who had been conscripted for military service from across the country—often from tribes—and forcefully homogenized) is underlined in this murderous encounter.

Ultimately, though, for Daneshvar it is the marginalization of the Iranian woman’s voice in the development of a revolutionary consciousness that needs underscoring. It is fitting, then, that the person who comes to Zari’s defense against the attacks of her husband and son is another woman—Fatemeh. After Yusof’s outburst, admonishing Zari for not thinking, Fatemeh yells, “What’s the matter with you—father and son ganging up on this poor soul? ... Do you want to know the truth, brother? She is a pushover. She gives bribes so no one will bother you.”¹⁶⁶

Fatemeh situates Zari’s so-called lack of courage in the larger political struggle: her concessions

¹⁶⁵ Daneshvar, *Savushun*, 220.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 141.

allow her husband to continue his acts of resistance unscathed. The same woman who puts her wellbeing and body on the line to rear the nation, will also, naturally, do everything in her power to protect the wellbeing of the nation—of *her* nation. In *Zanan dar Dastan* [*Women in Fiction*], Nargess Baqeri attributes Zari’s “emotional” thinking to her social situation; to corroborate this claim, she refers to Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*, in which de Beauvoir speaks of women’s preference for reconciliation and preservation over revolutionary acts and not considering destruction as prerequisite to reconstruction.¹⁶⁷ She argues that Zari is aware of her emotional way of thinking,¹⁶⁸ which is why she tells Yusof that their marriage has taken away her courage. But Zari is not without courage, as is demonstrated in her outburst about her pregnancy. Choosing not to abort her unborn child is an act of courage in her combative nation-state.

The courage that Yusof has in mind, however, is the kind of courage she used to show when she was studying at the British school, and it is precisely that form of courage that she believes has been taken away from her after her marriage. In response to Yusof’s claim that she does not understand the manner in which her British education has taken away her thinking faculties, she responds (as cited earlier in this chapter),

Zinger kept making us feel indebted to him because he was teaching us sewing, so we would be able to make a living on our own. Khanom Hakim would say our recovery and cure was in her hands, but I knew in the bottom of my heart that they were only telling half the truth and that there was always something rotten somewhere. I knew that we were, all of us, constantly losing something, but we didn’t know what it was.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁷ de Beauvoir cited in Nargess Baqeri, *Women in Fiction: Heroines in the Fiction of Iranian Female Writers* [in Persian] (Tehran: Morvarid Publications, 2008), 179.

¹⁶⁸ Baqeri, *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁹ Daneshvar, *Savushun*, 142. Subsequent references will be indicated parenthetically in the text.

Zari indicates here that she was—and is—in fact capable of understanding their subjugation at the hands of the British. She describes it in terms of a loss, in the same manner that Yusof argues her courage has been lost. She also describes her understanding as coming from “the bottom of [her] heart,” indicating the depth at which this understanding was taking place. In turn, Yusof mentions that all this is why he married her, and wonders why she’s changed. Zari loses her cool:

But I told you; must I repeat it a hundred times? You are frighteningly frank and this frankness of yours—again, I know in the bottom of my heart—is dangerous. If I want to stand up to anyone, I must first stand up to you and then what a war of nerves will begin. Do you want to hear more truths? Then listen. It is you who have taken my courage away. I have put up with you for so long that it has become a habit with me. (ibid.)

Zari’s oppression is not solely at the hands of the British, and her concessions are not limited to the outside realm, or effectively, *her* country and nation-state. The more important concessions that Zari makes are in indeed in her own realm—namely, in the household. Once again, it is from “the bottom of [her] heart” that she senses the danger of Yusof’s idealism. And the reader understands how the loss that Zari was describing earlier as a result of her British education is connected to a loss that Zari is now experiencing in her own home.

Shortly after this conversation, Yusof refers to his wife in language that is similar to his description of his daughters as “cutie dolls,” to which Zari “thoughtfully” responds, “I am a human being...I’m not a cute kitten” (168). The context in which Yusof uses this language is important to note; as he scolds Zari for having lost her courage, she asks, “What should I do to satisfy you? What should I do to become courageous?” Yusof said laughing, “I can teach you. Your first lesson in courage is this: First, when you are afraid to do something, if you are in the right, do it in spite of your fear, my cute kitten!” (ibid.) Yusof’s pedantic and paternalistic statement reduces Zari to an unthinking, delicate animal, one who must learn about the fundamentals of courageousness from her husband. Zari pushes back against this characterization of herself and adds, “Anyway, first lessons are given to people who are dead between the ears”

(ibid). Zari challenges Yusof's treatment of her which is the vestige of the Constitutional Revolution's male-centered "cultural language." Yet, by asking him what she should do to fit his definition of courage, she is ultimately succumbing to that male-centered culture. In Zari's maternalist mode of being, the family as nation is consistently at the center. I end this section of the novel's analysis on this note to segue into Condé's narrative, and determine the manners in which Condé's narrative differs from that of Daneshvar's, in addition to what I argue are their common literary and political projects. In conclusion, I will compare the endings of the two novels to situate the culminations of their projects in their particular cultural settings, and discuss what their implications could be for their disorderly political imaginations.

Hérémakhonon

"What is it about her writing that bugs me?" As unsophisticated and unscholarly as this question was that I wrote at the top of page 35 of my copy of Maryse Condé's *Hérémakhonon*¹⁷⁰—I wrote it, after all, during the first semester of my graduate studies at Columbia University—it is the perfect starting point to my discussion of her novel. To articulate it in a more disciplinary and less cryptic manner, my qualms with Condé's novel were, at the time, its apparent apolitical quality—or to be more precise, her apolitical protagonist—at a time and in a context that to be apolitical raised questions about one's ethics and loyalties. And the questioning of the ethics and loyalty of Condé's protagonist by her politically active friends is at the center of this novel, which was first published in French in 1976; at the height, therefore, of decolonization on a geopolitical level—or what Jennifer Wenzel calls "the formal era of historical decolonization."

¹⁷⁰ While I had originally read *Hérémakhonon* in English, in this reading I consult the French also to ensure an accurate analysis of the narrative and its language.

¹⁷¹ This indicates that decolonization was formally taking place during the 1960s and 1970s on a geopolitical level as formerly colonized countries were one by one gaining their independence; yet, in more conceptual areas such as language and culture, or the “psychic and epistemological”¹⁷² aspects of decolonization, there was still a lot of headway to be made, as there were often quite conflicting views on how one should go about decolonizing the mind.¹⁷³

Condé wrote the novel in response to the violence perpetrated by Sekou Touré, the Guinean president-turned-dictator, in 1962; yet the novel was published in 1976, at which time she was living in Paris, after having lived in Guinea, Ghana, and Senegal for almost a decade. Given that the novel revolves around Veronica and her interactions, it can thus seem surprising, on first thought, that Condé characterizes *Hérémakhonon* as “a novel of protest”:

When I wrote *Hérémakhonon*, there was an oversimplified militancy in the air, along with a devout faith in African socialism and the mythification of that ideal. These things exacerbated me and seemed quite naïve. I wanted to write a novel that would counter what was said at the time with too much superficiality. Basically, I wanted...to point out *how difficult it was to build a nation*. *Hérémakhonon* was a novel about disenchantment and pain. I have been sadly amused by some of the interpretations given to it. People have said, “Deep down she is alienated, she must have sold out to the reactionaries” and so forth. *Hérémakhonon* was not fictionalized autobiography at all. It was a novel of protest.¹⁷⁴ [emphasis added]

In comparison with Daneshvar’s novel and its context, there are points of correspondence and divergence. In the same vein that most critics were unable to remove Al-e Ahmad from

¹⁷¹ Jennifer Wenzel, “Decolonization,” in *A Companion to Critical and Cultural Theory*, eds. Imre Szeman, Sarah Blacker and Justin Sully (John Wiley and Sons, 2017), 449.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 451.

¹⁷³ I am, of course, alluding to Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong’o’s book, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*, that, coupled with Chinua Achebe’s speech in 1964 “The African Writer and the English Language” and his 1965 *Transition* article “English and the African Writer”, were pillars of the discourse of decolonization in terms of language.

¹⁷⁴ Maryse Condé, “First Works: Fiction and Literary Criticism,” in *Conversations with Maryse Condé*, ed. and trans. Françoise Pfaff (University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 40.

Daneshvar's narrative and read Yusof as a representative of Al-e Ahmad, Condé was equated with her self-centered protagonist, resulting in skewed critiques of the novel that failed to look past the ostensibly unlikable character of Veronica. Yet, the seemingly apolitical nature of Veronica is different from that of Zari's, at least on first notice. Zari's priorities are depicted as different from Yusof's, due to her fear for her family's wellbeing. Condé's protagonist, on the other hand, simply does not care, apparently, about anything or anyone but herself. Also, as mentioned above, ultimately Zari seems to ask for guidance from Yusof as to where her political allegiances must lie. Veronica has no allegiances. Narratologically, both texts include preoccupations with the cultural vestiges of colonialism and imperialism, as well as the idealistic struggles against these vestiges. While the militarism that African countries and other postcolonial nations were experiencing was distinct from the situation in Iran, as Iran was never formally colonized, both texts address the violent, masculinist struggles for nationalism that were taking place in their narrative locations. In this vein, they represent the gendered nature of nation formations and the burden that women were carrying in these formations, while being disenfranchised in conversations about these formations. And ultimately, both writers underline the *literary* designs of their projects, their attempts to disrupt the narrow definitions of political literature, and to create a political aesthetic that overturns the social and socialist realism of their (male) literary contemporaries.

At the time that *Hérémakhonon* was published in 1976, it received a great deal of backlash. In describing the novel's reception in France, Condé mentions that it wasn't deemed "politically correct" and as such, it "almost went unnoticed," and in Africa, save for "a moralizing" article that her friend had written in response to it, there was the same "conspiracy

of silence.”¹⁷⁵ She was “labeled as a person who detests and says bad things about Africa” and “a reactionary.” The worst reaction surfaced in the West Indies. She mentions a critic there who “called [her] “a voyeur and a whore,” adding that “an odor of sperm could be smelled” in the book, and ended up comparing [her] to Mayotte Capécia.”¹⁷⁶ The decision to vocalize this comparison on Condé’s part is significant; her protagonist also makes a point in the narrative to claim that she is “no Mayotte Capécia!”¹⁷⁷

The majority of Frantz Fanon’s second chapter, “The Woman of Color and the White Man,” in *Black Skin, White Masks* is dedicated to disparaging Capécia’s novel, *Je suis Martiniquaise*, and Capécia herself in the harshest terms. He writes that she “has definitively turned her back on her country,”¹⁷⁸ as she writes in what could be deemed an autobiography¹⁷⁹ about her desire to be wanted and loved by André, a French white man, and how “for her white and black represent the two poles of the world, two poles in perpetual conflict: a genuinely Manichean concept of the world”¹⁸⁰:

...what Mayotte wants is a kind of lactification. For, in a word, the race must be whitened; every woman in Martinique knows this, says it, repeats it. Whiten the race, save the race, but not in the sense that one might think: not “preserve the uniqueness of that part of the world in which they grew up,” but make sure that it will be white... It is always essential to avoid falling back into the pit of niggerhood, and every woman in the Antilles, whether in casual flirtation or in a serious affair, is determined to select the least black of the

¹⁷⁵ Condé, “First Works,” 46

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ Maryse Condé, *Heremakhonon*, trans. Richard Philcox (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1982), 28.

¹⁷⁸ Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1965), 53.

¹⁷⁹ Mayotte Capécia was her pen name; her real name was Lucette Ceranus, and in the novel, she writes about Mayotte. Referring to this novel as autobiography is not, therefore, as straightforward as it would seem and it merits a more nuanced reading than what Fanon offers.

¹⁸⁰ Fanon, *Black Skin.*, 44-5.

men.¹⁸¹

I quote these sections of Fanon at length as they are integral to the political, anticolonial and anti-imperial discourses of the time, and not just in Africa or the Caribbean. Alice Cherki affirms in *Frantz Fanon: A Portrait*, that “Fanon found especially fertile ground in Iran”¹⁸² during the time that Daneshvar was working on her novel. Fanon’s works, and in particular the aforementioned *Black Skin, White Masks* along with *The Wretched of the Earth*, were pivotal texts in all of these locations and for the intellectuals and writers who were setting the frameworks for cultural productions and their revolutionary ideals that would help form the nation. These texts largely contributed to the definition and delineation of said ideals. Fanon’s treatment of Capécia’s novel, then, had an everlasting impact; her name became synonymous with efforts to “whiten the race” and to be a traitor to one’s own people. When Fanon makes that sweeping statement about “every woman in the Antilles,” it’s not quite clear whether he’s ventriloquizing Capécia or if this is indeed his belief, thus offering itself (among many other similar examples in his prose) to simplistic readings of revolutionary ideals. In this particular example, however, to claim that Fanon was indeed complicit in this statement wouldn’t be far-fetched. One of the major blind-spots of the discourse he helped create was, after all, the situation and rights of the colonized woman. Condé, both in her decision to point out that she was likened to Capécia and to demonstrate her protagonist’s desire to distance herself from that same writer, is signaling that she is aware of the masculinist discourse that Fanon has created, as is her protagonist, even though she doesn’t seem to care about it. She is signaling, therefore, that both her and her protagonist are in conversation with Fanon and responding to that discourse in which he was central. In the case

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 47.

¹⁸² Alice Cherki, *Frantz Fanon: A Portrait* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2006), 99.

of Veronica, one could argue that her act of conversing with and responding to that discourse is not deliberate; yet, the pervasiveness and totalizing nature of specific forms of political, anticolonial resistance and its galvanizers such as socialism, a patriarchal nationalism, or Pan-Africanism, situated members of the newly-independent nation-states (or those still struggling for independence) in conversation with its discourse—a discourse that by and large excluded women—irrespective of their desire for it. Moreover, Condé’s choice to mention Capécia is even more telling when one considers her critique of Fanon’s reading of Capécia’s novel in “Order, Disorder, Freedom and the West Indian Writer.” She writes “Frantz Fanon takes a very dangerous stand. He *deliberately* confuses the author and the object of her fiction [emphasis added].”¹⁸³ Readers and critics of Condé’s novel performed this same error (also, one could argue, deliberately) confusing Condé and Veronica, and Condé repeatedly points out in interviews that her novel was not indeed autobiographical. A conflation of the two women—the female author and her female protagonist— both in Capécia’s novel and Condé’s novel, allows for reductive readings of women and their political roles that in turn contributed to further marginalization of these women and their concerns.

Condé’s narrative takes place in a post-independent West-African society. In an interview, she mentions that she had lived in Guinea for ten years before she wrote the novel: “I saw so many things: people rioting, being killed, being sent into exile, being deported, and so on. The years I spent in Africa were so tragic. I had to write about them.”¹⁸⁴ Elsewhere, about the end of her ultimately twelve-year stay in Africa she writes, “I was in a state of complete confusion, all the

¹⁸³ Condé, “Order, Disorder,” 131.

¹⁸⁴ Maryse Condé and Barbara Lewis, “No Silence: An Interview with Maryse Condé,” *Callaloo*, 18.3 (1995) 543. *JSTOR*. Accessed 30 May 2017.

values I used to believe in were shattered.”¹⁸⁵ These values are “Marxism, race and revolution.”¹⁸⁶ Both Daneshvar and Condé write their novels in the 1960s, when the values Condé mentions were important elements of the committed literary movement and the model of West Indian literature that Condé outlines in her above-mentioned essay, and that I have discussed in my introduction. My intention, therefore, with regard to the work of Daneshvar and Condé, is to study the alternative modes of revolutionary literature they are offering; as mentioned in my introduction, Condé writes of the importance of a psychological revolution before a political one. I have also cited Nabavi’s delineation of what “revolutionary” meant in a third-worldist discourse—it is necessarily anti-Western and anti-imperialist. By reading *Héremakhonon*, in conjunction with Condé’s essay “Order, Disorder, Freedom, and the West Indian writer” as well as interviews she gave about the novel, I demonstrate how a writer or an intellectual can create a political work of literature that contributes to liberation projects without succumbing to the grand (masculinist) narratives prevalent in the discourse of the time, one of which was anticolonial nationalism.

Condé’s protagonist is decidedly not preoccupied with the historical and political exigencies of the anticolonial movements in the 1960s and 1970s. In the very first pages of the novel, as mentioned in the introduction, Veronica proclaims that she is “not involved in politics”¹⁸⁷ and is met with Birame III’s incredulity at this statement. It seems that Birame III finds it impossible not to be political. As mentioned earlier, twelve years later Condé would write a preface to the second edition of the novel in which she not only acknowledges readers,

¹⁸⁵ Maryse Condé, “The Role of the Writer,” *World Literature Today*, 67, no. 4 (1993): 697, <https://doi.org/10.2307/40149563>.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁷ Condé, *Heremakhonon*, 9.

like me, who would have felt frustrated with her protagonist, but also takes a step further and attacks her protagonist in quite vicious terms. Here is, once again,¹⁸⁸ Condé's description of Veronica in this preface:

Véronica, narcissistic, egotistical, indecisive, at times even spineless, is the witness of the drama. A witness who first wants to remain indifferent, but who little by little finds herself dragged into the heart of the action. Her pathetic states of mind, her cynical, engaged and often shocking reflections are a parasite in the narrative (*parasitent le récit*), exasperating even the reader who would like to indicate to her the correct behavior.

Despite her adverse characterization of her own protagonist, however, Condé exclaims that she wouldn't—and indeed doesn't—change anything in the narrative, save for a few minor edits.¹⁸⁹

It is, therefore, imperative to her narrative that her narrator remain “narcissistic, egotistical, indecisive, at times even spineless,” even though, and to the extent that, she exploits the narrative. These statements from Condé about her novel, on the one hand, strongly challenge critics who equated Condé with her protagonist, and she in turn strongly condemns and critiques this reductive reading of her novel in particular and fiction in general in interviews and essays.¹⁹⁰

On the other hand, it is clear that Condé created this parasitic protagonist, with all her shortcomings and frustrating mannerisms, to offer an alternative narrative about a postcolonial African nation-state and a Francophone woman from the Caribbean with origins in Africa. Condé's choice of protagonist and characterization thereof should be carefully analyzed to understand what this alternative narrative is offering. Finally, in the manner I challenge the characterization of Zari as spineless and a scarecrow through a careful reading of subtle indications in the novel to the contrary, I similarly challenge Condé's own designation of her

¹⁸⁸ I've cited these lines once in my introduction to this chapter. See note 97.

¹⁸⁹ Maryse. “Avant-propos,” 12.

¹⁹⁰ See, e.g., “First Works,” and “Order, Disorder.”

“negative heroine.”

How, then, does Veronica, as a narcissistic witness, fit into this narrative about the difficulty of building a nation? And how can a novel about a bourgeois woman who couldn't care less about the political activism surrounding her be a novel of protest? While I agree with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's argument that “readings that focus on Mercier as a character are limited in approach,”¹⁹¹ I would argue that one should pay attention to *Condé's choice* of character and narrative and what this choice represents in an anticolonial discourse; by analyzing this choice as well as what the reactions to it have been, I would like to draw attention to the larger implications these choices had at the time that the novel was written and published, and how it envisioned its contribution to the literary and political discourse at the time; a discourse from which Condé and her work were excluded.

Towards a New “West Indian Literature”

As mentioned in this dissertation's introduction, in “Order, Disorder” Condé laments the masculinist-nationalist tropes that more or less prevailed in West Indian literature since the 1930s. Condé's novels defies all of those tropes, including that its hero should be a man whose origins lie in the proletariat, that the location of the narrative, as well as its framework, should be the native land, and that the woman is merely the auxiliary in the hero's quest for freedom.¹⁹² In fact, she actively and openly defies the categorization of her work either as African or West Indian. She has qualms with Creolization, or at least with the avenues through which it has come to fruition; its masculine quality in particular and the erasure of the female or the fact that the

¹⁹¹ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak “The Staging of Time in Heremakhonon.” *Cultural Studies* 17, no. 1 (January 1, 2003): 85. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0950238032000050823>.

¹⁹² Condé, “Order, Disorder,” 126. Subsequent references will be indicated parenthetically in the text.

feminine voice has no place in this Creolization is something she rightfully takes issue with.

In that same essay, she lauds Édouard Glissant and “his most important contribution to West Indian literature” which is “the introduction of a new dimension, the one of language” (127). In the framework that Glissant sets for West Indian literature—a framework that, Condé laments, “has not been adopted by the majority of West Indian Writers” (128)—language is central to the narrative: “The cohabitation of Creole and French creates a new language...For Glissant, the question is not Creole *or* French, but Creole *and* French.” (ibid.). About her own narrative language, she states, “I write neither in French nor in Creole. I write in Maryse Condé.”¹⁹³ She is thus creating her own unique language which is a combination of the two, for, similar to Daneshvar’s Persian that is interspersed with Shirazi dialect and non-Persian words and phrases, *Héremakhonon* is written in French, interspersed here and there with Creole phrases. There are times when she offers a translation of a Creole phrase; for example: “*Tala, cé plis piti là? Is this the youngest?*”¹⁹⁴ Other times she does not offer a translation. She describes a scene from Veronica’s childhood where their housemaid, Mabo Julie, is cooking. About Mabo Julie she writes, “She has a great big face that I saw fifteen years later on Scarlett O’Hara’s Maid.”¹⁹⁵ The song that Mabo Julie is singing is left untranslated: “*Surah en blanc,/ Ka semb’on pigeon blanc/ Surah en gris/ Ka semb’on tourterelle.*”¹⁹⁶ In certain cases, she almost seamlessly integrates a creole phrase into the French:

Qui n’a pas entendu parler du tam-tam africain?...Enfin pour moi rien d’extraordinaire le

¹⁹³ Maryse Condé. “Literature and Globalization,” trans. Marcelline Block. *The Encyclopedia of Global Human Migration*, ed Immanuel Ness. (Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2013), DOI: 10.1002/9781444351071.wbeghm347

¹⁹⁴ Condé, *Heremakhonon*, 122.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 32.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

tam-tam. Cela ne diffère guère des rythmes du *massa kon* des temps de carnaval. Ni du *gros Ka* lors des fêtes de communes (African drums. Who has not heard of them?...For me, there's nothing very extraordinary about drums. These are hardly any different from our own *massa kon* at carnival time. Hardly any different from the *gros ka* at village fairs.)¹⁹⁷

It would seem that when the meaning of the phrase is integral to understanding the narrative, Condé offers a translation; she does not wish to leave her readers in the dark. In the case of the song, however, it is not the meaning of the song that is crucial to reading this scene. Veronica is signaling the distance between herself and her family's maid. She points out that Mabo Julie reminds her of Mammy in *Gone with the Wind*. While in the latter, there is a clear racial hierarchy in the depiction of Scarlett and Mammy, in the case of Veronica and Mabo Julie, the hierarchy exists despite their shared skin color. Veronica and her family, whom she claims are members of the bourgeoisie, speak with each other in French. Furthermore, Veronica only uses Creole words when absolutely necessary; when, for example, there is no translation for the name of the drums she is mentioning.

Taking a step back from the narrative, one can therefore distinguish between the linguistic ideologies of Veronica and Condé. Condé is not creating a hybrid text in the manner that, say, Junot Díaz does in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. I mention Díaz because Condé uses this novel to make a point about language in "What Is a Caribbean Writer?" About *The Brief Wondrous Life* she writes: "The most spectacular aspect of the novel is its style—he shamelessly juxtaposes an unconventional English and Spanish. But this runs the risk of seeming incomprehensible or tiresome to the reader. Especially those who, like me, cannot read Spanish

¹⁹⁷ Maryse Condé, *Héremakhonon* (Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, 1976) 19; Condé, *Heremakhonon*, 7.

and must arm themselves with a dictionary or wait for a French translation.”¹⁹⁸ Her use of the adverb “shamelessly” in describing Díaz’s novelistic style indicates her astonishment with his bold style; at the same time, however, she points out how this same style can alienate readers. Condé clearly does not wish to alienate her readers in *Hérémakhonon*. She points out that Díaz is not the only or first person to juxtapose two languages. She mentions Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera* and explains, “Fortunately, according to her, the situation is but temporary and precedes the time of a joint transformation, a ‘Creolization’ considered more *peaceful*. As for Díaz, he offers no vision of the future [emphasis added].”¹⁹⁹

“Joint transformation” implies that Condé’s idea of Creolization is not just about the colonized subject adapting and transforming the language of the colonizer, but also about the colonizer being open to the transformation of his language by the colonized. A ‘more peaceful’ Creolization is no longer about juxtaposition in a manner that reinforces the binaries of colonizer versus colonized; rather, it is about eliminating those boundaries altogether. Her use of the term ‘peaceful’ is especially pertinent when one thinks of these lines she wrote about *Éloge de la Créolité (In Praise of Creoleness)* by Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau, and Raphaël Confiant: “Like Césaire in *Return to my Native Land*, the opening lines possess the violence of a declaration of war.”²⁰⁰ Veronica has read Césaire and acknowledges his centrality in the West Indian canon. Yet she adds,

In my opinion, it’s high time they left the niggers in peace, let them dance, get drunk, and make love. They’ve deserved it. What after all are they expected to do? Prove, prove, prove with mind-bending effort that they are as...as the whites (qu’ils sont aussi—aussi—

¹⁹⁸ Maryse Condé, “What Is a Caribbean Writer?” in *The Journey of a Caribbean Writer*, trans. Richard Philcox (London: Seagull Books, 2014), 8-9.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 9.

²⁰⁰ Condé, “Order, Disorder,” 128.

aussi...que le Blancs). He who takes one step backward is the shame of the race, the race, the race.²⁰¹

The rhythm in these lines evoke Césaire's *Return to my Native Land*, only to overturn the war it is declaring. These lines also evoke the epigraph to this chapter and the lines I've quoted by the Iranian singer-songwriter, Mohsen Namjoo, and the Palestinian poet, Mahmoud Darwish. What Namjoo refers to as geographical determinism permeates the lives of the African, the West Indian, the Iranian, the Palestinian. The desire to live and enjoy a *human* life, with all the dignities afforded by this life, the parameters of which are not dictated by the violence of colonialism and binaries imposed by this violence are evident in these lines. They also bring to mind the opening pages of the novel, quoted earlier in this chapter, where Birame III thinks it impossible not to be political and in the readings that follow, I connect this impossibility in the African context to the quality of being a human in that same context. Is an apolitical African or Iranian always an impossibility? Is it always a betrayal, a luxury reserved for the non-colonial? Or is it merely an attempt to qualify the category of (formerly colonized) human outside of the national alliances and political alignments that are part and parcel of anticolonial resistance? Moving forward, Condé thus cautions against "preserving erroneous categories": "Place of residence, nationality and even language are all being relativized and redefined."²⁰² She speaks of the meaninglessness of the term nationality.²⁰³ About the Caribbean she writes, "It has become a shapeless, elephantine place that takes on every name possible,"²⁰⁴ which clearly indicates that, while she contests the term and category of nationality, she is not advocating for a shapeless

²⁰¹ Condé, *Heremakhonon*, 77; Condé, *Héremakhonon*, 150.

²⁰² Condé, "What Is a Caribbean Writer? 9

²⁰³ *Ibid.*, 3.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

Caribbean where anything goes.

In terms of its narrative structure, the novel has three sections, yet there are no chapter breaks between them.²⁰⁵ There are merely small breaks in the narrative, about triple-spaced, and after the break the narrative continues, usually at a different time and location. Given the quality I have described above, when one flips through the pages of the novel, the narrative looks almost seamless. Upon reading it, one finds a confusing quality in the narrative, with Veronica jumping back and forth in time and inserting, it seems, her own thoughts in the midst of her conversations with others—which at times makes it difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish her words from others. When asked about her influences for her narrative and form in this novel and which “literary current” she would place herself in, Condé reveals that there is no postmodernist influence in this work, as her interviewer implies, and that she “[doesn’t] believe writers situate themselves in a particular current. They are placed in it.”²⁰⁶ She adds that the “composition of the book” compelled her to make a “narrative choice.”²⁰⁷

The narrative is told from the point of view of Veronica, that is, first-person narration. The narrative overall is a combination of her quoting the other characters verbatim (at least, that is what is implied by the use of quotation marks when other characters are speaking) and her own responses or musings. Yet her own words are never directly quoted. The exchange below is a telling example of the question of narrative in the novel. Veronica is speaking to Mwalimwana (who could be a surrogate for Nkrumah), a high-ranking official in this West African nation-

²⁰⁵ I am referring to the original text of the novel in French; in the English translation, the new section after these small breaks starts on a new page, giving the impression of a new chapter, albeit with no section heading.

²⁰⁶ Condé, “First Works,” 42-3.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 43.

state, to the extent that they've made a song about him which is broadcast on the national radio four times a day. He has come to visit Veronica at the National Institute where she is scheduled to teach a class for nine months, and the following conversation takes place, after Mwalimwana asks her where she is from (the sentences in quotation marks are Mwalimwana speaking, and the lines in between are interjections by Veronica):

“From the West Indies? Well, that’s nice. One of the children that Africa lost...”
Sold, Mwalimwana, sold. Not lost. Tegbessu got 400 pounds sterling per boatload.
“...and found again. Are you pleased with our students’ work?”
They don’t do a damn thing. All they think of doing is criticizing your behavior.
“Hard-working, you say? But sometimes a little slapdash? Shake them up. We spoil them too much.”²⁰⁸

In response to Mwalimwana’s note about the West Indies, Veronica apparently does not say out loud what she is thinking, but there’s still an interjection, an interruption, within the novel’s narrative, so that the reader may become privy to the protagonist’s view of the topic being discussed at the moment—and a very unequivocal view at that—even though in the actual event, she prefers to remain silent. In her mind, she is, in effect, calling out the complicity of Africans in slavery and has no patience for the romanticism that Mwalimwana professes in terms of a Pan-African solidarity. Then Mwalimwana asks her a question about the students. There is here an opportunity for the reader to receive a direct statement from Veronica. Yet Condé has made a conscious decision to never allow the reader to read a direct utterance by Veronica. More importantly, we realize that what Veronica ‘says’ to the reader is entirely different from what she says in the actual event. In *How Fiction Works* James Woods writes,

The first-person narrator is often highly reliable; ... Even the apparently unreliable narrator is more often than not reliably unreliable... We know that the narrator is being unreliable because the author is alerting us, through reliable manipulation, to that narrator’s unreliability. A process of authorial flagging is going on; the novel teaches us

²⁰⁸ Condé, *Heremakhonon*, 30.

how to read the narrator.²⁰⁹

How should we, then, read Veronica? What is it that Condé is trying to teach us about her heroine, or her “negative heroine [*héroïne négative*]”²¹⁰ as she puts it? When one considers the fact that Condé had first written the novel entirely in the third person and then changed the narrative to first-person,²¹¹ the choice of narrator becomes more telling. To quote Woods once again, “...authorial style generally has a way of making third-person omniscience seem partial and inflected. Authorial style tends to draw our attention toward the writer, toward the artifice of the author’s construction, and so toward the writer’s own impress.”²¹² Upon editing the novel, Condé has made an active decision to divert attention away from her craft and draw it toward the narrator, making sure to put markers in place that alert her readers, at certain junctures, to the ‘reliable unreliability’ of Veronica. In other words, Veronica becomes the center of the narrative. Going back to Condé’s characterization of Veronica, her decision to place a “narcissistic...witness” at the center of her novel, and consciously remove herself from the narrative, thus makes it clear that Veronica’s point of view is central to our understanding of the narrative. I demonstrated that Daneshvar chooses a housewife to narrate her fraught socio-political environment and its prevalent discourse—a discourse that excludes her viewpoint entirely—in order to alert the attentive reader to the shortcomings of said discourse. Condé makes the same narrative choice for the same reasons.

Veronica has traveled to an undisclosed location in West Africa, and she describes her

²⁰⁹ James Woods, *How Fiction Works* (New York: Picador, 2009), 5.

²¹⁰ Condé, “Avant-propos,” 12.

²¹¹ Condé, *Conversations*, 40.

²¹² Woods, *How Fiction Works*, 6.

reason for traveling to this West African nation: “Not [as] a missionary. Not even a tourist. Well, perhaps a tourist, but one of a new breed, searching out herself, not landscapes.”²¹³ Both positions from which Veronica distances herself, that is, the missionary and the tourist, are loaded positions in the African context. She is not there to educate and convert, nor to gaze and gape disinterestedly. The fact that the location is not named (save for the fact that it is in West Africa) allows for a reading of the novel that is symptomatic of the region at large, and, one could argue, similar newly independent nation-states. And while the location is specific enough to indicate its importance for Veronica, as she has ancestral ties to the location, she still announces herself as an alternative sort of tourist, thus indicating that she has no vested, real interest in this country she has visited, other than how it benefits her. Veronica lives in Paris and it becomes immediately clear that she knows next to nothing about this country she has traveled to, and exoticizes her travel from the onset. She is interested in the country’s past and its ancestry, not its present nor its future. She has come to “try and find out what was before” (11). Yet this search for a past is not in the manner of a Senghorian negritude search for and glorification of an African past; it is strictly for selfish reasons. She is, in other words, trying to search for blackness before slavery, since she has never been with a black man: “I detested them [black men] because they weren’t free. Because they were terribly afraid of being what it was said they were. Because, in fact, they were just that” (33). At the onset of her affair with Sory, she confesses that “I crossed the seas, you know. Just for you” (ibid.). She refers to him as her “nigger with ancestors”: “I now realize why he fascinates me. He hasn’t been branded” (35). Her fascination with Sory therefore manifests itself in the psychological struggles she has undergone in her relationships with men as a West Indian woman. Sory is the first black man she has been with, because he possesses something that other black men did not: freedom.

²¹³ Condé, *Hérémakhoon*, 3. Subsequent references will be indicated parenthetically in the text.

Here, she is speaking about freedom from slavery; but freedom as a principle is a complex, multifaceted notion in an anticolonial context. National independence is at the heart of struggle for decolonization; yet, as Said indicates in his reading of Yeats' poetry in *Culture and Imperialism*,²¹⁴ national independence and liberation are not the same. And during the quest for freedom from colonialist rule and the creation of a newly independent nation-state, what this freedom would entail wasn't entirely clear.²¹⁵ Arguably, two forms of freedom that were least realized in the post-colonial situation were psychological freedom and the liberation of the formerly colonized woman. What, then, does freedom signify for Veronica?

At the heart of Veronica's travel and the narrative that shapes around it is a quest for her identity. About this theme, that is, an Antillean woman with ties to slavery going "back" to Africa in search of herself, Spivak writes, "The discourse of 'finding Africa', by the female colonial subject, the story line of this novel, seems to belong to the 1970s."²¹⁶ Yet, what sets Veronica's narrative apart from a similar narrative of return to the mainland or homeland is that her identity is deeply tied to the men she has been with, all of whom were French white men before she started her affair with Sory. This is another point of divergence between Zari's sense of self and that of Veronica's, for Zari's (national) identity is primarily tied to her family. Veronica, however, clearly states at the beginning of the novel that her reasons for traveling are purely selfish; therefore, her identity is tied to *her* sense of freedom. In other words, her narrative is not about political independence. And she is attracted to Sory precisely because of the color of his skin and how he is comfortable in this dark skin: "This man has the quality I prize most in others, probably because

²¹⁴ See pp. 11-12 of this dissertation's introduction.

²¹⁵ Wenzel, "Decolonization," 460.

²¹⁶ Spivak, "The Staging of Time," 85.

I lack it so terribly. He's at ease with himself (Il est bien dans sa peau). His skin, rubbed since childhood with shea butter, fits him like a glove (Frottée depuis l'enfance au beurre de karité et glissant harmonieusement sur ses jointures).²¹⁷ Veronica has never been at ease with herself, her skin is not in harmony with her joints; hence, the importance of her being with a black man whose past is not tainted, in her view, by slavery, whose ancestors belonged to no one, and thus has the qualities of the so-called master, "regal, yet military."²¹⁸ The disharmony between her skin and her joints could be gesturing towards a form of non-alignment with any political cause. Sory, on the other hand, is clearly aligned with the anticolonial, masculine, nationalist, and militaristic movement in his country and has no qualms about those whom must be treaded upon in order for this independence movement to be realized. Condé writes: "The uproar about my novel *Héremakhonon* was largely caused by Veronica, the heroine, expressing her own sexuality."²¹⁹ This West Indian woman who has traveled to Africa, not in search of "landscapes" but in search of herself, has found the freedom that she was looking for, it would seem, in the arms of a black post-independence dictator, and this is considered her worst betrayal.

In response to Sory's question about why she has traveled to Africa, we read,

I was fed up. I was living in Paris. With a white man.
"With a white man?"

Really quite shocked. Yes, yes. Let me go on. I wanted to escape from the family, the Mandingo marabout, my mother, the black bourgeoisie that made me, with its talk of glorifying the race and its terrified conviction of its inferiority. And then gradually I came round to thinking that this form of escape was not valid, that it was hiding something else. I could have escaped in the other direction. Make up for the distance they had lost. Put down roots within myself. Do you understand?

"In other words, you have an identity problem?"

The tone is somewhat mocking...Is that it? Perhaps I'm not making myself clear.

²¹⁷ Condé, *Heremakhonon*, 52; Condé, *Héremakhonon*, 105.

²¹⁸ Ibid.

²¹⁹ Condé, "Order, Disorder," 133.

“There was a young black American girl here who had the same sort of problem, I believe. She ended up having her hair plaited like our women and having herself renamed Salamata.”²²⁰

There are several points to be made about this conversation between Sory and Veronica. Of course, to call it a conversation is in and of itself debatable; once again, we are not sure how much of Veronica’s interior monologue corresponds to what she says out loud. But we know that parts of it are vocalized. For example, she says that she was living with a white man, which apparently shocks Sory. There are, therefore aspects to her conversations that are almost confessional in nature and speak to the obsession that Veronica has with her own story and the desire to proclaim it. At the same time, after she provides these explanations to Sory, she ends her soliloquy with, ‘Do you understand?’ This in part signals the fact that she expects that her challenges may not be understood by this African man, and that she needs to explain it in detail. Sory’s condescending response, reducing all of this to an “identity problem,” and then worse, equating it with the struggle of a black American woman, and by extension any African diasporic woman, is a testament to the fact that Veronica is correct in assuming that she needs to explain her situation, and even when she does, it is quickly and condescendingly relegated to a prescribed idea of the African diasporic woman. Furthermore, it would seem that Sory is suggesting that the superficial solution that the black woman from America found will not only work for Veronica as well, but more importantly that this ‘identity problem’ is, at its heart, a superficial problem, one that does not merit attention: “He speaks to me like a sick or else a very stupid child” (49). Yusof’s paternalistic treatment of Zari and the manner in which he deems her concerns unimportant to the political work that he carries out is replicated here by Sory in his treatment of Veronica.

It seems, therefore, that at times in the narrative, especially in the beginning, Veronica’s

²²⁰ Condé, *Heremakhonon*, 48-9. Subsequent references will be indicated parenthetically in the text.

quest for the freedom to find herself is mocked, particularly when placed in the larger, seemingly more important political context of the time. The events in this West African country take precedence over Veronica's needs and desires. Yet, as we move forward in the narrative, Veronica finds that she is no longer able simply to sleep with Sory without thinking of how his violent acts affect those whom she has befriended. The psychological aspect of decolonization is multifaceted and difficult—much more complex than the straightforward manner in which Veronica presents it during the initial stages of the narrative, and now she gets that. Veronica struggles, and these internal struggles are evident throughout her narrative, whether they're actually vocalized or not; in most cases, it seems what she utters is different from what she is thinking:

“We have proved that our race...”

Our race, our race, our race. You can understand why race was coming out of my ears.
That's why.

Am I talking? Or do I think I'm talking? I must be dreaming as he doesn't answer. (35)

She's sick of speaking and thinking about herself in terms of the binary of race, as, say, Fanon indicates in his treatment of Capécia's novel, and, as she has mentioned earlier, in terms of the black bourgeoisie that has come to define her being. She wants to break out of these oppositional discourses (race and class), although originally it seems like she wants to break out of it by finding and sleeping with a man who defies the racist depictions of black men as inferior. She writes this while acknowledging that she's “no Mayotte Capécia”:

All those young black males that my family introduced to me made me shudder. Why? Not because they were black. Ridiculous! I'm no Mayotte Capécia. No! I'm not interested in whitening the race! I swear.... But it's what they thought. What the others thought of me. Obviously, I could have laughed at their Black Panther berets and their black leather jackets. Paris isn't New York. Laugh? I didn't think of it. (28)

These lines are arguably condescending in tone toward the black internationalist movement that she's witnessed in Paris; at the same time, however, it displays her attentiveness to the movement as well as the idiosyncrasies and discrepancies in the challenges that African-Americans

experienced during the Civil Rights era, having been deprived of basic human rights, compared to the African diaspora in Paris, whom, while most certainly subjected to discrimination and violence during the Algerian Revolution period, enjoyed civil liberties, at least from a legal standpoint. Moreover, they signal the fact that she has read Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*. The language she uses to alert us to this knowledge is crude, to say the least. Yet if one is able to get past her self-involvement and the extent to which she turns all conversations about race and politics to herself (at least in the earlier stages of the narrative), one can discern her awareness of the anticolonial, revolutionary discourse of the time, both at home and abroad. One could argue, therefore, that in creating a character that is adamant to point out the hypocrisy of certain types of resistance and the failed aftermath of anticolonial movements, Condé is pushing for inclusivity in the political discourse of hitherto unacknowledged viewpoints. The need to break the tired binaries that were enforced on the colonial subject and to treat them as multidimensional individuals with struggles, many of which are entirely unrelated to the political warfare of the nation-state, and to live and speak of an existence that included the highly personal in the political, was strongly felt, and being advocated by Condé, albeit through the guise of a self-centered negative heroine.

And there are moments in the text when her self-centeredness really pushes through. While she's waiting for Ibrahima Sory at his residence one night and he doesn't show up, we read, "No Ibrahima Sory. Oh, I can imagine—affairs of the state. *L'état c'est moi* and nothing else. The state should be *my* fantasy and *my* desire" (86). It's telling that she chooses a famous (or, more fittingly, infamous) quote attributed to Louis XIV in this context, and bends it towards herself. Her fantasy and desire become (or should be) the affairs of state. Perhaps this is also why, in the end, she returns to Paris, where "it's spring now" (167), and she acknowledges that she "looked for [herself] in the wrong place. In the arms of an assassin" (ibid.). Ultimately, therefore, after the revolts that

have resulted in the arrest and killing of her friend, Saliou (a politically active man and the director of the institute where she'd been teaching), disguised by the state as a suicide, and that have revealed to her the true nature of Ibrahima and the extent of his power, she returns home, which for her is the metropole. Yet, Paris is not central throughout the narrative and thus doesn't carry the weight of, or signpost its status as, metropole; it is simply where she returns after she is disillusioned with Africa and realizes her quest for self was much more complicated than she expected. This quest becomes complicated by the politics of her friendships and relationships. About this complication, Condé explains, "People think that friendship and love should be subordinate to political options. Veronica wants to be free—that's the crux of the problem."²²¹

The moment when Ibrahima Sory slaps Veronica, the climactic point in the narrative, leads, ultimately, to her departure. Veronica has pushed the boundaries of what was allowed in her relationship with Ibrahima Sory. It is no longer, or not only, about a woman who enjoys her sexual escapades with a man of power, and the man is no longer, in turn, able to control this woman as he wanted to. The extension of the power dynamics in this relationship can be seen in the woman's place in the anticolonial movement and perversely, in Fanon's "Algeria Unveiled"; perhaps a better substitute for "perversely" would be reading Fanon's essay against its grain. Fanon writes of the struggles of the Algerian woman with veiling and unveiling in the context of the Algerian revolution, and how the modest Algerian woman was forced to unveil in order to play an integral role in the revolution. Yet what is lacking in Fanon's essay, that is, the colonized woman's (sexual) agency, rears its head in this exchange between Veronica and Ibrahima. She takes charge of her own sexuality and because of that, she is accused of being a whore, whether she sleeps with a white man or a black man whom her political activist friends don't approve of because of his

²²¹ Condé, "First Works," 41.

violent autocracy. And when she is finally acknowledging the political activism of her friends and students, who are struggling to voice their dissent and to ask, rightfully so, for the (re)institution of the anticolonial ideals they fought for, she is slapped for her transgression. The women were used to the extent that they benefitted the movement and were able to play certain parts in the formation of the nation; afterwards, they were conspicuously absent from positions of power and the discourse within the newly developed independent government, and were asked to be quiet and stay at home. The slap also makes her acknowledge that she is no longer free to think and do as she pleases, which is why she returns to Paris.

From Paris to West Africa (to Paris)

In “Maryse Condé’s “*Hérémakhonon*” as Fictitious Autobiography and Autobiographical Fiction,” Sarah E. Mosher writes, “The novel’s African theme is announced in the title, since ‘*Hérémakhonon*’ is a Malinke word that means both ‘wait for happiness’ and ‘welcome house.’”²²² Condé expands this explanation of the title and gives a more important backstory to her choice of the title:

When I was in Guinea, there was a department store with that name. In theory, this store offered everything people needed, but it had nothing except Chinese stores of poor quality. For me it was a symbol of independence. I found out much later that *Hérémakhonon* is also the name of a Malian city where Samori is said to have fought. When I chose *Hérémakhonon* as the title of my novel, the name merely symbolized for me all the illusions fostered by the newly independent African nations.²²³

When asked by the interviewer, Françoise Pfaff, whether her choice of title indicates her sarcasm, Condé responds that there’s “more disenchantment than sarcasm.”²²⁴ The representation

²²² Sarah E. Mosher, “Maryse Condé’s *Hérémakhonon* as Fictitious Autobiography and Autobiographical Fiction,” *Journal of Haitian Studies* 16, no. 1 (Spring, 2010): 144.
<http://ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/608558474?accountid=10226>.

²²³ Condé, “First Works,” 39.

²²⁴ Ibid.

of African independence, therefore, is a store that sells low-quality products from China, which explicitly undoes the policy of non-alignment represented in the text through Nkrumah—a policy that “involve[d] foreign investment from capitalist countries...invested in accordance with a national plan drawn up by the government of the non-aligned State with its own interests in mind.”²²⁵ Such policies were meant to provide the newly independent state with economic opportunities for national development without having to pledge political allegiance to any of the Eastern or Western blocs of power during the Cold War. Condé has no qualms in pointing out, in quite stark terms, the economic hardships that befall the newly independent African society, despite (or perhaps, because of) their political idealism. In response to Pfaff’s conjecture that Veronica “participates in neocolonialism by working for the French system of Cooperation and Technical Assistance,” Condé says, “Yes, but this is not the most serious issue. People have to work, and besides people can do a lot of positive things within the context of Cooperation.”²²⁶ Once again, Condé draws attention to her earlier comment about the difficulty of building a nation, and the mythification of certain ideals that do not, put simply, put bread on the table. More importantly, she emphasizes the inherent value in cooperation and openly defies the simplistic binary between colonizer (in this case, France) and colonized, in the same manner that Daneshvar defies a simplistic pursuit of anti-Western thought.

Going back to the novel’s title, the dual meanings explain volumes when considered in conjunction with the novel’s narrative; Ibrahima Sory’s residence is titled Hérémakhonon. If one is to take both meanings literally, it raises two questions: Is it only there, then, that Veronica feels she is welcome, due to the fact that she is able to openly live out her sexual desires with a

²²⁵ Kwame Nkrumah, *Neocolonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism* (London: Thomas Nelson, 1965), x.

²²⁶ Condé, “First Works,” 41.

man who is a despot in this new West African society? Is she constantly waiting for happiness as she waits for Ibrahima Sory to return from an expedition, without explaining to her what is happening in the society that Veronica becomes more and more entangled with? The larger implications of this would be the ties that bind Veronica, an African diasporic woman, to a so-called motherland, ties that are ultimately devoid of meaning for her, and the fact that her personal happiness lies outside of the stark camps that are drawn within this African society.

One aspect of these stark camps includes the aforementioned issue of language. In the same year that Condé started writing her novel, the “Conference of African Writers in English Expression” took place in Makerere, Uganda. Some of the central questions about the African writer’s language raised in this conference reached their height in conversations between two of the conference participants, James Ngugi²²⁷ and Chinua Achebe in the subsequent years and decades. I return, then, to Ngũgĩ’s *Decolonising the Mind* and his declaration that “language was the means of spiritual subjugation.”²²⁸ For him, an important step in decolonization would be to write in the regional and ethnic languages in order to eradicate the “psychological violence in the classroom,”²²⁹ where imperial power had, according to Ngũgĩ, exerted its most force. Yet Achebe would argue that, although “history has forced [this language] down our throats,”²³⁰ and that writing in the colonizer’s language instead of one’s mother-tongue “looks like a dreadful betrayal and produces a guilty feeling,” he had “no other choice”:

I have been given this language and I intend to use it... I feel that the English language

²²⁷ Five years later, Ngugi would change his name to Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o.

²²⁸ Ngũgĩ, *Decolonising the Mind*, 7.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*

²³⁰ Chinua Achebe, “English and the African Writer,” *Transition*, no. 75/76 (1997): 346. doi:10.2307/2935429.

will be able to carry the weight of my African experience. But it will have to be a new English, still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surroundings.²³¹

The issue of classrooms and, by extension, education that Ngũgĩ brings up, along with the question of language as articulated by Achebe, that were relevant in the context of *Savushun*, are especially pertinent in reading *Héremakhonon*; Veronica teaches a class at The National Institute that is a subsidiary of the system of French Cooperation that Pfaff mentions as neocolonial. The first time she walks on the campus of The National Institute, she describes the students she sees in the yard: “...we have nine months together, a pregnancy, to discuss Marx, Kwame Nkrumah and other African avatars of Marxist doctrine.”²³² Veronica’s view of her work as educator is given a very clear maternalist tinge, and is thus an extension of the literal burden of nation-building that would fall on the shoulders—and in the wombs— of women. Interestingly enough, the woman’s womb as a location for education was a concept that was prevalent in Persian texts from the pre-modern era until the nineteenth century; Najmabadi connects this concept to the formation of the nation: “To envisage the womb not simply as vessel but as a school...imputed all the disciplinary and regulatory functions of school to the womb. Not only did the bearer of the womb regulate the character of the fetus, but now the regulatory process turned back upon the womb/woman...National formation began with the womb.” Thus, “woman as potential mother needed to be regulated and reconstructed.”²³³ This act of regulating and reconstructing the woman can be seen in how Yusof takes it upon himself to teach Zari about courageous living. But Veronica

²³¹ Ibid., 349.

²³² Condé, *Heremakhonon*, 19.

²³³ Afsaneh Najmabadi, “Crafting an Educated Housewife,” in *Remaking Women: Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 93.

defiantly resists any form of regulation or reconstruction of her self and her womanhood. Furthermore, the incident in which they call her a whore could potentially erase any disillusion she had about the procreative component of her work there. Granted, it is due to a quasi-maternal relationship she establishes with one of her students, Birame III, that she crosses a line with Ibrahima and is subsequently slapped. And once her students become implicated in the violence perpetrated by this West African state, she is no longer able to carry on with her sexual escapades with the same nonchalance as before; her relationship to *Hérémakhonon* becomes complicated and messy. There is, however, another more important aspect of her teaching that makes the metaphor of giving birth even more charged, when one considers that she originally did not want to teach Nkrumah, ‘an African avatar of Marxism.’ Earlier, when speaking to her friend and director of the Institute, Saliou, he tells her that she needs to “adapt [her] teaching,” to which she responds (internally, of course):

Is that all? Kwame Nkrumah? I’ve nothing against him. Simply I never thought he deserved the name of philosopher. I’m not one to put people down. I’ll delve into consciencism, his key concept. I’ll lecture on it. I’ve been brought up so thoroughly on intolerance that I’m remarkably tolerant. So there’ll be no more Spinoza, Rousseau, Bergson in my philosophy classes? Good. They’re not essential. No, they hardly talked about my mother’s family.²³⁴

While there is no trace of the desire for African socialism in Veronica’s worldview or way of life, there is undoubtedly an African interest and at times a Pan-African awareness on her part, indicated by her interest in reading philosophers who address her ancestry; it is, therefore, imperative, both for her and for the narrative, that this interest and awareness be personal and not social. Veronica is a woman struggling to find her identity that is fraught with contradictions and oppositions. And she is well-versed in the literature and socio-political theory of her time. Her lack of social interest is not, therefore, out of ignorance. While her home is Paris and she speaks and teaches in French,

²³⁴ Condé, *Heremakhonon*, 13.

she is easily persuaded to leave French and European philosophers out of her syllabus—philosophers whom, it seems, are normally part of her syllabus and are integral to modern definitions of the self. But now in West Africa she is attempting to locate herself without heeding these philosophies. She is, therefore, aware that Enlightenment modernity is out of place in Africa and she does not simply apply her teachings in Paris to her experience (or the experiences of her students) in West Africa.

Her disdain for the African avatars of Marxism, however, is made clear, and her reasons for this disdain are indeed not at all personal. Earlier in the novel when she's been allocated a villa for her stay, which is obviously due to the fact that she is sleeping with an official, she describes the car ride to her villa:

Strange how this town is stratified! I caught a quick glimpse of the ministerial paradise. There are also embassies and foreign missions. I have been given asylum in this kind of no-man's land of French and American technical assistants up in arms against each other and among each other—Poles, Czechs, Russians, and Chinese. Don't forget Mwalimwana is nonaligned! Provided they leave me alone. I haven't crossed the oceans to get mixed up in their quarrels. There is a small garden in front of the villa and the earth is rich and red. I could plant flowers.²³⁵

Her comment about Mwalimwana being non-aligned immediately follows her description of the stratification of not only the town from a sociological perspective, but also from a political perspective. The old hierarchy of the colonial world has given way to a new hierarchy; for all the espousal of Marxist ideologies in anticolonial resistances in Africa and elsewhere, the new world order of this postcolonial state has replicated the stratifications that its formerly colonized subjects were revolting against in the first place. In a conversation between Mwalimwana and Veronica that I quoted at the beginning of this section on Condé, Mwalimwana claims that the students are spoiled:

²³⁵ Ibid., 27.

“Free primary education and secondary schooling. Free university education, too. Free dispensaries for medical care. You know what it was like under the white man: bush schools where you grilled under the corrugated iron roof. Koranic schools where you learnt by heart, occasionally casting an eye at the written page...”

And yet, Mwalimwana, they’re not content. I’ve already realized that. They count your Mercedes and vent their anger against your wives’ jewels. They say an oligarchy of greed has taken over from Europe. Instead of the Koran they recite Fanon. Yesterday they wanted to drag me into a discussion of *The Wretched of the Earth* that I haven’t read²³⁶.

Socialism has clearly not solved the students’ problems. Reciting the canon of Islam has given way to reciting the canon of the anticolonial movement. At the end of the nine months with these students that she compares to a “pregnancy” and the responsibilities that come with it, it could be argued that she would merely be giving birth to more revolutionaries, without having much control over whom (or what) she gives birth to. Furthermore, socialism is merely for the masses. The corrupt rulers of the post-independent societies continue amassing wealth in the same manner that their colonizing predecessors were. Finally, it is notable that, similar to Zari, she doesn’t want any part in these conflicts and stratifications in this African country. Immediately following this articulation, she describes the garden in which she could plant flowers. For Zari, flowers represent her children, and she describes the meticulous care that is needed to keep the garden, her nation(-state), blooming and well. In this narrative, however, flowers and gardening merely delineate a pastime, a mode of distraction from the politicization of African life—a life that Veronica can freely choose not to be a part of whenever she wishes, hence her return to Paris.

Conclusion

“In a Bambara myth of origin” Condé writes, “after the creation of the earth, and the organization of everything on its surface, disorder was introduced by a woman. Disorder meant the power to

²³⁶ Ibid., 30.

create new objects and to modify the existing ones. In a word, disorder meant creativity.”²³⁷ In this chapter, I have aimed to demonstrate the disorder that Daneshvar and Condé were introducing into the political and literary narratives of their time, by producing novels that did not fit within the parameters of revolutionary and national culture central to the collective struggle for independence. In *Manichean Aesthetics: The Politics of Literature in Colonial Africa*, Abdul JanMohamed cites Nadine Gordimer as follows: “cultural identity is the ground on which the exploration of self in the imaginative writer makes a national literature.” About this citation, he writes, “What Gordimer implies here is that the manichean society is incapable of generating a *national* literature; it can produce African national and European colonial literatures, but the two cannot be combined. Such literatures will tend to retain and reflect in sublimated or overt forms the manichean polarization and valorization of the bifurcated society.”²³⁸ JanMohamed is arguing that Gordimer claims (and JanMohamed agrees) that a national literature that does not draw upon its colonial (and in Iran’s case, quasi-colonial) past cannot but lack integral elements of what has contributed to its national culture, to its very being. Edward Said corroborates this notion of culture in *Culture and Imperialism*:

...the history of all cultures is the history of cultural borrowings. Cultures are not impermeable; just as Western science borrowed from Arabs, they had borrowed from India and Greece. Culture is never just a manner of ownership, of borrowing and lending with absolute debtors and creditors, but rather of appropriations, common experiences, and interdependencies of all kinds among different cultures. This is a universal norm.²³⁹

None of these totalizing theorizations and cultures—neither the European nor the African or

²³⁷ Condé, “Order, Disorder,” 130.

²³⁸ Abdul R. JanMohamed, *Manichean Aesthetics: The Politics of Literature in Colonial Africa* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1983), 265.

²³⁹ Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 217.

Iranian, anti-Western national—can account for the personal experiences and practices of the individual. Nor can these experiences be easily and cleanly separated. There will be overlap and messiness, and that should be accepted as the norm. Veronica, the Antillean woman, who lives in Paris and has traveled to West Africa, the land of her ancestors, in the 1960s, is attempting to present this messiness as norm, yet she is called a whore by her students and slapped by her lover because of her transgression. By virtue of her experiences and recounting them in the haphazard fashion that she does, then, Veronica creates in the readers what Vèvè Clark refers to as “Diaspora literacy.”²⁴⁰ She explains this literacy as “the ability to read and comprehend the discourses of Africa, Afro-America and the Caribbean from an informed, indigenous perspective.”²⁴¹ The mode of her haphazard articulations speaks to the messiness of this diasporic experience, which, as Condé mentions, creates meaning out of disorder and chaos. The meaning it creates is also messy. Condé is well-equipped to share these messy meanings, for as Clark points out, “The protagonist of *Hérémakhonon* demonstrates that Diaspora literacy is more than an intellectual exercise. It is a skill that requires social and political development generated by *lived experiences*. The author herself has undergone both the intellectual and experiential components of this phenomenon [emphasis added].”²⁴²

As I mentioned earlier, although Veronica returns to Paris at the end of the novel, Paris is not central in the narrative that Condé’ creates. One could argue that the reason for this is that its centrality is implicit and requires neither more emphasis nor focus. While Pascale Casanova’s

²⁴⁰ Clark, Vèvè A. “Developing Diaspora Literacy: Allusion in Maryse Condé’s *Hérémakhonon*,” in *Out of the Kumbia: Caribbean Women and Literature*, eds. Carole Boyce Davies and Elaine Savory Fido (Africa World Press, 1990), 303.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 304.

²⁴² *Ibid.*

claim about Paris in *The World Republic of Letters* as the literary, cultural, and political center of the world seems—and arguably is—(self-)aggrandizing, for the female subject and intellectual who were formerly colonized by the French (that is, both Veronica and Condé) and who are still marginalized post-independence, it offers modes of freedom hitherto unattained:

As the capital of France, Paris combined two sets of apparently antithetical properties, in a curious way bringing together all the historical conceptions of freedom. On the one hand, it symbolized the Revolution, the overthrow of the monarchy, the invention of the rights of man—an image that was to earn France its great reputation for tolerance toward foreigners and as a land of asylum for political refugees. But it was also the capital of letters, the arts, the luxurious living, and fashion. Paris was therefore at once the intellectual capital of the world, the arbiter of good taste, and (at least in the mythological account that later circulated throughout the entire world) the source of political democracy: an idealized city where artistic freedom could be proclaimed and lived.²⁴³

The “apparently antithetical properties” that have achieved synthesis in Paris offer a model and location for a successful amalgamation of political non-alignments. The model, however, as I have alluded to above, remains latent and is not unequivocal. Paris always offers a possibility, but outside of its discourse as the metropole. Specifically, for Veronica (and Condé), a location like Paris is not read and recognized in the context of center versus margin or metropole versus colony. Instead, it is a place of potentiality, offering the formerly colonized individual a space to work out individualistic concerns without fear of retribution.

Zari does not have this space. Nor is the fate that awaits her similar to that of Veronica’s. Zari’s fear for her family is realized in the end when Yusof is shot dead by an unknown perpetrator. The narrative seems to suggest that only after his death has Zari understood the importance of his cause. She decides that she would like his funeral to resemble a Siyavashun ceremony, and for the village to mourn Yusof as they would mourn the folkloric hero who was

²⁴³ Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, trans. M. B. Debevoise (Harvard University Press, 2004), 24.

unjustly killed by outsiders. To Yusof's older brother, she says with resentment, "while he was alive, you and others tried to keep him quiet and he was forced to shout louder and louder until he got himself killed. Now...let the people show in his death that he was right...Moreover, with his death, justice and truth have not died."²⁴⁴ His burial proceedings are thus transformed into a spontaneous uprising by the villagers, and it is immediately and violently cracked down upon by the local police. After the crowd are dispersed, Zari and her immediate family are permitted to bury his body at night, in the dark, and without anyone present. The final description we read of Zari's state of mind is as follows: "But Zari was sick of everything, even death, a death that had...no prayers for the dead, and no funeral procession. She thought, I won't have anything inscribed on his gravestone, either."²⁴⁵ It would seem, then, that the opportunity that is present for Veronica and offers her a space for some form of personal reconciliation, is completely absent for Zari, that she is completely depleted, and that she will hopelessly accept the anonymity with which her husband has died. But the very last lines of the novel complicate this notion. Among the notes of condolence that she's received, one touches her the most, and she reads it out loud for Yusof's sister and her son, in translation—for it is from MacMahon—and the narrative ends with his message for Zari: "Do not weep, sister. In your home, a tree shall grow, and others in your city, and many more throughout your country. And the wind shall carry the message from tree to tree and the trees shall ask the wind, 'Did you see the dawn on your way?'"²⁴⁶

The message of support that Zari finds most pertinent comes from the Irish photo-

²⁴⁴ Daneshvar, *Savushun*, 296.

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 306.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

journalist who is part of the British convoy. As a lover of poetry who desires freedom for his land (and for Iran that he sees as analogous to Ireland), he has a difficult relationship with what (and whom) would constitute his larger nation—namely, the British Empire. This can explain the unexpected intimacy that he and Zari share throughout the narrative, and perhaps this is why Zari takes comfort in a message of hope that comes from this unlikely counterpart—someone who was considered by Yusof as part of the problem, and who thus complicates the simplistic anti-Western sentiments I've challenged in this chapter. Just as MacMahon played the role of reticent intermediary between the British and Yusof, Zari was playing the undesirable role of intermediary between authorities she had to pander to in order to save her husband, and Yusof. In short, the role of the woman as merely auxiliary in the struggle for freedom, to use Condé's articulation, was exemplified in Zari. Yet, MacMahon's note signals an opening, an approaching dawn, that carries with it the opportunity for a new beginning for Yusof's cause. This new opportunity, however, starts with a rebirth in Zari's own garden. And while the first tree that grows represents Yusof, leading to the sprouting of trees all across the country, it starts in Zari's garden, in *her* city and *her* country. If, as most critics have argued, Yusof brings about a social awakening and revolutionary consciousness for Zari upon his death, then his death is necessary so that this new revolutionary consciousness can be inclusive of Zari, and by extension, Iranian women.

Chapter 2

Disrupted and Disruptive Genealogies in the Novels of Hushang Golshiri and Édouard

Glissant

Oh people, a nasty temperament brought us modernity;
Oh people, a nasty temperament brought us handkerchiefs and flounce skirts.
-- Mohsen Namjoo, "Reza Khan"

Once upon a time there was Radha and Krishna, and Rama and Sita, and Laila and Majnu; also (because we are not unaffected by the West) Romeo and Juliet, and Spenser Tracy and Katharine Hepburn.
-- Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*

In the short novel *Shazdeh Ehtejab* [*Prince Ehtejab*] (1968/9) by Hushang Golshiri (1938-2000), there are two female characters with nearly identical names, Fakhri and Fakhrolnesa. In fact, the abbreviated or informal form of Fakhrolnesa's name would be Fakhri. Fakhrolnesa is the deceased cousin and wife of the novel's eponymous prince who comes from a long line of tyrants. Yet, since the timeline of the narrative is non-linear and distorted, instances of her life are intertwined with the narrative present—a present that is very difficult to distinguish from the narrative past. Fakhri, a servant in the household and from a provincial background, was close to her mistress during her life. Now that Fakhrolnesa has died from tuberculosis, the ailing, delirious prince who has no offspring and thus is the last remnant of this aristocratic lineage, is trying to forcefully transform Fakhri into Fakhrolnesa. Given the narrative's (deliberately) confusing timeline, it is, at times, also impossible to distinguish between Fakhri and Fakhrolnesa, and at a certain juncture in the novel, the transformation becomes complete—albeit momentarily. The meaning of Fakhrolnesa's name is, as Abbas Milani puts it, "the pride of women."²⁴⁷

²⁴⁷ Abbas Milani, *Lost Wisdom: Rethinking Modernity in Iran* (Washington, D.C.: Mage Publishers, 2004),

Fakhri's name as an informal or shortened version of Fakhrolnesa becomes all the more poignant when one considers the difference between the two women, and how vast the gap is that the prince is trying to forcefully eliminate. Fakhri as a second-hand Fakhrolnesa is thus not considered "the pride of women" in her original state, and the prince takes it upon himself to violently transform her into what he thinks will be a suitable successor to his late wife, and proceeds to rape her. Yet, the transformation is not what the prince expects. While she starts out as a servant, a proletarian, after the prince tries to transform her into something she is not—an aristocratic lady—she gradually starts to develop her own voice and thoughts. She learns how to read and enjoys learning; she is curious, asks questions, and voices her own opinion. As we move toward the end of the novel, progressing closer to the Prince's death, Fakhri's character develops and becomes strong; *she* becomes strong.

In the novel *La case du commandeur (The Overseer's Cabin)* (1981) by Édouard Glissant (1928-2011), there is an attempt to trace the origins of Marie Celat (also referred to as Mycéa), the Martinican woman at the center of the narrative, and her family. Their ancestry charts back to two brothers, both of whom were named Odon and who were both forcefully transported to Martinique on a slave ship. We learn that they both fell in love with the same woman. And it becomes virtually impossible to distinguish between the two and to track the family's ancestry to one of the brothers. This attempt at tracing this genealogy is not, however, Marie Celat's concern. She is the only member of the family who is not interested in uncovering their true ancestry, and while she admits that they have all been "sépar[é] (split)"²⁴⁸ from birth, she does

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²⁴⁸ Édouard Glissant, *La case du Commandeur: Roman* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1981), 174; Édouard Glissant, *The Overseer's Cabin* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2011), 147.

not wish to find a resolution to this division. Or rather, a resolution for her does not necessarily indicate finding a response to the burning question of their origins—a question that has been troubling her people for decades, if not centuries. The novel begins with an extract from a publication titled the *Quotidien des Antilles* dated September 4, 1978, in which a woman is described by her neighbors as being psychologically unstable. This woman, we discover, is Marie Celat. One possible reading of the narrative could thus interpret her madness in light of her disinterestedness in this question of ancestry; she is driven mad, for everyone around her is obsessed with this personal history which they deem central to their individual and collective identities. Kelly Baker Josephs' *Disturbers of the Peace: Representations of Madness in Anglophone Caribbean Literature*, while dealing with the Anglophone context specifically, recognizes the pervasiveness of the literary trope of madness in Caribbean literature at large: “With mad figures frequently appearing in Caribbean literature from the French, Spanish, and English traditions—in roles that range from bit parts to first-person narrators—madness should be regarded as a significant part of the West Indian literary aesthetic.”²⁴⁹ She attests that this trope in the Caribbean context has folded into similar representations in the “larger postcolonial discourse”²⁵⁰ and while her project prioritizes these representations in Anglophone Caribbean texts, she confirms the connection between madness and the process of nation-building and “issues inherent in decolonization”²⁵¹ writ large.

In my comparative analysis of these two texts, I intend to demonstrate the following:

²⁴⁹ Kelly Baker Josephs, *Disturbers of the Peace: Representations of Madness in Anglophone Caribbean Literature* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2013), 2.

²⁵⁰ Ibid.

²⁵¹ Ibid.

Marie Celat's perceived madness and the prince's mania can both be read as extensions of similar anxieties about the nation and its history, and the diverging manners in which their madness are dealt with in the texts can provide insight into the larger literary and cultural projects of Golshiri and Glissant vis-à-vis their respective socio-political environments; the desire to trace, maintain, and continue filial relations, whether it's the forced transformation of Fakhri into Fakhrolnesa, or the need to discover which of the two Odonos is the family patriarch, demonstrates a preoccupation with genealogy, and the manner in which these genealogies are disrupted or rendered impossible in both texts paves the way for the development of a new genealogy—one that, to use Michel Foucault's definition, would be an "antiscience"²⁵²; and finally, by examining the narrative world that these texts are creating through their formal practices, I will make a case for the kinds of knowledge that are being produced and the implications of this nonconformist knowledge (or what Edward Said would call "noncoercive knowledge"²⁵³) for literature as a discipline (political or otherwise) from the viewpoint of Golshiri and Glissant.

There are elements in the characterization of Fakhri and Marie Celat that would allow for a continued discussion of gender in an anticolonial context, as in the previous chapter. The fact that, in both texts, the figures that disrupt the genealogical narratives are women, has important implications for the meanings and knowledge that are being generated by the texts (and, arguably their authors). I would not go so far as to claim these texts to be feminist texts. Yet, the centrality of these female characters in the new genealogies that are being created, genealogies that, to cite

²⁵² Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-76*. (New York: Picador, 2002), 9.

²⁵³ Edward W. Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), 29.

Foucault's conception once again, "are about the insurrection of knowledges,"²⁵⁴ points to the writers' conviction that women are integral to this insurrection. In "*Society Must Be Defended*": *lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-76*, Foucault refers to this form of genealogy or "multiple genealogical investigations" as "a meticulous rediscovery of struggles and the raw memory of fights. These genealogies are a combination of erudite knowledge and what people know. They would not have been possible—they could not even have been attempted—were it not for one thing: the removal of the tyranny of overall discourses."²⁵⁵ On the level of narrative, as I will demonstrate in this chapter, the "combination of erudite knowledge and what people know" is perfectly exemplified in the two figures of Fakhri and Marie Celat. The "tyranny of overall discourses" are, in Golshiri's novel, represented in the figure of the prince as the successor of his tyrannical ancestors, and similarly in Glissant's novel, in the figures of Marie Celat's predecessors and their obsession with the history of their ancestors. The impossibility of tracing or maintaining ancestral genealogies in these texts point to the impossibility of relying on pre-colonial history as a master discourse, which in turn challenges an anticolonial discourse in which native or national history is a critical source for the development of a national, anticolonial culture to combat cultural imperialism.

It is therefore not only the narrative discourses that are of importance here, but also the "overall discourses" in which Glissant and Golshiri were producing their texts. The genealogies that are thus being disrupted by the two writers and the subsequent new genealogies that they're creating through their texts in the broader, socio-political context must also be considered. In order to further explain their modes of disruptions, I will turn, once again, to Foucault:

²⁵⁴ Foucault, *Society*, 9.

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 8.

Compared to the attempt to inscribe knowledges in the power-hierarchy typical of science, genealogy is, then, a sort of attempt to desubjugate historical knowledges, to set them free, or in other words to enable them to oppose and struggle against the coercion of a unitary, formal, and scientific theoretical discourse. The project of these disorderly and tattered genealogies is to reactivate local knowledges...against the scientific hierarchicalization of knowledge and its intrinsic power-effects.²⁵⁶

My overarching claim in this project about the disorderly political imaginations of the writers under study is reflected here in Foucault's concept of a "disorderly and tattered" genealogy.

Granted, Foucault is specifically referring to the tyranny of Western knowledges and the manner in which knowledge that is not "formal" or "scientific" (for example, oral histories) would not be included in the production of meaning that is central to cultural projects; in fact, in the anticolonial projects of national culture—the kind that Fanon advocates in *The Wretched of the Earth*—there is an insistence on these informal, non-scientific, and non-hierarchical knowledges, that arise out of the masses and constitute their own genealogy, rather than the top-down movement of the historical knowledges that Foucault is writing about. Similar to Foucault, Glissant writes of the "double hegemony" of the categories of History and Literature (both purposely capitalized) against which "the peoples who until now inhabited the hidden side of the earth fought, at the same time they were fighting for food and freedom."²⁵⁷ The local knowledges that Foucault writes about and I present in my readings of the novel are, on the one hand, located within the people themselves, and on the other hand, they are, as Glissant states, working against the hierarchical systems of History and Literature, undermining their power. It is thus within the "raw memory" of their fights that one can locate these genealogies.

Furthermore, there are also local forms of hierarchical knowledges against which Glissant

²⁵⁶ Ibid., 10.

²⁵⁷ Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 76.

and Golshiri are writing. “Political literature is not literature,”²⁵⁸ Golshiri proclaimed, at a time when ideological motivations and pronouncements were a central factor in producing literature that would contribute to the revolutionary cause. If we are to read Golshiri’s novel as a genealogical invention and thus an insurrection of knowledge, this insurrection takes place in the manner in which he situates his work against the category of political literature as a totalizing discourse. This is not to claim that his work is devoid of political content or value. Rather, by keeping his focus on the aesthetics, narrative, and language in his creation, he demonstrates the possibility of literary creation that is contributing to the revolutionary cultural landscape by virtue of its innovation—innovation that includes the vernacular (in the form of Fakhri’s language), decenters history proper, and instead presents the text’s narrative, local history as the only history that is essential in his novel, and by extension, literary creations. Similarly, Glissant writes of a Creolization that must specifically return to the Caribbean as a point of origin rather than the universality (read: third-worldism) that works following those of Césaire and Fanon advocated.²⁵⁹ Part of the work of this chapter, then, is to uncover how Golshiri and Glissant are responding to the prevailing discourses of their time in their capacity as critics. Discursively speaking, what local knowledges specifically are they reactivating in these novels, and against what kind of hierarchies are they reactivating them? Also, what kind of knowledge does madness present in these narratives?

In *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, Edward Said advocates for a mode of criticism that is “oppositional,” and about the characteristics of this oppositional criticism, he writes, “its social

²⁵⁸ Hushang Golshiri, *Garden among Gardens: Collection of Essays* [in Persian] (Tehran: Niloufar Publications, 1999), 438.

²⁵⁹ Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 26.

goals are noncoercive knowledge produced in the interests of human freedom.”²⁶⁰ This form of oppositional criticism is positioned against what he refers to as the powers of filiation and affiliation that determine the critic’s thought and work. He explains,

Contemporary critical consciousness stands between the temptations represented by two formidable and related powers engaging critical attention. One is the culture to which critics are bound filiatively (by birth, nationality, profession); the other is a method or system acquired affiliatively (by social and political conviction, economic and historical circumstances, voluntary effort and willed deliberation).²⁶¹

Writing of the pressures that both these powers place on the critic, he provides as examples the works of Jonathan Swift and Giambattista Vico who did not succumb to these pressures. He maintains that these writers were aware “that their era also made claims on them culturally and systematically, and it was their whole enterprise therefore to resist these pressures in everything they did, albeit of course, that they were worldly writers and materially bound to their time.”²⁶²

In the readings that follow, I will similarly demonstrate the manner in which both Golshiri and Glissant are producing “noncoercive knowledge produced in the interests of human freedom” through a resistance to both the filiative and affiliative pressures of their socio-political environments. At the same time, one cannot dismiss the fact that they are indeed also “worldly writers and materially bound to their time.” In other words, they are writers who are deeply aware of and enmeshed in the political environment and cultural discourse of their time. Glissant was known for his political activism in Paris in the 1960s as well as founding the “Institut Martiniquais d’études [IME] (Martinique Institute of Studies) to offer an alternative to the

²⁶⁰ Said, *The World*, 29.

²⁶¹ Ibid, 24-25.

²⁶² Ibid, 25.

Franco-centric studies then dominant on the island.”²⁶³ In a similar vein, Golshiri had established one of the foremost journals of literary criticism during his time and was periodically imprisoned for his writing that was considered politically subversive.

Finally, these notions of filiation and affiliation are similarly challenged in their characters’ relationship to their surrounding worlds as well, and through their resistance, these characters also represent modes of being that can contribute to the revolutionary struggle—modes of being that don’t necessarily map onto the dominant discourse that the third-worldist anticolonial intellectual contributed to.

“Iran’s bifurcated and tormented identity”

In his introduction to the edited collection *Iran: Between Tradition and Modernity*, Ramin Jahanbegloo writes of the “crisis of modernity” for the Iranians’ “fragmented selves” and notes that this crisis “is part of our heritage”: “Ours is the modernity of the once semicolonized.”²⁶⁴ In the formation of the Iranian’s modern subjectivity, then, on the one hand, there was the forced imposition of European enlightenment; as Hamid Dabashi writes in *Iran: A People Interrupted*, “Iranians (like the rest of the world) received the universal promises of Enlightenment modernity through the gun barrel of European colonialism.”²⁶⁵ On the other hand, Abbas Milani writes about this fragmented Iranian self in terms of the pre-Islamic Persian identity and the post-Arab invasion Islamic identity. In the first epigraph to this chapter, I’ve written lines from Mohsen Namjoo’s “Reza Khan” that indicate how modernity was forcefully brought into Iran. The “nasty

²⁶³ *Encyclopedia of World Biography Online*, s.v. Édouard Glissant, Accessed April 5, 2019. <http://link.galegroup.com/apps/doc/K1631009569/BIC?u=columbia&sid=BIC&xid=2b50664d>.

²⁶⁴ Ramin Jahanbegloo, ed., *Iran: Between Tradition and Modernity* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2004), xi.

²⁶⁵ Hamid Dabashi, *Iran: A People Interrupted* (New York: The New Press, 2007), 47.

temperament” that he’s referring to belongs to Reza Shah Pahlavi.²⁶⁶ Namjoo has mentioned that Abbas Milani's towering biography of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi,²⁶⁷ *The Shah*, inspired the lyrics to this song. In the aforementioned biography, Milani writes of Reza Shah’s coronation ceremony and describes the Shah’s blue cloak:

The blue cloak was covered with a paisley design; paisley, it is said, is the quintessential visual metaphor of Iran's bifurcated and tormented identity--riven between Arabic Islam and pre-Islamic Persian creeds. The paisley, *they say* [emphasis added], is a bent cedar, and the cedar is the tree Zarathustra planted in heaven. The heavenly tree was "bent" under the weight of the Arab invasion. The paisley's appearance on the cloak was an early omen of what was to come. Soon after his coronation, Reza Shah adopted a policy of glorifying the pre-Islamic part of the Iranian identity and weakening the Islamic component. His son, Mohammad Reza, also continued this policy, but under different circumstances and with drastically different results.²⁶⁸

The legend of the paisley that Milani is referring to, in fact, comes from one of Golshiri’s stories. Milani notes this story in *Lost Wisdom*, where he mentions Golshiri’s delineation of the Iranian’s “crisis of identity” and how, this crisis “according to Golshiri, is at once new and old.”²⁶⁹ After citing Golshiri’s story about the paisley from his novel *Barreh-ye Gomshodeh-ye Ra’i* (*Ra’i’s Lost Sheep*) in which Golshiri “writes of a thousand-years old battle between the Persian and Islamic forces for the soul of Iran,” Milani explains what he means by the crisis being both old and new; according to Golshiri: “Iran’s encounter with the West, and its new modern ethos, only

²⁶⁶ The first king of the Pahlavi dynasty, who reigned Iran from 1925 to 1941, by which time he was replaced by his son, Mohammad Reza. Reza Shah’s modernizing efforts are often compared to that of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk’s, whose secularization and modernization of Turkey proved to be a model for the Iranian Shah.

²⁶⁷ The second and final king of the Pahlavi dynasty, who reigned after his father was abdicated, until January 1979, a couple weeks before Ayatollah Khomeini returned from his exile in France and about a month before the Islamic Revolution in Iran.

²⁶⁸ Abbas Milani, *The Shah* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 33.

²⁶⁹ Milani, *Lost Wisdom*, 127.

added to the confusion of this attenuated sense of self.”²⁷⁰

It is in response to this bifurcated self that searches for an “authentic” self,²⁷¹ an “authentic culture,”²⁷² and “‘native’ and ‘authentic’ forms of cultural of resistance”²⁷³ developed among the Iranian intellectuals in the 1960s. Negin Nabavi locates the inspiration for this search in Césaire’s *négritude* and Fanon’s notion of a native culture.²⁷⁴ Nasrin Rahimieh maintains that this search culminated in Islam, and Shi’ism in particular. But despite these intellectuals’ insistence on preserving the native aspect of this search, elements from other anticolonial movements across the Third World as well as Marxism wound up in the formation of this “native” Iranian self.²⁷⁵ A question that arises in this context, then, is what would an Iranian self, that was predicated neither on notions of an anticolonial self (informed by the works of Césaire and Fanon), nor on a Marxist notion of self, look like. Furthermore, she writes about the “elusiveness of literary attempts to carve out an autonomous Iranian self”: “The spiritual core of the nation ... existed in the realm of ideas.”²⁷⁶ In my reading of *Shazdeh Ehtejab*, I will demonstrate Golshiri’s literary attempt at representing an autonomous Iranian self in the figure of Fakhri—an attempt that is not elusive and does not search outside of its own locale for its

²⁷⁰ Ibid.

²⁷¹ See Nabavi, *Intellectuals and the State*, 61-64.

²⁷² See Nabavi, *Intellectuals and the State*, 97-100.

²⁷³ Nasrin Rahimieh, “Reflections of the Cold War in Modern Persian Literature,” in *Global Cold War Literature: Western, Eastern and Postcolonial Perspectives*, Ed. Andrew Hammond (New York: Routledge, 2012), 95.

²⁷⁴ Nabavi, *Intellectuals and the State*, 97.

²⁷⁵ Rahimieh, “Reflections,” 95.

²⁷⁶ Ibid.

development; although, it is through violence and force that this autonomy is consummated. Modernity is imposed on Fakhri, but she makes the best of it—she transfigures it and makes it her *own*. The reason why her arrival at an “authentic” Iranian identity is successful is because she does not go about searching for it. She simply *is*; it’s her own knowledge and her raw experience of a forced modernity coupled with her local and personal history that leads to this transformation. It is an autonomous self that is not preoccupied with authenticity, hence its success at realizing its autonomy. At the same time, she is a repository of history and memory, and could thus represent erudite knowledge. In this vein, Fakhri’s figure as the combination of her raw experience and this erudite knowledge can be read as the genesis of a new genealogy, an “antiscience,” in the Foucauldian sense. The prince’s forceful search for an “authentic” self is rooted in his native past and the hegemonic discourse of his ancestors. His failure to realize this self, along with Fakhri’s transformation that is ultimately not aligned with the prince’s desires, could demonstrate that Golshiri was able to create the representation of an autonomous self that was not elusive, and was not predicated on any of the prevailing discursive practices of his time.

Golshiri’s Literature

I’ve argued that Golshiri’s novel can be read as an attempt to discover the Iranian self in the midst of a chaotic, tragic, and brutal setting of imperial history and the onslaught of modernization. In line with the overall project of this dissertation, I examine an alternative response to the political left at a time of widespread decolonizing and revolutionary actions across the globe; a response that remains engaged with the present in all its manifestations, yet manages to carve a space that is not simply ideological, and its literary figuration allows it to be fluid and uncertain. Fluidity and uncertainty are at the center of this Iranian subjectivity (and later, we will see in Glissant’s narrative, Caribbean subjectivity), and modes of empowerment. In

other words, it is at the center of this disruptive uncertainty that creativity takes place and the formation of an Iranian or Caribbean autonomous self becomes meaningful and successful in these literary productions.

Golshiri, a novelist, essayist, literary critic, and teacher of literature, writes with disappointment about his fellow contemporary writers who stubbornly adhered to the notion of literature that had to be “committed,” a defining feature of which was its socialist realism: “Our knowledge of sociology derived from the Russians’ Marxist-Leninist interpretation of society. Although we were able to mentally detach ourselves from that movement early on, the roots would continue to drink from that water source for years.”²⁷⁷ He himself had been a member of the Tudeh party [Party of the Masses] in his early years but had broken ties with them, and was strictly against an idea of literature that was predicated on serving a particular political agenda and for galvanizing the public. As mentioned in my introduction, the notion of committed literature in Iran was influenced by Sartre’s *littérature engagée*. Golshiri’s aforementioned statement that “political literature is not literature,” interestingly enough, is in fact aligned with one facet of Sartre’s project. In his introduction to the journal *Les Temps Modernes*, Sartre outlines what his idea of *littérature engagée* is and how it will be implemented in their journal. He explains,

As for us, who without being materialists have never distinguished soul from body and who know only one indivisible reality—human reality—we align ourselves on the side of those who want to change simultaneously the social condition of man and the concept he has of himself. Consequently, concerning the political and social events to come, our journal will take a position in each case. It will not do so *politically*—that is, in service of a particular party—but it will attempt to sort out the conception of man that inspires each one of the conflicting theses, and will give its opinion in conformity with the conception it maintains. If we are able to live up to what we promise, if we succeed in persuading a few readers to share our views, we will not indulge in any exaggerated pride; we will simply congratulate ourselves for having rediscovered a good professional conscience,

²⁷⁷ Golshiri, *Garden*, 14. All translations of Golshiri’s works are my own, unless otherwise noted.

and for literature's having become again—at least for us—what it should never have stopped being: a social function.²⁷⁸

Golshiri is similarly against “political” literature in the sense that it is politically positioned for or against a particular party or government. The point I am making about his novel aligns with Sartre's belief in literature's ability to change the social condition of a people; in other words, it is inherently political. However, the point of divergence between Golshiri and Sartre (and his followers in the committed literary movement in Iran) was regarding how one created such literature and what its motivations were. Writing with the intention of creating social change, or using literature in a utilitarian manner and believing that its sole function is its social function, was against Golshiri's deep-seated belief in the primarily aesthetic value and nature of literature.

Golshiri intentionally familiarized himself with the literary works of the so-called Western world, reading and teaching translations of Richard Wright, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Dante, Balzac, J.D. Salinger, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, and William Faulkner, to name but a few. Yet, he recounts a trip to the US where an Iranian literary critic, having read Golshiri's critiques of Iranian novels, assumed he knew deconstruction and asked him about it. Golshiri's response was, “Excuse me? What did you say?”²⁷⁹ He hadn't even heard of deconstruction yet. Golshiri would always state that in his critical practices, based on his own experience of writing, he had a number of approaches, such as prioritizing narrative and the language of the novel in his reading (19). In his essay “Thirty Years of Novel Writing” (1967), he maintains that, “The novelist is not a mirror of his time” (210), and that in critiquing the novel, “we should only consider the novel, the only living and expansive document that we have in front of us” (211).

²⁷⁸ Sartre, “*What Is Literature?*”, 255.

²⁷⁹ Golshiri, *Garden*, 11. Subsequent references will be indicated parenthetically in the text.

While his arguments about literary criticism can rightfully be compared to theories of structuralism or deconstruction, it's clear that, at the time he was writing these essays, he was completely unaware of them—even though his essays were contemporaneous with the above-mentioned schools of criticism. He mentions that it was important to him to familiarize himself with these schools of thought once he became aware of their existence, yet ultimately his critical practices remained as before (*ibid.*), untouched by paradigmatic movements and critical theories either at home or abroad.

An equally limited reading of *Shazdeh Ehtejab* would regard its narrative techniques as derivative of literary modernism in the Western hemisphere. In his introduction to his translation of the novel, James Buchan writes that Golshiri's *Shazdeh Ehtejab* “showed that Iranian writers had learned the techniques of European and American modern fiction and added some tricks of their own.”²⁸⁰ But in fact, as Abbas Milani argues, Golshiri advocated that “traditional Persian literature should be mined by modern Persian writers,”²⁸¹ an act that he undertook himself, in order to create modern *Iranian* fiction: “on the question of the genesis of the Persian novel, he parted company with the dominant paradigm that had long argued that the novel, as a genre, is Western in nature and source.”²⁸² Granted, in this chapter, it is not my intention to focus on European or American versus local modernisms; it is, however, useful to point out the manner in which Golshiri (and later, Glissant), similar to their counterparts in other chapters of this dissertation, would not allow their creative practices to be impeded by essentialist polemics. Rather, they would make use of all the literary, cultural, and political tools at their disposal, local

²⁸⁰ James Buchan, “Introduction,” in *The Prince*, by Hushang Golshiri (London: Vintage, 2006), 1.

²⁸¹ Milani, *Lost Wisdom*, 126.

²⁸² *Ibid.*

or otherwise, to create their own unique cultural products that were not reducible to any specific category of knowledge; simultaneously, they participated in the political discourse of their time, without abiding by the rules and regulations of that political discourse.

Golshiri's Prince

Golshiri's narrative is set at the end of the Qajar dynasty, in the early twentieth century; thus, the historical period of his novel is about sixty years before the time in which he is writing. The novel's eponymous character, Shazdeh [Prince] Ehtejab, is an impotent descendent of a line of tyrannical kings who terrorized their people, massacred them, and amassed an outrageous amount of wealth in the process. The narrative situates the old and sickly prince in his ancestral house, surrounded by portraits and paintings of his family, with the eyes of some of the women cut out—we later find out that the prince himself had cut out the eyes of his father's sisters.²⁸³ And in his memory of these particular women, they are almost always crying. Their knowledge of events seems to be different from that of the ancestral men. The prince speaks of “all the things that exist in the shadows of his aunts' portraits” and “that if he wanted to, he could find something in that distant darkness.”²⁸⁴ He claims that that “something”, that knowledge, could perhaps let him “create Fakhrol-Nessa anew or even himself” (ibid.). There is, therefore, a certain form of knowledge that the aunts hold—a knowledge that is repressed and subjugated by the men—that would allow for the creation of a new self out of an old or even dead one.

Notwithstanding the pictures, the room that the prince is in is practically empty, save for

²⁸³ In Persian, there are four different words for “aunt,” depending on whether your aunt is your mother or father's sister, or if she's married to your paternal or maternal uncle. In this case, he is using the word *ammeh* which means his father's sister.

²⁸⁴ Hushang Golshiri, *Shazdeh Ehtejab [Prince Ehtejab]* (Tehran: Ketab-e Zaman, 1968), 25. All translations of Persian are my own unless otherwise noted. Subsequent references will be indicated parenthetically in the text.

the chair he is sitting in and a couple of odd pieces of furniture, and the house is dark. The prince describes his weak physical state in terms of having “ancestral fever”; the room that he is sitting in, we learn, is filled with the “smell of mustiness,” and “his entire body filled only a small corner of that ancestral chair” (ibid.). The personal, tyrannical history of his ancestors permeates the room, and its dark mustiness indicates the tired weight that this history puts on the frail prince. The prince hallucinates throughout the novel and remembers events from his past; or, perhaps a better manner of articulating this would be that the narrative *performs* the act of remembering. The timeline and the narrative of the story are convoluted and difficult to follow. The narrator is at times the prince himself, at times an omniscient narrator, and at other times the servant, Fakhri. The narrative itself thus becomes a history that is made of different viewpoints and not always reliable. The act of cutting out the crying eyes of the aunts indicates that this history is tampered with by a character who is hanging on to the last remains of his ancestral power. So, the prince’s acts of remembering cannot be trusted, which is why, I argue, the narrative performs a re-remembering of the ancestral history through different voices in the narrative. In this manner, Golshiri is signaling that fiction creates its own reality and that it should not be expected to function as a political apparatus that represents social reality. Through his depiction of a faulty reality of ancestry, he creates a work of fiction that can point to the shortcomings that representations of social reality have. In a manner, he is also signaling that History (with a capital H) is subjective and oppressive, for it can be manipulated by those in power to present a certain account of the past in order to serve particular, political purposes.

The novel is narrated all in one large chunk, with no chapter breaks or pauses in narration. And, similar to Condé’s novel, the timeline of *Shazdeh Ehtejab* is very disorienting and non-linear. When the prince remembers the past, the house is filled with light, furniture,

music, and the laughter of his late wife, Fakhrol-Nessa. We quickly become familiar with the Prince's familial history, and how he has fallen short of meeting the ancestral expectations or following their example at every juncture in his life. As the prince seemingly drifts in and out of states of delirium, remembering, or better yet, reimagining the tyrannical past and history of his forefathers through looking at the family paintings and portraits on the walls surrounding him, we are violently, and without formal breaks, thrust into different timelines and historical periods of this ancestry. More often than not, it takes more than one reading to get one's bearings and understand where this shift is taking us. And it is at times useless to try to situate the novel in the described timeline. The fact that Golshiri decides to create a narrative that frantically throws the prince, and along with him the reader, back and forth in the historical past of late nineteenth century Iran, is telling in a number of ways. The most immediate and perhaps simple explanation that comes to mind is that Golshiri didn't want to risk persecution by the Pahlavi regime for portraying the tribulations of an Iranian society undergoing modernization, especially when his portrayal reflected the violence with which the Pahlavi regime was enforcing this modernization. Yet, as mentioned earlier, Golshiri does not believe that fiction should be a mirror of its time; his account was, ultimately, fictional. At the same time, I've argued that with this novel, Golshiri is contributing to the development of a modern, autonomous, Iranian self. In an interview after his death, his wife explains that Golshiri "condemned [political] commitment that was explicitly represented [in literature]"; she adds, "Later, when I read his work attentively, I realized he has implemented this commitment with more nuance. He was well-versed in the political climate of the time."²⁸⁵ As a central figure in establishing one of the leading literary journals of the time, *Jong-e Isfahan*, he undoubtedly could not have been distant from the socio-

²⁸⁵ Maryam Taheri Majd, *Hushang Golshiri* [in Persian] (Tehran: Nazar Publications, 2004), 14.

political and cultural discourse of his time. About this journal, in an essay in *Iranian Studies*, Arta Khakpour writes,

a new journal had emerged in the provincial capital of Isfahan, founded independently in 1965 by a group of young writers who had been attendees of a forward-looking literary salon. Within a decade, this “little magazine,” *Jong-e Isfahan* (The Isfahan Anthology) had developed into the most notable modernist literary magazine in Iran, eclipsing the established Tehran-based journals for its iconoclasm and defense of modernist aesthetics. Of all the members of *Jong*'s core group, the writer that most earnestly took on the mantle of literary modernism, particularly in fiction, was Hushang Golshiri.²⁸⁶

After a film adaptation of *Shazdeh Ehtejab* came out with his direct supervision as scriptwriter, Golshiri was ultimately imprisoned for “its supposedly anti-monarchical content,”²⁸⁷ rendering any potential reservations he may have had about the content of his work meaningless. With the time period that he chooses for his narrative, he is thus decentering history as a formal discourse that is integral to cultural production. Following his own example of dealing only with the novel at hand as a living document for a credible reading of it, I will return to the novel and provide some instances in the narrative that speaks to his idea of history. Without dealing with the immediate socio-political reality of his time, he is still able to provide insight into its social fabric and its constituent individuals.

In one of the first interactions the prince has with Fakhrol-Nessa that took place before she became his wife, he enters her room and finds her reading:

--What's the book?
-- Our distinguished ancestor's memoir.
-- You, you read these things for what?
...
-- Look, if we want to know ourselves, we have to start here, with these very ancestors.²⁸⁸

²⁸⁶ Arta Khakpour, “Beyond the One-World Frame of Fiction: The Breakdown of Reality in Hushang Golshiri's Stories,” *Iranian Studies* (Vol. 49, No. 3, 2016, 451-469), 451-2.

²⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 452.

²⁸⁸ Golshiri, *Shazdeh*, 36-7. Subsequent references will be indicated parenthetically in the text.

We learn that for Fakhrol-Nessa, reading is the central mode of accessing the history of their ancestors. She is thus reading about the culture to which she is filiatively bound, and we learn that all the information she shares with the prince about their forefathers, comes from the books that she is constantly reading. In fact, she reads out loud to him from these books, in order to teach him about their ancestry. In a manner, though, she can also be read as an oppositional critic in the Saidian sense—one who is trying to break free from the ties of affiliation. For, interestingly, she does not see herself affiliatively tied to their political system. In other words, she is a careful reader. She consistently points out the errors of her ancestors in their mode of governing and suggests that things should have been done differently, so that they wouldn't have been doomed to failure. She is also highly critical of the prince, of what she deems his inefficiency to govern, his inability to bear children or have hundreds of concubines like his grandfather, and the fact that he merely gambles all the time.

Fakhrol-Nessa is admittedly a complex character, and I would argue that, in this complexity, we can start to see the germination of the autonomous, modern Iranian self. She is, at times, portrayed as a ruthless woman who constantly berates and belittles her husband, ridiculing him for not having the traditional markers of masculinity. Indeed, the extent to which this portrayal can be trusted is debatable, for we see portrayals of her by both the prince and Fakhri. At the end of the above-mentioned section where she is reading, we read that Fakhri comes in to tell her that lunch is ready. The prince leers at Fakhri, and Fakhrol-Nessa sees this. She offers Fakhri to him, stating that she's a virgin (41). In this instance, we see Fakhrol-Nessa treat her servant as her property and a commodity that she can offer to the prince, to encourage him to become like his lascivious ancestors. And the narrative suggests that in this instance, it is the prince's recollection of this conversation. Fakhri's recollection of her mistress paints her in a

much more positive light.

Another instance of the prince's recollection of his late wife takes place towards the end of the novel. He remembers another conversation that took place while they were walking in the garden and reached a white plaster column. She gives him a handful of stones, laughs, and says "Hit it." He asks, "Hit what?" (81). She tells him that he's really clueless, and explains how his great grandfather took pride in being able to break the bones of the ancestral enemies, and how the prince can't even bring himself to throw a few stones at a body that's been under that plaster for twenty years (*ibid.*). She continues: "Don't be afraid, Shāzdeh. Hurry and give Grandfather's soul cause to rejoice. This ungrateful wretch was a spy corresponding with the grand vizier. My father told me so. Believe me. When Grandfather found him out, he ordered them to bury him alive in the column, so that for ever after he'd be able to see everything clearly and report it."²⁸⁹ When he looks closer he sees the silhouette of a person in the column and wonders how he hadn't noticed it before: "Who was this spy? What was his name? Fakhrol-Nessa didn't know either. She said: 'One of hundreds of people. What difference does it make? He was a human being.'"²⁹⁰ About his gambling, "Fakhrol-Nessa would say: 'This isn't work, you're fooling yourself. You have to do something that counts, that's real work, something that will at least amount to a page in history. Take the gun and go to the garden's fence, and aim at someone who is walking on the other side of the fence, and shoot him. And then watch him as he dies'" (83). In this instance, it would appear that she is encouraging the prince to carry on the unspeakable acts of his ancestors. She is always laughing manically in the prince's recollections. He paints her in a cruel light, as

²⁸⁹ Hushang Golshiri, "Prince Ehtejāb," trans. Minoos R. Buffington. *Literature East & West* XX, no. 1-4 (December 1976: 245-303) 293-4.

²⁹⁰ Golshiri, *Shazdeh*, 81. Subsequent references will be indicated parenthetically in the text.

she demonstrates a merciless disregard for the human life of this man that was killed by their ancestors, among countless others. The fact that she refers to their ancestors as “distinguished” throughout the novel indicates the high regard in which she seems to hold them. She is frustrated that the prince is a weak, emasculated man who cannot repeat the successes of his forefathers, who have accumulated all the riches that he is gambling away; in this reading, the only way in which the prince could prove his worth and continue the legacy of their ancestors is if he continues the cycle of their violence as well. And it is either by acts of violence or exercising his sexual prowess that he would be able to make his mark in history, to have a page's worth of history in his name. His actions matter insofar as they become part of the discourse of history, and the means by which they become part of history do not matter. In fact, the more violent the act, it seems, the better chance it has of becoming part of history.

Yet in a conversation that Fakhrol-Nessa has with Fakhri we witness another facet of Fakhrol-Nessa's character, and a different attitude toward this ancestral history. Fakhri recounts this conversation: “I said: ‘My lady, what's in that book?’ She said: ‘Do you want me to read for you?’ I said: ‘Yes’” (51). Fakhrol-Nessa reads her one of the stories from the great grandfather's diary. Fakhri is astonished: “I said: ‘But my lady, these are all lies.’ She said: ‘I know, but I want to know how these distinguished ancestors could sleep at night’” (ibid.). In both accounts, Fakhrol-Nessa is described as obsessed with these books and histories. She is always reading. From the prince's perspective, Farkhol-Nessa is adamant that the prince has to continue their violent legacy. It is in moments with Fakhri, however, that we witness a more sensible side of Fakhrol-Nessa, one that is not laughing manically; and not only does she admit that a lot of the familiar history that she is reading contains lies, but more importantly, she finds their actions unethical and morally depraved, to the extent that she wonders how they could sleep at night.

There are also moments when she ridicules the fact that they all suffered from hemorrhoids, and had to either cut heads or spend time in their harems in order to get their intestines to work well (37). One can see intimations of an impending modernity in facets of Fakhrol-Nessa's rejection of brutal tradition, at least in Fakhri's version of events. Furthermore, this notion of fabricated history, and the fact that, it would seem, its fabrication has no bearing on reality, is something that the prince also attests to. In one of his recollections of the stories that Fakhrol-Nessa read to him, he thinks, "Fakhrol-Nessa told me. Had she read it or had her father told her? It's doesn't make a difference" (90). Elsewhere, when he's remembering his grandmother's death, narrating the event internally in the present moment, he says, "She dies while praying, or in her bed, or on the porch. It doesn't make a difference, she dies" (77). In other words, it doesn't matter if the history that is being recounted is written, or is passed down orally. Also, the manner in which the events took place is of no importance; ultimately, what matters is that it happened—and sometimes even the fact of the event cannot be corroborated, or appears to be fabricated. Ultimately, all of the events of the past are read by Fakhrol-Nessa, and the reader is given a disarranged version of this history through the prince's foggy recollections of her reading.

It would seem, therefore, that through these jumbled acts of remembering his ancestral past, the prince is simultaneously trying to dismantle it, not only through gambling, but also through the fact that he has no offspring—while Fakhrol-Nessa claims that he is barren, this is never acknowledged by him. In fact, throughout the novel, there is no indication that his marriage to Fakhrol-Nessa was consummated. Yet, he practically forces himself on Fakhri every night. We learn that Farkhol-Nessa died from tuberculosis, and after her death, the prince has kept her body under a white sheet in her room for an uncertain amount of time. During this time, he tries to transform Fakhri into Fakhrol-Nessa, so she could take the place of his deceased wife.

One possible reading, then, is that the prince is trying to create a new genealogy, one that is not linked to his ancestral past. But the fact that he is trying to forcefully transform Fakhri into Fakhrol-Nessa indicates that he wants the ancestry to continue in some convoluted manner, and he is driven to a madness of sorts in doing so. Although compared to those of his forefathers, his acts of violence are significantly watered down, his treatment of Fakhri still represents a continuation of the masculinist traditions of this dying dynasty, and this desire to continue tradition has led to his afflicted mind.

Yet, as mentioned earlier, Fakhri is a simple and devout countrywoman who doesn't know how to read, and had spent her life taking care of the mistress of the house and preparing food for the master. As the cultivation of her mind and habits at the hands of the prince are taking place, at times she becomes indistinguishable from the former lady of the house, and the reader is unable to ascertain when she's reading about Fakhrol-Nessa and when she is reading about Fakhri. In fact, not only is it difficult for the reader to distinguish between them at times, but also in his remembering of the past, oftentimes the prince forgets whom the particular history he's recounting involved: Fakhri or Fakhrol-Nessa. Finally, and most importantly, at times even Fakhri sees herself as Fakhrol-Nessa. These fluctuations between the characters have a formal representation in the novel as well, meaning that the point of view and narrative shifts between these figures, yet there are no textual markers that indicates these shifts. It takes several readings to be able to distinguish between the voices and to locate the speaker in the text. When Fakhri is remembering her past interactions with her mistress and speaks of their interactions, suddenly, halfway through her act of remembering, the narrative voice shifts and Fakhrol-Nessa becomes the speaker: "Shazdeh was standing in the dark, he was caressing Fakhri's naked body with his cold hands. Slowly, I went close to him. I put my hand on his shoulder, and said: 'Shazdeh, this

is wrong and obscene, at least make her your official wife, like your great grandfather did.’

Shazdeh didn't turn around, he was kissing Fakhri's neck. He had put his hand around my waist, Fakhri's waist” (57-8). Not only is this “memory” by Fakhrol-Nessa most probably fabricated (for there is no evidence in the novel that the prince had relations with Fakhri before Fakhrol-Nessa died), but it also intermingles this fabricated history with the narrative present, creating an entirely unreliable “reality.” There is no unitary, formal discourse to rely on.

When Fakhri announces to the Prince that Fakhrol-Nessa has died, we read her point of view as the Prince picks her up, carries her up the stairs to Fakhrol-Nessa's room, knocks on the door and asks the dead Fakhrol-Nessa:

“May I come in?” I said, “Shazdeh, I told you that her eyes are fixed on the ceiling.” Blood had trickled out of her mouth on her beauty mark. What eyes! Shazdeh laughed, and said: “So much the better.” And he opened the door. He turned on the light. Ms. Fakhrol-Nessa, with a ghastly face, was lying flat on the bed. The blood on the corner of her mouth had dried up. Under her foggy eyeglasses, her eyes were still open, like two white bowls. I said, “Shazdeh, she’s dead.” He said, “You shut up.” (69)

He then rips Fakhri's dress from behind, kicks her to the ground, and tears away her apron, dress, and slip. He forces her to wear Fakhrol-Nessa’s white wedding gown. He takes off the handkerchief that she wears on her head, and while he grabs her hair from behind, he says “Look Fakhrol-Nessa, Fakhri is dead, she’s dead” (70). He orders her to sit in front of the mirror. “I sat in front of the mirror. In the mirror, it was still Fakhri who was crying” (ibid.). He thus beats her and rapes her into becoming Fakhrol-Nessa, and the moment that Fakhrol-Nessa is dead, the transformation is, for him, instantaneous.

Yet, while there are moments in the narrative when the two women also see themselves as one, the differences in their temperament and character are, more often than not, pronounced. What's more, with the passage of time, Fakhri comes more into her own. In the early stages of the forced transformation, Fakhri still speaks in a colloquial manner. The narrative in these

sections, contrary to the remainder of the novel, is written entirely in informal Persian. Fakhri's mode of speaking thus takes over the entire language of the novel. She is illiterate at first, but she tells the prince that she wants to learn how to read. The prince says he'll tutor her, and takes on her education (51). As mentioned earlier, while the prince tries to transform her into something she is not, she gradually comes into her own. We also learn that she is, in a manner, the gatekeeper of Fakhrol-Nessa's history. Towards the end of the novel, the last days of Fakhrol-Nessa's life are recounted. The prince forces Fakhri to remember and retell every little detail of those last few days. He tells her, "If the mistress said anything, don't forget any of it, or else..." (93). As Fakhri recounts the days leading to Fakhrol-Nessa's death, the prince, who is also dying of tuberculosis, gets closer to his demise. But Fakhri gets stronger. And she moves further away from the frantic laughter that characterized Fakhrol-Nessa. At one point, when the prince is in bed with Fakhri and describes her body, he says, "Fakhri's body was warm, warm and naked and filled with blood. Tuberculosis couldn't break that live barricade" (87). The illness that has taken away her purported predecessor and her current master, will not affect her or weaken her. Her resistance against tuberculosis signals a hope in the narrative—perhaps she can break the ancestral cycle of violence after all.

On the final page, one of the Prince's old servants, who is now in a wheelchair and appears every once in a while to announce a death and guilt the Prince into giving him charity, approaches the Prince and announces the Prince's own death to him. The cycle of dismantling this ancestral history thus becomes complete. To quote Dabashi,

Through the verbal narrative of Prince Ehtejab, ... Golshiri both constituted and resurrected the memorial site of Iranian political repression. In one act of creative genius, Golshiri narrated the brutality and decadence that characterized the Qajar dynasty (and through the Qajars the rest of Iranian dynastic nightmares) through a sequence of historical mutations pasted onto intractable cultural memories, which had sunken deeper and deeper into a people's collective consciousness. Prince Ehtejab is not just the last

prince in this terrible spiral; he is also the first person in Iranian modernity who needs to be narratively dismembered for us to be able to imagine a freer future.²⁹¹

I would add that with the prince's death, it is in fact Fakhri who exemplifies the first living person in Iranian modernity, and she thus represents the “freer future” that is no longer in the realm of imagination, for she lives on. By taking on the best of her mistress, in whom the first inklings of a break with tradition could be seen, she takes ownership of her transformation—even though, at first, this transformation was forced. Therefore, it takes a while for her to arrive at this ownership. At first, she constantly wishes that she could cough like her mistress. She regrets that she is not as petite as her mistress, or that her hands are not delicate and white like hers (her hands are thick and darkened by work and exposure to the elements). At the same time, the prince wants to erase her past entirely. He kicks Fakhri’s father out, who had been serving in the household for forty years, for he thinks that as soon as she sees her father, she’ll know that she’s Fakhri and not Fakhrol-Nessa.²⁹² And when she refers to Fakhrol-Nessa as her mistress, the prince instructs her to refer to Fakhrol-Nessa as her servant. He is effectively trying to erase her past. But as she develops into a stronger, more autonomous self, most of the narrative is shaped by her, as she recounts the past. There are also instances when she realizes that her mistress’s jewelry suits her as well.²⁹³ She dares to transcend the class into which she was born by wearing her former mistress’s jewelry and acknowledging that they don’t look out of place on her. The hope is that with the prince's death, we would have a Fakhri that would not go mad, that would no longer wish that she coughed like her mistress or who could die also like her mistress,²⁹⁴ that

²⁹¹ Hamid Dabashi, *Masters and Masterpieces of Iranian Cinema* (Washington, DC: Mage, 2007), 175.

²⁹² Golshiri, *Shazdeh*, 70.

²⁹³ *Ibid.*, 57.

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 70, 71.

does not have tuberculosis, and is not the descendent of this horrific family. As a reader like Fakhrol-Nessa, but one who has neither filiative nor affiliative ties with the ancestry and its political system, she can *fully* exemplify the Saidian oppositional critic who will have the ability to produce noncoercive knowledge.

Dabashi continues: “The moral terror perpetrated on the Persian political psyche by successive generations of despotism has an illusive and amorphous air about it that cannot be articulated or exorcized except by an uncanny narrative that at once registers and retrieves it, remembers in order to forget and be cleansed.”²⁹⁵ This cleansing thus paves the way for the formation of a new form of Iranian identity; one that is free of the imperial genealogies that had defined it thus far and is breaking away from the paradigmatic systems of both governance and knowledge through which the Iranian self was shaped and defined. With the death of the prince, there is space for the genesis of a new genealogy in the figure of Fakhri, who has the combination of both “erudite knowledge” and the “raw memory of struggle,” and who, along with her mistress, becomes central to insurrections that can lead to these new, “antiscience” genealogies. Golshiri’s nonconformist, fluid, unconstrained narrative is like the “antisciences” that these women contribute to, and semblances of this narrative can be seen in Glissant’s narrative, as well.

Glissant’s Overseer

In 1981, the year that the native Martinican, Glissant, published his novel, another central work of his oeuvre came out: *Le discours antillais (Caribbean Discourse)*. At this time, he was living in Paris and working “as the editor of the magazine *Le Courrier de l’UNESCO*, published by the

²⁹⁵ Dabashi, *Masters and Masterpieces*, 180.

United Nations,” after almost a decade of work in Martinique where he had founded IME.²⁹⁶ Michael Dash writes that these two “major works” appeared “at a time when the fathers of negritude had begun to succumb to creative exhaustion” and that they “are marked by the research into and diagnosis of Martiniquan reality that were done at IME before Glissant left for Paris.”²⁹⁷ In certain analyses of Glissant’s work, critics see the 1980s as a starting point for his “post-political” work, defining the 1950s through 1970s as his period of political activism. This definition of his work as “political” is partially due to his participation in the first two international conferences of the Congress of Negro Writers and Artists (*Congrès des écrivains et artistes noirs*); his signing of the Manifesto of the 121 (*Déclaration sur le droit à l’insoumission dans la guerre d’Algérie* or Declaration on the right of insubordination in the Algerian War); and his co-founding of *Front Antillo-Guyanais pour l’Autonomie*, after which he was barred from leaving France until 1965.²⁹⁸ Charles Forsdick challenges this simplistic categorization of Glissant’s work, and it is in response to these categorizations, he argues, that Celia Britton made a point to underline Glissant’s various modes of political involvement in the obituary she wrote for him in *The Guardian*.²⁹⁹ Britton starts the final paragraph of his obituary with this unequivocal statement: “Glissant was always politically involved.”³⁰⁰

Similar to what I’ve argued about Golshiri, the inherently political nature of Glissant’s

²⁹⁶ *Encyclopedia of World Biography Online*, s.v. Édouard Glissant.

²⁹⁷ J. Michael Dash, *Édouard Glissant* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 126.

²⁹⁸ Charles Forsdick, “Local, National, Regional, Global: Glissant and the Postcolonial Manifesto,” in *Caribbean Globalizations, 1492 to the Present Day*, eds. Eva Sansavior and Richard Scholar (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015), 230-231.

²⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 229

³⁰⁰ Celia Britton. “Edouard Glissant,” *The Guardian*, February 13, 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/feb/13/edouard-glissant-obituary>.

work cannot be disputed. His preoccupation with Francophone Caribbean literary language cannot be severed from the political issue of French colonization. However, he does not set out to write a political novel or series of essays—his focus is on language and literature, and the literary performs the political act, without underscoring the act as such. In fact, Glissant is against totalizing discourses, including, as mentioned earlier, *History and Literature*. Reading his novel in conjunction with *Caribbean Discourse* and *Poetics of Relation* (the latter of which Glissant himself describes as “a reconstituted echo or a spiral retelling”³⁰¹ of *Caribbean Discourse*), I’ll demonstrate how, like Golshiri, Glissant creates a narrative against the hegemonic discourses of (Western) history and literature. He performs this disruptive narrative by incorporating oral histories, demonstrating the futility of tracing ancestries and attempts to prove filiation, and the madness associated with this futility. More importantly, however, the difference between the madness in Golshiri’s text represented by the violent prince and the madness in Glissant’s text represented by Marie Celat, is the possibility that Glissant’s portrayal of madness offers. To cite Dash, “Hers is a split personality. Caught between *ceci* and *cela*, day and night, the *autocensure* of the present and the irresistible power of the past, she incarnates a *creatively fissured* mind [emphasis added].”³⁰² The “creatively fissured mind” of Marie Celat offers this possibility, the particulars of which I’ll demonstrate in this section.

As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, Glissant starts his novel with an extract from a publication that refers to Marie Celat’s madness. Attempts to trace her lineage permeate the narrative, traces that lead to the two aforementioned brothers, the two Odonos who were both

³⁰¹ Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 16.

³⁰² Dash, *Édouard*, 128.

brought to this land on a slave ship. We learn that they both fell in love with the same woman: “So, there were two brothers and just one garden. A situation with no tomorrow.”³⁰³ The reference to the woman as “garden” here invokes the Garden of Eden, mankind’s mythical fall, and the story of Cain and Abel. The two brothers’ quarrel over the woman is what prompts one Odonno to betray the other Odonno and sell him into slavery—only to have his scheme backfire, for he is sent along with the brother on the slaver as well: “Odonno sold Odonno. A brother sold his brother to be deported; he himself was not spared.”³⁰⁴ In the narrative, there is not one Odonno and the other Odonno, there is no language of differentiation. We know that, while they were both sold into slavery, Odonno ended up in “pays d'avant (land-before),” Africa as the motherland, and Odonno arrived at “pays-ci (land-here),”³⁰⁵ the New World/Caribbean where their descendants are trying to figure out which Odonno was their forefather. “Pays d’avant” and “pays-ci” are referenced time and again throughout the novel. The search for their origins, therefore, is embedded in the opposition of two locations, two discourses, and thus the possibility of two different genealogies, that of the betrayer and the betrayed:

Odonno was somewhere down there near the mortars where indigo was ground; over here, Odonno became a warrior who had killed more justly than he would be killed....Odonno would see his children’s children dig in this pile where Odonno died—all of them forever asking: so who was it who left his blackened thigh bones in this charcoal? The betrayer or the one betrayed?³⁰⁶

In *Poetics of Relation*, Glissant writes, “for colonized peoples identity will be primarily ‘opposed to’—that is, a limitation from the beginning. Decolonization will have done its real work when it

³⁰³ Glissant, *The Overseer’s Cabin*, 49.

³⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 140.

³⁰⁵ Glissant, *La case*, 19; Glissant, *Overseer’s Cabin*, 9.

³⁰⁶ Glissant, *Overseer’s Cabin*, 141.

goes beyond this limit.”³⁰⁷ The searches for collective identity in the narrative, therefore, will be doomed to failure unless they refrain from participating in the opposition. These oppositional discourses are portrayed throughout the text in a number of ways. In addition to the foundational knowledge of Western history and literature, represented through the paradigmatic myth of Genesis, there are illusions to classical figures of Western philosophy and civilization. Among the descendants of Odon, we have names such as Pythagore (Marie Celat’s father), Augustus (Pythagore’s grandfather), and of course Marie Celat herself. The totalizing discourse of Western logic, politics, tradition, and written history is challenged by these characters who subvert the knowledge of the figures after whom they’ve been named. Instead, Pythagore and Augustus represent the subjugated knowledge of the oral history of the Caribbean and its voodoo rites and ceremonies. And Marie, instead of being the starting point of a tradition and genealogy, is in fact the last person in a genealogy who, in fact, wishes to break free of this imposed genealogy altogether.

The opening chapter of the book starts with a description of Pythagore performing a voodoo ritual. Pythagore, as opposed to his Greek-philosopher counterpart, is a truth-seeker in the Caribbean tradition. He is searching for his origins in the form of the two Odonos. However, he does not carry out his search via a written history. He performs voodoo ceremonies to find answers to his questions about the two brothers. Also, when confronted with a “Newcomer,” the “last man sent into captivity by the slave trade,”³⁰⁸ he believes he can access this ancestral history through conversations with this final, former slave: “[Pythagore] would no longer need books or his daughter, Marie Celat: he would open the book written on earth (il ouvrirait le livre

³⁰⁷ Glissant, *Poetics*, 17.

³⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 26.

tracé sur la terre) by this man who had gone round and round in the space of the island.”³⁰⁹ The verb “written” here does not accurately reflect the manner in which the book is making a mark on the land, of drawing and creating a design of sorts on the island. As Peter Hitchcock notes in his reading of *Le discours antillais*, “a sense of the land’s integral formation of Martinican being is essential to any notion of Antillanité or Caribbeanness at this historical juncture.”³¹⁰ Pythagore is thus relying on an oral history coupled with a geographical linkage in order to form their genealogy. Hitchcock adds, “The land is a repository of memory.”³¹¹

In *Caribbean Discourse*, Glissant writes of “Reversion and Diversion” [*Le retour and le détour*], and explains that for the Caribbean cultural critics, like Fanon and Césaire, a diversion from their place of origin was necessary for the creation of their discourse: “The poetic word of Césaire, the political act of Fanon, led us *somewhere*, authorizing by diversion the necessary return to the point where our problems lay in wait for us.”³¹² But their works were adapted for decolonization writ large:

However the works that followed negritude and the revolutionary theory of *Wretched of the Earth* are universal. They follow the historical curve of the decline of decolonization in the world. They illustrate and establish the landscape of a zone shared elsewhere. We must return to the point from which we started. Diversion is not a useful ploy unless it is nourished by reversion: not a return to the longing for origins, to some immutable state of Being, but a return to the point of entanglement, from which we were forcefully turned away; that is where we must ultimately put to work the forces of creolization, or perish.³¹³

³⁰⁹ Glissant, *Overseer’s Cabin*, 27; Glissant, *La case*, 39.

³¹⁰ Peter Hitchcock “Antillanité and the Art of Resistance,” *Research in African Literatures* 27, no. 2 (1996): 34. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3820159>.

³¹¹ *Ibid.*, 35.

³¹² Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 25.

³¹³ *Ibid.*, 26.

In a footnote, he adds that “For us Martinicans, this place already is the Caribbean.”³¹⁴ In other words, the point “from which [they] started” is not Africa. Pythagore’s search, insofar as it is connected to the island itself, could yield the results that he is hoping for—that is, the creation of a new genealogy that is predicated on neither formal history and knowledge, nor a universal Third World discourse. It is thus moving away from totalizing discourses in that manner, and is relying on the land itself as the “repository of memory.”

After Cain kills Abel, God punishes him and tells him, “you will be a fugitive and a wanderer on earth.”³¹⁵ Glissant appropriates this punishment of wandering, that could be read into the fate of Odon, into the strength of what he calls “*errance*” (errantry), unsettling the tyranny of this punishment. In describing Pythagore’s need to find answers to his question about origins, he writes,

Pythagore était passé du côté des songes errants, qui ne repèrent pas leur paysage et ne s’ancrent dans aucune argile...et qu’ainsi cette terre qui le portait sans qu’il s’y plantât commodément était bien un relais originel, un compromis en condensé entre deux infinis au cœur. Et de ne pas le savoir, étant torturé du besoin de ce savoir, enferma donc Pythagore dans *l’errance* du songe.

(Pythagore had moved on into those wandering dreams of unlocated landscape, dreams not anchored in clay...and consequently, that this land that bore him despite his not being comfortably planted there, was really a primary relay, a compressed version of compromise between two infinities at its heart. And not knowing this together with the torment of needing this knowledge enclosed Pythagore in the *errantry* of dream) [emphasis mine].³¹⁶

In *Poetics of Relation*, Glissant expands upon this notion of *errance*:

The thought of errantry is not apolitical nor is it inconsistent with the will to identity, which is, after all, nothing other than the search for a freedom within particular surroundings...in the poetics of Relation, one who is errant (who is no longer traveler,

³¹⁴ Ibid.

³¹⁵ Genesis, 4: 12 (New Revised Standard Version).

³¹⁶ Glissant, *La case*, 41-2; Glissant, *Overseer’s Cabin*, 29-30.

discoverer, or conqueror) strives to know the totality of the world yet already knows he will never accomplish this—and knows that is precisely where the threatened beauty of the world resides. Errant, he challenges and discards the universal—this generalizing edict that summarized the world as something obvious and transparent, claiming for it one presupposed sense and one destiny. He plunges into the opacities of that part of the world to which he has access.³¹⁷

Pythagore has not fully given in to the “opacities” of his world. His errantry is that of dreams, for his desire to gain the knowledge of his true ancestry has become a “torment.” And while his “dreams are not *anchored* in clay,” thus allowing for the wandering that is necessary in the collective search for identity, there is still a sense of the universal in his search; and that is the desire for filiation. Therefore, this search for a genealogy that does not detach itself from the imposed history of slavery, cannot lead to a new genealogy that is predicated on local knowledges and experience. Further in *Poetics of Relation*, Glissant outlines the difference between a “Root identity” and a “Relation identity”; he explains (and critiques) the former as “founded in the distant past in a vision, a myth of the creation of the world” and “sanctified by the hidden violence of a filiation that strictly follows from this founding episode.”³¹⁸ The filiation described here, starting with the myth of Genesis and the filial violence of Cain and Abel, parallels (and in fact, leads to) the culturally filiative binds that Said refers to, representing birth, nationality, and the formation of nation-states. Pythagore and the community who are obsessed with figuring out which Odon is their forefather, have not been able to break with this violence of filiation—both the original, brotherly violence in which this filiation is grounded, as well the violence that filiation represents in terms of rightful claims to origins and legitimacy. Pythagore’s errantry is, therefore, not fully realized because of its rootedness in filiation. On the

³¹⁷ Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 20.

³¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 143.

other hand, Relation identity is “linked not to a creation of the world but to the consciousness and contradictory experience of contacts among cultures” and “produced in the chaotic network of Relation and not in the hidden violence of filiation.”³¹⁹ Marie Celat is closest to this Relation identity.

Among all the various family members who are attempting to trace their origins back to these two brothers, Marie Celat does not wish to do so. In a quote mentioned earlier, we read that Pythagore no longer needed his daughter or her books. Her books are in fact French and she is learning how to read and write in French at school: “It’s true that when she spoke it was always in Creole—except, of course, at school...She savagely reviled the boys who were jealous of her success and couldn’t figure out how she could knock you down in Creole and yet produce that abrasively accurate French.”³²⁰ Her school principal forbids the use of Creole,

because he was persuaded that said dialect constituted an obstacle to progress *on the right track*. He hated Mycéa because he had to admit that she contradicted all his theories. He was particularly bothered by what he considered the “baroque” way she wore her braids, sticking out like sparks around her head ... He was offended by the fact that someone could so obviously be gifted in the humanities and at the same time so obstinately savage. (34)

Herein lies the “contradictory experience of contact among cultures” as a result of the violence of colonization, and we understand that her French education in fact reinforces the development of her *creolité*—that she is able to inhabit both spaces equally well, without allowing one to overdetermine their effect on her identity; she is, therefore, returning to the “point of entanglement” in order to not perish. She also represents the combination of “erudite knowledge and what people know” in Foucault’s notion of a new genealogy. At the outset, we understand

³¹⁹ Ibid., 144.

³²⁰ Glissant, *Overseer’s Cabin*, 33. Subsequent references will be indicated parenthetically in the text.

this is something that she seems to want to keep for herself, not letting her father in:

And when Pythagore went closer the child would hunch over her work to conceal it from her father, closing herself off, not even deigning to raise her head, inside a world that excluded him. He didn't know (and didn't know that Mycéa knew it already: he really did not know the child) that the books incessantly lied to the great advantage of the people who produced them. (22)

Her father, in a moment that foreshadows his daughter's disruption of the new genealogy he and his ancestors are trying to create, sees his daughter's birth as "the death of his hope" (11). That is why he "had celebrated this birth the same way you sounded a horn for a death" (ibid.). It is therefore, not surprising that her daughter, from a very young age, does not let her father into this liminal world that she is successfully inhabiting; for later on, she is consistently forced to come out of this world, to participate in the search for ancestry that her entire community is involved in. Furthermore, like Fakhrol-Nessa, Marie Celat is also a careful reader: she understands the lies that permeate the written word and the historical accounts that are written from a position of power, which allows her to be an equally careful reader of oral histories as well, as we shall see below.

The question of their ancestry is described as "le question" in the text and Marie Celat is the only one who is "wary of getting further involved in 'the question' (se gardait d'enforcer plus avant dans 'le question')." ³²¹ This burning question is described as a "hole" time and again throughout the text, and in response to her husband, she says, "We are all split. What did she mean to imply? Probably that we both did and didn't know how to recognize and acknowledge the hole that, with all its dark recesses, split us from birth." ³²² This hole that is splitting them up from birth is the question of who was Odon and which one of the brothers is their true ancestor.

³²¹ Glissant, *Overseer's Cabin*, 150; Glissant, *La case*, 177.

³²² Glissant, *Overseer's Cabin*, 147. Subsequent references will be indicated parenthetically in the text.

What is significant here is that Marie Celat acknowledges that they are “all” split, including herself. And this is where her “creatively fissured mind” shows that she is closer to the embodiment of a new “antiscience” genealogy and a Relation identity than Pythagore and the others. She does not wish to resolve this split. She acknowledges the hole, but does not allow it to be the determining question that they must find an answer to; for that would be tantamount to giving into another totalizing discourse in order to set oneself free from the totalizing discourse that was imposed on them through their history of slavery.

Early on we are introduced to Papa Longoué, the quimboiseur,³²³ whom Cinna Chimène, Marie Celat’s mother, used to visit in search for answers to “the question.” We find that he is someone whom the people of the island visit when they need guidance—particularly, when they have a question to ask. And Cinna Chimène finds answers; she sits still “not to let anything move around inside her head” (78), in order for the words to come to her. After a while, “The words began to appear. She laughed softly because she understood that Papa Longoué at the entrance of the cabin was giving birth to them and pushing them toward her like bubbles in the river” (78-9). So, Papa Longoué is, quite literally, generating meaning for the islanders. “She thought, ‘those are words from inside the chamber-fish.’³²⁴ She thought, ‘so, not words from Farance but words from Ayiti where the two brothers had their garden’” (79). He becomes a conduit for the meaning they can attain from slavery about their ancestry. And in their ensuing conversation, he tells her, “Ayiti wasn’t the first land; the land where, he said, all the people were Odon. Cinna Chimène asked what land, he replied Guinea the Congo. Cinna Chimène asked what Odon, he replied

³²³ An Antillean term for a sorcerer of sorts.

³²⁴ The chamber-fish refers to a story she has been told about the slave ship that brought the two brothers; so, the chamber-fish is in fact the slave ship.

Odonno I don't know (64-5) [Odonno que je ne sais pas]."³²⁵ Papa Longoué's response indicates the universality of the African diasporic experience, a concept that Glissant challenges. For, though Cinna Chimène first finds the words in Haiti, where the two brothers originally were before they were sold into slavery, Papa Longoué diverts the search back to Africa. And because of their search for their ancestry, the community of the island gets stuck there, metaphorically speaking. There is Diversion, but no Reversion. Marie Celat, however, insists on Reversion, on taking the focus of the conversation and the question away from Africa and the two brothers and back to the island itself.

Marie Celat as mentioned earlier, is "wary of getting further involved in 'the question' (se gardait d'enfoncer plus avant dans 'le question')." "³²⁶ The original French of the text implies that she is at fear of disappearing into this question, signaling the pervasiveness and danger of getting lost in this search. It is around this time that "we began to notice that Mycéa was almost invisibly slipping away."³²⁷ I cite this line from the novel in this manner (that is, by including myself in the narrative "we"), to convey two things: the narrative's opacity, and Glissant's mode of shifting to collective address through the narrative that could include the reader. The non-linear narrative without sufficient textual markers does not always allow one to understand who is narrating and whom is the subject of narration. According to Hitchcock, "If Glissant's prose is opaque, it is both because assumed transparency has provided a window for colonial control (power as knowledge) and because he struggles to find a language adequate to the depth of the rupture in

³²⁵ Glissant, *La case*, 81.

³²⁶ Glissant, *Overseer's Cabin*, 150; Glissant, *La case*, 177.

³²⁷ Glissant, *Overseer's Cabin*, 148

identity endemic to what constitutes a Martinican voice.”³²⁸ Consequently, a first-person plural narrator is present at most times, whose identity is not clear, but suggests that the collective, though split, voice of the island is narrating the text and including the reader in this search for an identity. While this would indicate that the collective identity presupposes an individual identity in the Caribbean context, Mycéa’s story is also emphasized in the text. The novel starts with a note about her admittance to the asylum and ends with her release. At the point in the narrative where it seems that she is starting to “slip away,” she decides to visit Papa Longoué:

Unlike Mathieu, she had not gone up to see the old quimboiseur because of some matter that needed tending to. Neither her mother nor her father had asked her to go consult the man whom people usually considered as their ultimate doctor, supreme lawyer, confidant, and intercessor during this period when there was no money for anything at all. One day Mycéa, pretty much left to her own devices, ended up on the heights.³²⁹

During her visit to Papa Longoué, when asked what the question is that she has come to ask, she reveals that “She wasn't after anything at all, just looking to see a quimboiseur's house” (149). Papa Longoué insists again and again, “Because she was neither the first nor the last...of those who want to know...the answer to the question she had come to ‘leave’” (ibid.). The verb “leave” put in quotation marks here emphasizes that Marie Celat is the last figure in the book who visits Papa Longoué and indeed the person with whom the act of posing “the question” ends. The question is, then, “left” at that juncture. However, giving in to the pressure from Papa Longoué, “Exasperated, Marie Celat said then that she was asking a question. In fact. What was the Odonon that she still vaguely remembered from her childhood? Cinna Chimène never in her life ever answered a single question, rather she asked them” (ibid.). We realize that the burning question that has been on everybody else’s mind this entire time is a vague memory in Marie Celat’s, and

³²⁸ Hitchcock, *Antillanité*, 38.

³²⁹ Glissant, *Overseer’s Cabin*, 148. Subsequent references will be indicated parenthetically in the text.

she is indeed fed up with the line of questioning. After listening to Papa Longoué recounting the fragmentary genealogy that the generations of her family have strived to create, she realizes that they are not actually sure of their ancestry. She then asks, “Then why sing this story, and where had Odonno hidden?” Papa Longoué replies that “Odonno means something that comes back around like a procession going round the church. Well, said Marie Celat, that's just ignorance talking” (ibid.). The act of repeatedly circling a monument to tradition is, literally, an act of ignorance, of not knowing. Marie Celat, therefore, refuses to participate in this production of hierarchical knowledge that her community is attempting—knowledge that is, at its origin, based on conjecture. Subsequently, she realizes that the only sense of connection she feels with her parents was driven by a desire for answers to questions about ancestry and identity: “all she had in common with them were the many questions that had scarred them so pitifully, and not the relations of a daughter with her father and mother” (155). Thus, “Paradoxically, though she shared with them this feeling, it had kept her apart from both of them, having deprived her since birth of any sort of desire for filiation” (154). The desire to attain knowledge of their ancestry exists in the entire family, but the difference between Marie Celat and her parents is that she is capable of living with that lack of knowledge and not participating in the production of another hierarchical system of knowledge; and it is this difference that disrupts the desire for filiation in Marie Celat. If we accept her role as careful reader and the oppositional critic that Said advocates for, the disruption of a desire for filiation would in fact make her a more capable cultural critic. Resisting the urge to participate in the universal discourses, despite its allure, is what makes one a good critic. Or rather, articulated more clearly in the context of this novel, it is a crucial step that the Caribbean individual must take toward the point of entanglement, without becoming invested in the question of origins. For, as mentioned earlier, the true errant in Glissant’s view is

one who “strives to know the totality of the world yet already knows he will never accomplish this.”

While, thus far, I have argued that the community’s collective search for an ancestry is leading to another overall discourse, there is a possibility for it to not become so. They are indeed attempting a new genealogy, an “antiscience,” an attempt that can be read in Pythagore’s insistence on ritual and oral histories, and I would argue that there is a possibility for this attempt to be fully realized in the figure of Carnival. But the problem is that even in Carnival, this Martinican community hasn’t been able to fully immerse itself in the possibility that Carnival offers: “We hadn’t learned to leave the Plantations, though they isolated us more efficiently than any animal enclosure. We lived a few yards from the sea yet never plunged our bodies into it” (44). Their obsession with their past, that of slavery, is crippling and they are unable to cleanse themselves of this crippling obsession through the ceremony of Carnival and through an act of forgetting. Rather,

In that most absolute of moments, though *given the chance to spill in all directions outside set limits*, we turned the giddiness into a new enclosure where we shut ourselves up again and didn’t look at what was going on around us. For us, Carnival meant withdrawing in a drunken spiral into ourselves. Carnival vidés created the *illusion* of roaming the limitless space that we had left behind with the land-before, space that beneath our mazy web of confinements ... still blew its sometimes suffocating sweep of wind inside us [emphasis added]. (ibid.)

About the community who is crippled by the “hole” that has split them from birth, we read that “We just tried to fill the abyss with who knows how many rocks, not to mention the shouts we roared at the land when we went racing along in wild Carnival crowds or election parades” (147). Though they have the chance, in the ritual of Carnival, to fully plunge into and simultaneously embody the sea that they’re surrounded by and “spill in all directions,” Carnival merely retains for them its symbolic meaning, and its possibility for giddiness, for allowing true errantry, is not actualized. Marie Celat is the only figure in the narrative who gets closest to this

notion of errantry: “It was time to leave Plantation days behind, and Marie Celat was prepared to plunge irretrievably into dullness, without pointless recriminations” (163). She “drew closer to the trees and to the people, understanding their long wearing away but refusing to suffer the same deterioration” (ibid.). She lives fully in the world around her, not attempting to search for meaning or a sense of identity outside of her immediate surroundings, while accepting the inevitable “dullness” but refusing to “wear away” like those around her. In *Caribbean Discourse*, Glissant critiques the hegemonic, Western categories of history and literature:

History and Literature agree...to separate man from the world, to subject nature to culture. The linear narrative of nature and the linear form of chronology take shape in this context. Man, the chosen one, knows himself and knows the world, not because he is part of it, but because he establishes a sequence and measures it according to his own time scale, which is determined by his *affiliation*.³³⁰

Marie Celat disrupts the above-mentioned order, as does Glissant, through the formal qualities of his text. Therefore, in both the figure of Marie Celat as well as the overall work that Glissant is doing through his narrative, we see the oppositional criticism that Said calls for, materialize. The affiliative powers that include a systematic history and a constructed relation with nature in Enlightenment modernity are disordered in favor of a more organic, relational poetics and mode of being, one that is tied to the landscape of the Caribbean.

It would seem, however, that Marie Celat’s errantry has led to her insanity (at least in the view of those around her). Ultimately, she is able to negotiate her dismissal from the institution with her doctor, only to return to a life with her parents. Dash reads her perceived insanity as follows: “In [Glissant’s works in] 1981, madness and eccentricity, or various forms of behaviour, are interpreted as positively deviant, a kind of escape into the irrational ... Where order leads inexorably towards political absurdity and cultural extinction, insanity becomes a kind of

³³⁰ Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 73

restorative counter-order.”³³¹ Foucault’s notion of a “disorderly and tattered genealogy” can thus be read in the representation of Marie Celat’s madness, against the order that the community is trying to impose on their history by figuring out their ancestry. The “creatively fissured mind” of Marie Celat narrated in the midst of the collective voice of the novel could therefore provide a model for the literary creolization that Glissant is calling for: “we should let the weight of lived experience ‘slip in.’ Literature is not only fragmented, it is henceforth shared. In it lie histories and the voice of peoples.”³³² Despite the differences in their particular historical and cultural contexts, *Shazdeh Ehtejab* represents Golshiri’s shared idea of literature with its artful fragmentation, coupled with the voices of its people and their lived experiences.

Conclusion

In the creation of these two narratives, the ideas of master discourses and genealogies within the texts fit within the larger context of a scientific system of knowledge production—a production that disregards Foucault’s “subjugated knowledges.” In Golshiri’s novel, the subjugated knowledge was represented through the character of Fakhri, and the master discourse that she’s up against is the ancestral, violent history and legacy of the prince’s genealogy. In the prince’s attempts to transform Fakhri into Fakhrol-Nessa, one could also read a desire on the prince’s part to rid himself of the imposed legacy of his ancestry—a legacy that he had not lived up to, and for which he was constantly humiliated by Fakhrol-Nessa (at least, according to his version of events). In this context, I read his madness as a result of being torn between the desire to rid himself of the weight of the past and not being able to let go of that history entirely, which is why he wants to turn Fakhri into Fakhrol-Nessa, his deceased cousin and wife. Yet, Fakhri is

³³¹ Dash, *Édouard*, 127.

³³² Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 77.

ultimately removed from both the filiative and affiliative ties that bound Fakhrol-Nessa to the prince, no matter how hard the prince tries to bind her. I've read this struggle as illustrative of the larger struggle of the Iranian individual, stuck between Persian imperial, Islamic, and modern (Westernized) histories. In the figure of Fakhri, one can find an autonomous Iranian self developing that defies the formal categorizations that each of these historical discourses seek to impose on her. The development of this self is possible because of the prince's death.

In Glissant's novel, the history of slavery, as a history that is imposed on the Caribbean self by the European colonizers, can be read as a tyrannical, master discourse; the subjugated knowledge in this context would be the Caribbean individual's (or collective's) knowledge of itself that is *not* dependent on its pre-slavery ancestry. Similar to the narrative that Golshiri creates, a woman is at the center of this insurrection of knowledge. The madness in Glissant's text, contrary to Glissant's project, offers a possibility for working through the historical split and this split in Caribbean identity. Yet, contrary to the possibility that the ending of *Shazdeh Ehtejab* offers, *La case du commandeur* ends on a more uncertain note. One could attribute this uncertainty to Glissant's concept of *errance*; realizing a Caribbean autonomous self is predicated on Relation identity. Such an identity is predicated both on the symbol and the reality of the Caribbean Sea, as it simultaneously contains their history and defines their landscape.

Chapter 3

Poet-Travelers: The Poetic Geographies of Sohrab Sepehri and Derek Walcott

“...if to translate is to betray, so travel, home voices say,
is a kind of treachery.”
---Jeffrey Gray

On February 11, 1979, Iran’s Revolution (which later became known as the “Islamic Revolution”) took place, effectively ending the monarchical rule of the Pahlavi family, which itself came on the heels of centuries of imperial forms of governance in Persia. Eleven days later, Saint Lucia, a tiny island in the Caribbean Sea, became independent after centuries of first, French, and later, British imperial rule. About eight years earlier, two poets from each of these countries were staying in New York City, though they did not meet and all evidence suggests that they were not even aware of each other’s existence. Both poets were also painters, and both had lost their respective fathers at a young age. Similarly, they had traveled, and continued to travel, extensively out of their home countries. For the purposes of this study, though, the most significant point of comparison between the two poets, Sohrab Sepehri and Derek Walcott, is their relationship (or lack thereof) to the issue of politics proper in poetics. Taking their time in New York as a catalyst for this comparative study of their work, I will present readings of their poetry that look past the stereotypically political aspects of a poetics of revolution and resistance, and demonstrate the unique language of revolt and liberation that they have created—a language that is necessarily transnational, indicating their extensive travels along with their readings (and in Sepehri’s case, translations) of world literature in general, and European modernist and North American poetry in particular. Their approach to the politics of language and translation is, therefore, central to any reading of their work. One can locate the politics of their poetics in the

landscapes they are creating in their work. Part of this comparative study, then, looks at both the similarities and differences of their poetic geographies; for example, what are the implications of Sepehri's poetic landscape being described as Edenic rather than Adamic, like that of Walcott's? And how do they depict the traveling poetic personas traversing these landscapes? Finally, their time in New York does not simply serve as a catalyst. Rather, the locality of the city is itself critical; how they position themselves vis-à-vis this location and what it offers figures in their unique poetics of liberation.

On May 23, 1971, the Iranian “poet-painter-translator,”³³³ Sepehri (1928-1980), wrote a letter from New York City (where he was residing at the time), to his friend “Goli,” playfully identifying as an American. At this time, he had recently returned from a very short trip to Iran, after having lived in New York for over eight months; between late spring in 1970 and mid-1971, then, Sepehri had spent most of his time in New York City. A month earlier, on April 13, 1971, Walcott (1930-2017), a Saint Lucian poet, playwright, and painter, delivered a lecture, now famous as the essay “The Muse of History,” at Columbia University.³³⁴ Both writers would present their work while in the city—in Walcott's case, it was a production of his play *Dream on Monkey Mountain*, and in Sepehri's case, it was painting exhibitions. Both writers connected with other writers and artists as well. Walcott's inner circle of poets included Mark Strand, Joseph Brodsky, and Susan Sontag.³³⁵ Sepehri's inner circle, however, included mostly fellow

³³³ This is from the cover of the most recent edition of his poetry collection, *Hasht Ketab* [Eight Books] published in 2010 in Tehran by Behzad Publications, which include a number of his translations of Chinese and Japanese poetry. All translations from Persian into English are my own, unless otherwise noted.

³³⁴ Bruce King, *Derek Walcott: A Caribbean Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 269.

³³⁵ *Ibid.*, 271.

Iranian writers. It was at this time that Walcott's poetry was first solicited for the *New Yorker*,³³⁶ while translations of Sepehri's poems mostly appeared in *Kayhan International*, established in 1959, and "the most popular foreign language daily in Iran",³³⁷ its circulation was "between 8,000 and 10,000."³³⁸ In other words, rarely, if ever, was this newspaper read by Anglophone readers outside the country.

Contrary to Sepehri's situation, for Walcott the 1971 New York trip was one of the first of many trips to North America and what would be referred to as his "uprootedness"³³⁹ from the mid-1970s to late 1980s. Moreover, this trip was seminal in Walcott's initiation into the North American literary landscape. In *Nobody's Nation*, Paul Breslin mentions asking Bruce King, who wrote an extensive authorized biography of Walcott, to give him a sense of Walcott's travels in the early 1980s, to which King responds in "a quasi-telegraphic e-mail,"

Unsettled and flying non-stop all over, not possible to do a summary really. Ex. Jan 1980 Trinidad[d], Feb 1980 NY, March Virgin[i]a, April Trinidad and NY, May NY, June Trinidad, September NY, Fall 1980 living in NY teaching at NYU and Columbia, Poetry Olympics in London late September, then NY, then back to UK for Welsh prize in October, NY, back to Trinidad at x-mas. 1981: NYU and Columbia next semester, mostly, late April 1981 Trinidad for Beef, back to USA (NY base but commuting between Chicago and Washington for productions), late May Trinidad, June MacArthur, July St. Thomas, Fall 1981, part-time at Columbia and Harvard, became assist prof at Boston in Jan 1982. *The main point is that he really was a NYer at this period and still trying to make it in the USA until the MacArthur and Boston U (mid-1981 / Jan 1982) changed his life [emphasis added].*³⁴⁰

King's response makes clear two points: that at the time that *The Fortunate Traveller* was

³³⁶ Ibid., 273.

³³⁷ Amin Banani, "The Role of the Mass Media," in *Iran Faces the Seventies*, ed. Ehsan Yarshater (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1971), 333.

³³⁸ Ibid.

³³⁹ Paul Breslin, *Nobody's Nation: Reading Derek Walcott*, (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2001), 41.

³⁴⁰ Ibid.

published in 1982 (from which the poems studied in this chapter are all taken), Walcott was essentially a New Yorker, and that North American accolades were important to him. These facts, along with his search for academic positions in prestigious institutions of higher education in the US, indicate that the intended readership of Walcott is not necessarily—or not solely—West Indian. And the fact that he wrote in English made this aspiration possible.

The Columbia University event (that is, the “international conference”) in which Walcott delivered a talk, included Jorge Luis Borges and Mario Vargas Llosa: “there was a show of Cuban paintings and Brazilian films.”³⁴¹ While the focus of this “international” conference seems to have been the Americas (one of the co-sponsors, in addition to the School of the Arts, was the University’s Institute of Latin American Studies),³⁴² one could imagine Sepehri being at least an attendant of this conference, if not a participant. In his letters, he mentions time and again how he traveled to New York to work on his craft—both painting and writing—and how he would go to “elegant and exclusive parties and mingle with distinguished artists.”³⁴³ He claims that even their “snobbishness³⁴⁴ and toughened taste” was good for him and felt fresh.³⁴⁵ Recognizing the inherent elitism in such “exclusive parties,” he nonetheless appreciates the impact these interactions have on his work and how they can help expand his outlook. Yet, while at this time Sepehri had become one of the best-known poets of his generation, there was no acknowledgement of a central figure and pioneer of modern Persian poetry working in New

³⁴¹ King, *Derek Walcott*, 269.

³⁴² Ibid.

³⁴³ Sohrab Sepehri, *...I Am Still Traveling* [in Persian] (Tehran: Farzan Rooz Publishers, 2001), 70.

³⁴⁴ He writes this word in English.

³⁴⁵ Ibid., 65-6.

York at the time in the same manner that there was an acknowledgement of his “international” counterparts. Indeed, his paintings, which did not require translation, had traveled throughout the United States for several years, once “under the auspices of the Western Association of Arts Museum” and another time “by the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Program.”³⁴⁶ More often than not, however, he would either have solo exhibitions at galleries, or his work would be part of group exhibitions that included contemporary Iranian art, and, on one occasion, “Contemporary Asian and Middle Eastern Art.”³⁴⁷ Even his paintings, therefore, were rarely considered outside the regional context of his origins.

In *Forget English!*, Aamir Mufti writes about the “situation of English as *global literary vernacular* [emphasis in original]”:

English not merely as a language of literary expression but as a cultural system with global reach, not simply a transparent medium but an assemblage and apparatus for the assimilation and domestication of diverse practices of writing (and life-worlds) on a world scale. In both these spheres of functioning, therefore—that is, both in its wider role as a global language and in the more specialized role as literary language—English is involved in exchange relations: relations, in other words, in which values are produced and exchanged, where historical particulars are made fungible and put into circulation.³⁴⁸

In his critique of world literature, Mufti rightfully points to the hegemonic nature of English in determining what gets included in this category of literature and what gets left out. English becomes currency, not only making possible the exchange of literary goods, but more importantly, altering the values of those goods through the homogenizing power of English and adapting them to a setting and context that will be palpable for an English-speaking readership.

³⁴⁶ Houman Sarshar, “Sohrab Sepehri,” in *Encyclopedia Iranica* (online edition, 2009), available at <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/sepehri-sohrab>.

³⁴⁷ *Inaugural Exhibition, New York University Grey Art Gallery and Study Center* (New York: The Grey Art Gallery and Study Center, 1975), 5.

³⁴⁸ Aamir Mufti, *Forget English!: Orientalisms and World Literatures* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016), 17.

Particularities of histories are flattened out and commonalities are manufactured through this “global literary vernacular.” The exclusion of Sepehri from such a category can be explained by the absence of this shared currency. And it is precisely because of the critiques that Mufti has leveled against the category of world literature that this category would not be a suitable lens through which Sepehri could be studied along Walcott; the tendency here is not to “domesticate” either of their writing practices. Hence, my intention to formulate this study using the methodology of a comparative poetics. An important feature of such a comparative study of poetics is, as mentioned earlier, language. Mufti agrees with “critics who argue that contemporary practices of world literature in North America, given their reliance on translation from the world’s languages into English, participate at the very least in leveling out the linguistic particularities.”³⁴⁹ My readings in this chapter, then, aim to bring to the forefront these “linguistic particularities” and to demonstrate how both poets actively engage with the literary traditions and productions of this “global literary vernacular” and other “Western” languages and literatures, while creating a unique poetic language that is not derivative and cannot be reduced to mimicry.

Sepehri read poetry in English and French and translated them into Persian; engaging with literary traditions beyond his own unquestionably influenced his literary output and outlook. Yet, while some literary scholars trace Walcott’s modernism to Eliot and claim his modernism to be an adaptation or revision of that of Eliot’s, unidirectional claims of influence aren’t of interest in this study. Taking Eliot into consideration as a shared resource for Walcott and Sepehri and knowing that they both actively engaged with and responded to his work, allows for a comparative reading of the two. But while Eliot and European modernism are considered as

³⁴⁹ Ibid.

compelling components of this reading, they do not constitute its center. An aspect of Eliot's critique of poetry that is, however, central to any discussion of Sepehri and Walcott is the role of poetry and its language in exploring a consciousness of nationalism. In "The Social Function of Poetry," Eliot claims "there is no art more stubbornly national than poetry" for it is "the vehicle of feeling,"³⁵⁰ and that the social function of poetry is "affect[ing] the speech and sensibility of the whole nation."³⁵¹ A reasonable claim that could be made is, therefore, that the social effect of poetry cannot be separated from nationalistic sentiments. And this social function is closely associated with the *lingua franca* of the poet's homeland. Eliot further ascertains that the poet's "direct duty is to his *language*, first to preserve, and second to extend and improve. In expressing what other people feel he is also changing the feeling by making it more conscious; he is making people more aware of what they feel already, and therefore teaching them something about themselves [emphasis in original]."³⁵² If the poetic task is to also "extend and improve" the language while raising the public's consciousness of their feelings, then it behooves the reader to analyze the poet's particular, poetic language and what kind of feeling it is evoking.

Reading for the social function of Sepehri and Walcott's work, one needs to first determine who their "nation" is. Indeed, "nation" in the traditional sense of the word, and by extension, nationalistic sentiments do not fit into their poetic language. If we're thinking of their poetic geographies, then, what or whom would constitute *their* nation? How can this nation and its *lingua franca* be mapped? Walcott is suspicious of poetry that "is committed to a

³⁵⁰ T. S. Eliot, *On Poetry and Poets* (New York: Farrar Straus & Giroux, 2009), 8.

³⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 12.

³⁵² *Ibid.*, 9.

straightforward political agenda”³⁵³; the words straightforward and commitment here are key, as I similarly locate Sepehri outside of the “committed” writers of his era, yet demonstrate the manner in which both poets should be (and in Walcott’s case, is indeed) included in a poetics of liberation and revolution that examines these writers’ response to the historical narratives and geopolitics of their locations. Their commitment is of a different kind, to their readers’ *social* rather than political consciousness; this commitment thus becomes difficult to define. I argue that their travels play into this difficulty of definition, and descriptions of Walcott as “Derek-Sans-Terre”³⁵⁴ or Sepehri as hermetic add to this difficulty. Sepehri was famous (or perhaps infamous) for not attending the opening nights of his painting exhibitions in galleries, and he was often socially recluse once he returned to Iranian society. But in fact, he was not a social recluse when he would travel, as is indicated by his social activities in New York. What forms of presence and articulation do his travels afford him that his own country doesn’t? And how does this manifest in his poetry?

In a comparison of Walcott and Sepehri, one would imagine that there’s no immediate shared historical narrative. Indeed, the particularities of Iran and Saint Lucia call for and cultivate modes of writing that are unique to these particularities. Yet, there are aspects of the colonial and imperial interventions in their local histories that are common, that lead to comparable experiences in terms of their cultural, social, and individual identities. Moreover, there are commonalities in the individual experiences of the two writers that make room for a comparative study of their work based on these shared experiences and parallel historical narratives, as well as the manner in which they adapt the available forms, languages, and

³⁵³ Breslin, *Nobody’s Nation*, 7.

³⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 43.

structures to present their unique articulation of anticolonial, political narratives. In particular, I'm interested in their shared moment in New York, their articulations of a New World at the time, and how their poetics got them there; could one pinpoint this location as the center of their travel poetics? More importantly, would they want their poetics to have a geographical center? And what does this imply in terms of their public and readership? Whom are they writing to/for? By reading a selection of their poetry and other forms of writing, I attempt to find answers to these questions.

World Capitals in Sepehri's Imagination

I started my introduction to Sepehri with a letter he had written to a friend when he was residing in New York in 1971. I read this letter as the culmination of his poetic sensibilities, as well as the terminus in the roadmap of his poetic geography. By contextualizing the letter in Sepehri's personal history as well as the socio-political history of Iran at the moment, I will study a number of his poems in this context, including the two long poems, "Seda-ye pa-ye ab [The Sound of Water's Footsteps]" (1964) and "Mosafer [The Traveler]" (1966), and will end with his poem "Address" from his most famous collection, *Hajm-e sabz* [*Green Volume*] (1967).³⁵⁵

The recipient of his letter, Goli Taraghi, is an Iranian female fiction writer who used to frequent Paris before the Islamic Revolution of 1979. Sepehri writes the letter in Persian, with some Latinate words peppered in.³⁵⁶ While his overall stay in New York was a little over a year, in the letter, he facetiously identifies as an American, playfully positioning himself against Iranians and indicating that at one time he/they were French:

When I read your letter, I thought, 'this one wants to become a poet, too. God help us!
But then my mind was put at ease because I remembered that you Iranians are very,

³⁵⁵ Also translated as *The Expanse of Green*.

³⁵⁶ These words are indicated by the use of italics.

what's the word? As we Americans would say, *Sentimental*. And that's why no good poets come out of you. You sit in a cafe in Paris, drink your coffee, speak to your friend, and you're still unhappy. The people of *Persia* call it insolence. But in fact, it's a kind of disease. Like the disease that we would call *Aerophagie* when *we were French* [emphasis added]. But good poetry is related to health. It requires insight and logic. As far as I know, you Iranians are usually affected with *Autoscopie*. And only the people of Kashan have remained immune. You've made me say proper things. You'll hear the even more proper things [I have to say] in New York. Come to New York so you can get to know American culture and me. I'll be your *Guide* and will show you the following things: my own room. A few skyscrapers, one of my paintings, the *UN* building, a couple of lines from my own writings, two bears from the zoo, my own intelligence, a few hippies, and a fashion salon. Then you can return to Iran and claim that you have perceived American culture all in one place.³⁵⁷

It would be quite remiss to interpret Sepehri's letter literally. While it would seem that he's effectively speaking to his Iranian friend from an elitist stance, a more nuanced reading of the letter invalidates such an impression. Through his facetious positioning of himself as a newly-minted American against his fellow Iranians, he cleverly exposes some of the shortcomings of critiques levelled against himself as a poet removed from his people and his own time. Yet there are also elements in his letter that should be interpreted straightforwardly, specifically his critique about the situation of poetry in Iran.

The letter must be read with a view of his well-known humorous disposition—a disposition that allowed him to critique certain modes of thought both in Iran and abroad, namely, the positioning of East against West. In the letter, as Sepehri takes on the affect of an American situating himself against Iranians, he simultaneously critiques the affect of the French bourgeoisie taken on by Iranian intellectuals. At the same time, in this humor (and with a study of some of his other letters written during that same period of residence in New York City), one can locate the importance he places on studying what was regarded as Western literature (without becoming plagued by it) and using the possibilities, aesthetic and otherwise, that they

³⁵⁷ Sepehri, *...I Am Still Traveling*, 70.

offer—possibilities that can be traced in his own poetry.

In the very first lines of the letter, we thus have a multiplicity of places. In fact, we have a triangulation of Iran, the US, and France (or Paris, to be more precise), along with the qualities that each of these nation-states seemingly generate, in absolute terms, in their citizens. In this triangulation, he is posing as an American citizen-subject, while his friend, Goli, is the Iranian citizen-subject. A few lines later, his choice to write “Persia” in Latin script rather than in Persian, and more importantly, calling it “Persia” instead of Iran, makes his American affect complete.³⁵⁸ From the outset, then, he's creating a distance between himself and “Goli.” Taraghi was not alone in frequenting Paris. Sepehri himself spent two years in Paris, where he enrolled in *École nationale supérieure des beaux-arts* [National School of Fine Arts] to learn lithography.³⁵⁹ In fact, it was quite common for Iranians to study in Paris. And as he indicates in the letter, he seems to consider Iranians to have been French at some point.

On July 8, 1962, *Kayhan International* published a barely noticeable news article in a tiny column, next to a large advertisement to fly with Lufthansa, with the slogan “Any time is travel time to Germany” and above the broadcasting information and schedule for BBC’s Persian radio program; the news article was titled “French school for Iran.” It was about a partnership between the Ministry of Education and Mission Lalique, “a non-religious French cultural and educational organization,” to open a French school in Tehran.³⁶⁰ The outflow of students to

³⁵⁸ In 1935, Iran’s anglicized name of Persia was officially changed to Iran via an official communication by the Foreign Ministry, but this led to much confusion about the country’s origins, and many English-speaking countries were slow in using the new name. In 1959, another official communication by the Foreign Ministry attempted to remedy the situation by allowing both designations to be used. See, Ehsan Yarshater, “Communication,” in *Iranian Studies*, 22, no.1 (1989): 62-65, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4310640>.

³⁵⁹ Sarshar, “Sohrab Sepehri.”

³⁶⁰ “French School for Iran,” *Kayhan International*, July 8, 1962, 3.

France had become so endemic that, according to the report, “A Ministry source told our reporter that the school is designed to discourage those students who currently go to France for a French secondary education from doing so. The . . . school will provide them with a French education here in Tehran.”³⁶¹ The news article, positioned at the juncture between the 1953 US-backed coup d’état in Iran and Sepehri’s stay in New York City, provides insight into the context in which Sepehri was producing his most significant and groundbreaking poetry. Furthermore, the article was published roughly around the time as Al-e Ahmad’s *Gharbzadegi*. Sepehri wrote during the tumultuous decades before the Islamic revolution in Iran, concurrent with global decolonizing movements; and at a time when many of his contemporaries would write ostensibly socio-political poems protesting the status quo, Sepehri was accused of being an “aristocratic Buddha-boy.”³⁶² About eight months later, the same daily newspaper published the work of Sepehri (among translations of other contemporary Iranian poetry), with an introduction and translations by Karim Emami, titled “New horizons in Persian poetry.”³⁶³ It is worth making a short detour here, then, to think about the information that this article, coupled with its encompassing discourse and context, presents—especially when one considers that this news article is published in a venue that addressed English-speaking audiences in Iran and also introduced them to aspects of contemporary Persian thought and culture. At the same time, an anti-Western spirit was building in the country—a spirit that Al-e Ahmad captured and summarily articulated in his book—and this spirit was completely at odds with advertisements to fly to Germany and the British Broadcasting Corporation’s programs.

³⁶¹ Ibid.

³⁶² Reza Baraheni, *Gold in Copper* [in Persian] (Tehran: Zaman Publications, 1965), 511.

³⁶³ “New Horizons in Persian Poetry,” *Kayhan International*, March 20, 1963, 11.

A French education had always been highly coveted in modern Iran (and even in pre-modern Iran, during the Qajar dynasty [1794-1925]). In his towering biography of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, *The Shah*, Abbas Milani writes about Reza Shah, the first Pahlavi king, sending his son Mohammad Reza, the crown prince to Switzerland for his education in the early 1930s: “French was in those days still one of the coveted signs of distinction for the country’s status-obsessed elite. In the years before the Second World War, French was for the Persian elite still the lingua franca of power and culture.”³⁶⁴ And this status of French continued well into the 1960s. Divorcing French education from French political thought in the guise of state-sponsored schooling could help Mohammad Reza Shah’s government in controlling the output of this education, for many Iranians who returned to the country after receiving education in primarily European countries would prove to be crucial in the subversive political trajectory of the country. As mentioned in my introduction, the leader of the pivotal Tudeh Party was the European-educated Iraj Iskandari. Mossadeq was educated in France (and Switzerland)³⁶⁵ and was part of a political faction called the Iran Party in the 1940s, whose leaders, with a few exceptions, were educated at the Universities of Berlin, Paris, and Geneva. One of the exceptions to this rule had received his education at a mission school in Tehran, signaling the fact that indeed all of the party leaders had “Western” educations, acquired either at home or abroad. The Iran Party is described as having “advocated a diluted form of French socialism.”³⁶⁶ The Iran Party, in turn, had developed out of an Engineer’s Association created in October 1941, the origins of which

³⁶⁴ Milani, *The Shah*, 42.

³⁶⁵ “Mossadeq, Mohammad,” in *Encyclopedia of Nationalism: Leaders, Movements, and Concepts*, ed. Alexander J. Motyl (Elsevier Science & Technology, 2000).
http://ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/login?qurl=https%3A%2F%2Fsearch.credoreference.com%2Fcontent%2Fentry%2Festnational%2Fmossadeq_mohammad%2F0%3FinstitutionId%3D1878.

³⁶⁶ Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions*, 190.

clarify where this “diluted form of French socialism” stemmed from. Mehdi Bazargan, a founding member of both the association and the party, later reminisced, “while studying in Europe during the 1930s, we marveled at the sight of free student associations, free religious fraternities, and free political parties. In Iran, the regime had destroyed all independent organizations. Consequently, as soon as the opportunity presented itself in 1941, we formed the Engineer’s Association.”³⁶⁷

Among Sepehri’s generation, Paris in particular was a center for Iranian intellectuals. One of Sepehri’s contemporaries, Daryush Shayegan, who wrote an introduction for and helped publish a collection of Sepehri’s poetry in French, writes, “In my childhood, the name of Paris resonated an unattainable distance for me. In my land, they referred to Paris as “the bride of cities.” But I didn’t know anyone who could draw a clear picture of this city.”³⁶⁸ Shayegan succinctly encapsulates the aura of intrigue and grandeur that Paris had in the Iranian imagination and how this aura remained precisely that: an unclear, inarticulable impression left on the mind. It is possible to connect the Iranian intellectual’s mode of thinking about Paris to Casanova’s argument about the city as “the universal republic of letters”; she describes Paris as

the capital of a republic having neither borders nor boundaries, a universal homeland exempt from all professions of patriotism, a kingdom of literature set up in opposition to the ordinary laws of states, a transnational realm whose sole imperatives are those of art and literature...Paris therefore became the capital of those who proclaimed themselves to be stateless and above political laws: in a word, artists.³⁶⁹

Casanova claims that these qualities arise out of the “apparently antithetical properties” of being

³⁶⁷ Ibid., 188.

³⁶⁸ Daryush Shayegan, *In Search of Lost Spaces* [in Persian] (Tehran: Forouzan Publications, 2013), 111.

³⁶⁹ Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2004), 29.

“the intellectual capital of the world...and... the source of political democracy.”³⁷⁰ Paris’s quality of statelessness and lack of borders and boundaries could thus be connected to the status of the intellectual’s mind in Paris. In other words, those who claim not to belong to any nation-state, could also develop a statelessness as it pertains to their minds. Paris becomes “an internal mood,” to cite Shayegan once again, who, echoing Walter Benjamin’s concept of *flâneur*, writes: “It’s a mental mood that is created by the passing of years, by aimless excursions, by completely senseless strolls, sensitivity to light and to old, worn out stones.”³⁷¹ And it would seem that it is precisely this mode of presence in Paris and the literary creations it leads to that Sepehri is critiquing. Sepehri decenters Paris in the Iranian intellectual imagination by advocating for excursions that are not aimless—excursions of the type that can be seen in “Address.” The title of the poem itself signifies a meaningful search. But before getting to the poem, it’s important to clarify that Sepehri is not writing against Paris itself, but rather the effect that it has on the Iranian intellectual’s imagination.

Through a critique of the Iranian intellectuals sitting in cafes in Paris, he is offering a critique of contemporary Persian poetry. What others would perhaps regard as the intellectuals’ insolence and sense of despondency, he calls a disease; *aerophagie* or aerophagia is “excessive swallowing of air ... in times of stress”³⁷²—some definitions even include the term “hysteria.”³⁷³ His naming of the disease in French and more importantly, attributing it to a time when they

³⁷⁰ Ibid., 23.

³⁷¹ Shayegan, *In Search*, 113.

³⁷² *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “aerophagy (*n.*),” accessed June 28, 2018, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/3148?redirectedFrom=aerophagia#eid9706562>.

³⁷³ *Merriam-Webster*, s.v. “aerophagia (*n.*),” accessed June 28, 2018, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/medical/aerophagia>.

were considered (or considered themselves) French, distances him from those who were looking for either literary or political inspiration in Paris, France, and Europe. The disease of swallowing too much air due to anxiety leaves one sick and full, filled with nothing, and this keeps one from writing good poetry. In another letter written from New York later that same year to a different friend, he compares the possibility of creating literature and art in the US with Europe:

American poetry, whatever it may be, has an expansive field. And gives one courage. What is impressive in art here is distance, space. In the works here, there is room for movement and breathing. Critique comes later... We haven't been raised well. Europe has put us in a trance. We've had to look a certain way to [be able to] see what is familiar. Before entering the museum, we've looked at Vermeer along the way... It's hard to avoid the sweet flutters that certain aspects of Western civilization have awakened in us. But here, one must become disburdened. One must reach a certain nakedness and begin... I haven't come here for the smell of democracy.³⁷⁴

The weight of European civilization, modernism, and democracy could, therefore, lead to the disease of aerophagia, and it is indeed what burdens the poet and does not allow for original creation. Sepehri moves away from the European modes of aesthetic training toward the nakedness and possibility of the New World. It is not the geographical location of America that is important; rather it is what the possibilities of its *space* offer, and that is *space itself*. Similarly, it not simply Europe that is the problem. The disease associated with being Iranian that, he's claimed in the first letter, keeps one from writing good poetry, is autoscopy—literally, self-watching. More specifically, the mental illness of autoscopy is “the visualization or enhanced awareness of one's own internal organs.”³⁷⁵ In this case, therefore, the Iranian writer presumably has an out of body experience, as if witnessing what is going on inside one's body from outside one's body. If this is a disease that is specific to Iranians, it would seem that Sepehri is

³⁷⁴ Sepehri, *...I Am Still Traveling*, 66.

³⁷⁵ *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “autoscopy (*n.*),” accessed June 28, 2018, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/250021?redirectedFrom=autoscopy#eid>.

suggesting that in order to correct this “enhanced awareness” of one's internal organs, of the insides of one's own country, one needs to have some distance. His travels and his readings give him this distance. The people of Kashan, he claims (tongue-in-cheek), are immune from this disease. For, being from Kashan himself, Sepehri is able to move outward, while remaining cognizant of his origins. Furthermore, by articulating these shortcomings using the language of disease, one could argue that he is offering his own version of the discourse that Al-e Ahmad created in *Gharbzadegi*. In the first chapter titled “Diagnosing an Illness,” Al-e Ahmad defines *gharbzadegi* as a disease acting as “an accident from without, spreading in an environment rendered susceptible to it.”³⁷⁶ Sepehri, by referring to the Iranian being afflicted with autoscopy, challenges this diagnosis of the illness as “an accident from without.” In fact, it is the Iranian’s deliberate fixation on the insides that has left the mind of the Iranian subject diseased. Sepehri’s prescription for this disease is purposeful movement that will lead to a revolution in thought. And while the movement itself is purposeful, the end location of the movement is not always clear, nor is it important.

Sepehri’s Perpetual Traveler

Sepehri’s immunity to this Iranian affliction as a result of purposeful movement is something that he had demonstrated seven years earlier in his partly autobiographical poem titled “Seda-ye Pa-ye Ab [The Sound of Water’s Footsteps]”—in a year when his travels had taken him to India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. Sepehri starts the poem “The Sound of Water’s Footsteps” with the line “I am from Kashan”³⁷⁷ and he repeats this line several times throughout the poem, at the beginning of certain stanzas, when he wants to provide the reader with information that can be

³⁷⁶ Al-e Ahmad, *Occidentosis*, 27.

³⁷⁷ Sohrab Sepehri, *Eight Books* [in Persian] (Tehran: Tahouri Publications, 1996), 271.

crucial to understanding him. One of the things that is noticeable about his anaphoric use of this phrase is that he never uses the word “Iran.” He never mentions his country, thus taking the reader to a very specific locale, but not a nation. In one of the stanzas that begins with “I am from Kashan,” he continues: “My lineage might be traced/ to a plant in India, an earthenware from the soil of ‘Silk’³⁷⁸./ My lineage might be traced, to a whore in Bukhara.”³⁷⁹ This stanza further strengthens the notion that he does not wish to fixate on his nationality. More importantly, he seems to dispense with the idea of nationality altogether and is stressing the connection he feels not only to the earth but also to other neighboring countries, pointing out the accidental nature as well as triviality of one’s birthplace and thus nationality. By mentioning the whore in Bukhara, he also disregards the chauvinism that is connected to lineage and the importance of the legitimacy of one’s parentage—paternal parentage in particular. Being cognizant of one’s origins, in Sepehri’s case, is not articulated in the form of a nationalist, ethnic, or racial collective. He thus actively subverts the claims that Al-e Ahmad makes in *Gharbzadegi*:

We have retreated into the shell of national state, drawn aside from our neighbors behind fortifications more extended and massive than the Great Wall of China, severed our ties with Iraqi, Afghani, Pakistani, and Russian, and grown ignorant of our neighbors...If the Afghan and I, united in our religion, language, and racial stock, know nothing of each other or if to travel to Iraq or India is harder than to penetrate the Iron Curtain, it is because we are within the sphere of influence of one corporation and the Afghan, in that of another. In such an age, the more closed the national borders, the more amplified the traditions of race.”³⁸⁰

This is not to say that there is no merit to Al-e Ahmad’s claims. To reiterate Dabashi’s statement about this groundbreaking text, he did indeed outline the global structures of power—what was

³⁷⁸ A hill in Kashan.

³⁷⁹ Ibid., 274.

³⁸⁰ Al-e Ahmad, 74-5.

then formulated as East versus West and now is presented as the Global South versus North—and the manner in which these structures dictated (or at the very least, complicated) the cultural, political, and social formations and identities of the Eastern nations. Sepehri, however, refuses to engage with this binary opposition. Both in his travels and readings, he refused to discriminate. In addition to traveling to his neighboring countries, he spent a good deal of time in Japan as well and translated Japanese and Chinese poetry into Persian. As mentioned earlier, he studied wood-block printing while in Tokyo, and he explains the reasons for this in a letter written while there: “It’s good to become knowledgeable of this technique in order to understand their historic art. For, as you know, gravure makes up the majority of their artwork. I believe there is nothing more meaningless than looking at museums, however, I’ve seen the museums here.”³⁸¹ Sepehri is never a passive recipient of art history (or any form of history, for that matter). He actively learns and engages with the cultural history of the places he visits. However, not having a reading knowledge of Japanese, he reads French translations of Japanese poetry and drama, and translates Japanese poetry from English into Persian. In the same letter, he writes,

Should I write what I do here? I paint, read books, write “stuff” and learn gravure on wood (*Wood Block Print*)³⁸²... I read the French translations of Japanese poetry that I can find here. And other Japanese writers, like [Yasunari] Kawabata whose “Snow Country” has been published by *Albin Michel*. Noh’s plays and the careful study by *Noel Peri* of Japanese lyrical drama [;] Japanese history, and a bit of *Taoïsme* and *Bouddhisme*. Some of these books have been published in Japan, some in France and some in Saigon. I’m currently reading a book titled *Présent du Bouddhisme* which is around two kilos. You see how “knowledge” is quickly increasing. One must read heavy books so to not be equaled by anyone. ³⁸³

There are several points to be made about this letter and what its implications are for Sepehri's

³⁸¹ Sepehri, ... *I Am Still Traveling*, 81.

³⁸² He uses the term “gravure” and then translates it into English in parenthesis for his friend.

³⁸³ *Ibid.*

reading and traveling practices—practices that present themselves in “The Sound of Water’s Footsteps” four years later. Five years before this trip, Sepehri had already published Persian translations of Japanese poetry (from English) in a leading literary magazine of the time, *Sokhan*. He thus clearly demonstrates his care for a deeper level of engagement with Japanese cultural productions by traveling to Japan, learning the fundamentals of its artistic and religious practices. For Sepehri, traveling is not complete without an active participation in this historical landscape of the country he is visiting. His participation includes a persistent productivity on his own part, by continuing to paint and write “stuff”; one could read this characterization of his writing as an indication of his humility (which was indeed a characteristic for which he was well-known) as well as a refusal to categorize the forms of writing he was undertaking at the time. The aforementioned humility is presented humorously in his depiction of knowledge and what it entails. He never flaunts the expansive knowledge that he’s gained by his extensive readings, even though, as Shayegan writes fittingly, “Contrary to most of our contemporary poets, Sepehri has a world culture. He has read all the contemporary poets of the world, American, European, Latin American and Asian.”³⁸⁴ Moreover, for Sepehri, the act of reading large books and going to museums does not constitute knowledge *sui generis*, if at all. Sepehri’s world culture that Shayegan refers to does not merely emerge from his readings. Rather, by being a careful reader of the landscapes he was visiting, including the people who inhabited those landscapes, he actively resists a superficial knowledge of them.

What is most striking about the Japanese knowledge that Sepehri is gaining is that he receives it via French. This intermediary form of reading and reception is not limited to Japanese. While in Tokyo, in another letter he asks a friend to send him Andre Gide’s French

³⁸⁴ Shayegan, *In Search*, 180.

translation of Rabindranath Tagore’s poetry, titled “*L’offrant de Lyrique*.”³⁸⁵ On his way back to Iran from Japan, “he stops in India to see Agra and the Taj Mahal.”³⁸⁶ Sepehri’s travels, therefore, follow his act of reading (and in many cases, translating) the poetry of the places he travels to. One could ask whether his act of reading and receiving many of these literary productions through their translation in a “Western” language would in fact replicate the skewed readings of these locations, and whether it ultimately corroborates Al-e Ahmad’s claim about the Iranian’s knowledge of other countries in Asia. Yet, by mentioning the locations in which these books were published, Sepehri is demonstrating an acute awareness of and investment in these books’ production centers—he takes care to remain informed of where knowledge is produced, as he is cognizant of relations of power that determine knowledge production. A great element of his poetics is overturning these power relations and translation plays a role in this act of upending.

The landscapes that Sepehri sees, moreover, are primeval and not arbitrarily divided into nation-states. In “The Sound of Water’s Footsteps” written after these travels, he instead prefers to speak of an earth that encompasses all the knowledge he believes to be useful and important:

The whole earth could be seen:
Order was on the march in the Ionian alleys.
An owl was warbling in the Hanging Gardens.
Winds were blowing eastward straws of history
at Khyber Pass.
A boat was carrying flowers on the still waters
of Lake Negueen.³⁸⁷
And a lamp shone eternally on every street corner

³⁸⁵ He misspells this—the correct spelling is “L’Offrande lyrique”.

³⁸⁶ Sepehri, *Eight Books*, 17-20.

³⁸⁷ Also spelled “Nigeen” or “Nageen”.

at Banaras.³⁸⁸

This comprehensive view of what, traditionally speaking, constitutes Eastern and Western civilization, is given from an airplane. A few pages earlier, he's speaking of the forms of transportation that he's seen, including a mule, a camel, trains, and a mystic. I include mystic in this category since for Sepehri, mysticism is a mode of transport that should be included among the more traditional forms of travel. The fact that each of these modes of transport are meant to *carry* something are stressed in his poem: "I saw a mule laden with Composition. / I saw a camel laden with empty baskets of Famous Sayings / I saw a mystic laden with *tanana ha ya hu*."³⁸⁹ In his notes to his translation of this poem, Karim Emami explains this latter phrase: "One of the phrases chanted by Persian mystics in the course of their rituals. The first two words, even though rhythmic, are apparently made up of meaningless syllables. The last two words, *ya hu*, mean "O God." Travel for Sepehri, then, signifies a movement that allows the traveler, along with that which he carries, to break out of strict categories. At times the traveler's baggage may be nonsensical or meaningless, but if the traveler is able to create his own meaning out of the seemingly meaningless, he can move towards his destination on his own terms. This argument becomes more meaningful when one considers the French translation, approved by (and to some extent, written by) Sepehri himself. Emami cites the French translation of the above-mentioned line, "*Un mystique qui traînait dans sa besace le nom de Dieu absent* [a mystic who, in his wallet, drags the name of an absent God]."³⁹⁰ This translation is from the anthology of Sepehri's

³⁸⁸ Karim Emami and Sepehri, Sohrab. "Water's Footsteps: A Poem," *Iranian Studies*, Vol. 15, no. 1/4, Literature and Society in Iran. (1982), 104 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4310383>.

³⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 101.

³⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 114.

poetry for which Shayegan wrote an introduction and helped publish, titled *Oasis d'éméraude* (1982). While in a hospital bed in London battling cancer, Sepehri read the introduction Shayegan had sent him for approval and commented, “This is the best and most accurate account of my work ever written.”³⁹¹ This collection, Shayegan writes, was the result of a “friendly collaboration” between the two, with Sepehri actively involved in the translation due to his fluency in French, thus “opening a lot of the knots [in meaning]” for Shayegan: “In some cases, I asked the poet to rewrite in French a poem he had written in Persian, or to change some of the sections in order to make it conform to the spirit of the French language.”³⁹² Furthermore, about this collection, Emami writes, “Because of the light that Mr. Shayegan's interpretations throw on the intentions of the poet at some key junctures, his French version deserves to be directly translated into English.”³⁹³ Momentarily setting aside the significance of translation for Sepehri (which I shall write more about when discussing the “The Traveler”), these lines confirm that the French translation of this line, while apparently quite different from the original, in fact carries an important clarification about the mystic. The mystic is, quite literally, carrying the name of God in his pocket, thus giving the characteristic transcendence of mystical practices a material quality. Sepehri thus concretizes the abstract, bringing them down from the ethereal to the earthly. In the aforementioned introduction to his French anthology, Shayegan writes, “Sepehri is too involved with his time to be a mystic in the traditional sense of the word.”³⁹⁴ Thinking about the travels of the mystic in more earthly terms, then, provide the reader with insight into the

³⁹¹ Paridokht Sepehri, *Sohrab, the Migrating Bird* [in Persian] (Tehran: Tahuri Publications, 1997), 98.

³⁹² Shayegan, *In Search*, 195.

³⁹³ Emami and Sepehri, 114.

³⁹⁴ Shayegan, *In Search*, 185.

revolutionary transcendence that Sepehri is advocating in terms of the travels that he or his poetic personas undertake.

It is not until the second, long poem written after this first series of travels, that is “The Traveler,” when travel is explicitly the concern of the poet. Indeed, “The Sound of Water’s Footsteps” locates Sepehri the poet along with his poetic persona within his hometown of Kashan and is preoccupied with the particularity of that location and the people it contains—specifically, his family. He writes of his father’s death and dedicates the poem to “the silent nights of his mother!”³⁹⁵ Yet, even with this specificity of location and filial connections, he writes of what he has seen on earth at large. Some of these forms of seeing include *seeing* travel: “I saw a train, carrying light. / I saw a train, carrying jurisprudence and how heavy it traveled. / I saw a train, it was carrying politics (and how empty it traveled).”³⁹⁶ While locating himself in Kashan, the town where people are not affected with autoscopy, his distance from the traveling trains allow him to witness the problematic nature of some of their cargo. In contrast to the mystic who carries with him a rhythmic call to God—a call that could fit in one’s wallet—the study of God’s words to write and interpret law is a heavy load. Then there is politics, which is vacuous and serves no purpose. In these lines he, quite explicitly, makes his feelings about the critiques against his work known—critiques that condemned the lack of political substance in his work. Sepehri revolutionized both contemporary painting and poetry, primarily through the *formal* characteristics of his work; yet, in the process, he never conceded to government censors. If he was asked to change something in his work that he felt would alter the content, he would refrain from publishing it altogether. In other words, he cleverly critiqued the social conditions of

³⁹⁵ Sepehri, *Eight Books*, 269.

³⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 279.

the country without having to compromise the integrity of his work. For instance, in this same poem, in a stanza about all the murders that have taken place on earth, he writes about “the murder of a depressed poet by winter flower.”³⁹⁷ The original line he had written was “the murder of a depressed poet by a red rose.” When his complete poetry collection, *Eight Books*, was set to be published in 1976, the censors were concerned that this line (written in 1964) would summon for the readers the 1974 execution of the Communist poet, Khosrow Golsorkhi, whose last name literally translates to “red rose.” In this particular case, Sepehri didn’t care about the change, since it didn’t change the meaning of the poem for him—he couldn’t have been referring to a poet’s execution ten years before it took place. He scoffed at the ignorance of the censors, remarking that, if they had known better, they would realize that the poem “Behind the Seas” is more problematic.³⁹⁸ The first stanza of the aforementioned poem from the *Green Volume* collection reads, “I shall make a boat [*ghayeghi khaham sakht*]. / I shall launch it into water. / I’ll go far away from this foreign soil / where this is no one who’ll wake / the heroes in the forest of love.”³⁹⁹ Throughout the poem, he repeats the line “there is a city behind the seas,” and he ends the poem with “There is a city behind the seas! / One should make a boat [*ghayeghi bayad sakht*].”⁴⁰⁰

In order to understand how Sepehri got here, we must return to the lines in “The Sound of Water’s Footsteps” where “The whole earth could be seen.”⁴⁰¹ As mentioned earlier, these views

³⁹⁷ Ibid., 284.

³⁹⁸ Paridokht Sepehri, *Sohrab*, 98-9.

³⁹⁹ Sepehri, *Eight Books*, 362-3.

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid, 365.

⁴⁰¹ See note 485.

are from an airplane; a few lines earlier, immediately after seeing the trains, Sepehri sees "...an airplane from which, at that altitude of several thousand feet, / The soil could be seen through the window:"⁴⁰² Whereas earlier Sepehri or his poetic persona (which, given the intensely autobiographical nature of his poem, can be conflated) was on the ground, watching the trains, his point of view abruptly shifts, and after the colon, he describes all that he sees from inside the airplane. He uses the term "soil" repeatedly throughout his work. On the one hand, it allows him to signal, and simultaneously subvert, the sentimental value that the soil of one's homeland has. In "Behind the Seas" this soil has become "foreign," prompting him to build a boat and sail to the city behind the seas. On the other hand, and perhaps more importantly for Sepehri, the soil signals, to use Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's model of the planet in *Death of a Discipline*, "undivided 'natural' space."⁴⁰³ It is from that vantage point that he simultaneously sees the "Ionian alleys" and "Hanging Gardens" as well as the "Khyber Pass" and "Lake Negueen." And it is from this same vantage point, in the airplane, that he sees his mother as well: "Down below / Mother was washing tea glasses in the memory of the Big River."⁴⁰⁴ In his letter from Tokyo to his friend, he writes, "The airplane was above the *soil of Buddha* when I suddenly thought of Safi Ali Shah Street [in downtown Tehran] [emphasis added]."⁴⁰⁵ Sepehri's poetic geography disregards the absolutism of geopolitics and instead, is concerned with the natural divisions of the earth, along with the humanistic foundations that defined a location before the invention of nation-states. If the jet in Walcott's "The Fortunate Traveller" serves as "a metaphor for power,

⁴⁰² Emami and Sepehri, "Water's Footsteps," 101.

⁴⁰³ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 85.

⁴⁰⁴ Emami and Sepehri, "Water's Footsteps," 102.

⁴⁰⁵ Sepehri, *...I'm Still Traveling*, 82.

privilege, and invisibility”⁴⁰⁶ (a point that will be elaborated in the subsequent section of this chapter), the view from the airplane in Sepehri’s poem is drastically different. The true comparativist that Spivak is advocating for in the aforementioned *Death of a Discipline* can be seen in Sepehri’s poetic persona, whom, while having an expansive view of the earth, sees his mother washing dishes in what is left of a river. A view of the “soil of Buddha” can take him to a specific alley in Tehran. Rather than focusing on “differentiated political space,”⁴⁰⁷ Sepehri writes of a city that is undifferentiated, yet not universal:

*The city could be seen:
Geometric growth of cement, steel, stone.
Pigeonless roofs of a hundred buses.
A florist putting his flowers up for sale.
A poet tying up a hammock between two lilac trees.
A boy throwing rocks at the school wall.
A child spitting an apricot stone onto his father’s faded prayer rug.
And a goat drinking from the Caspian Sea on a map.*⁴⁰⁸ [emphasis added]

Using the article “the” indicates the specificity of the city he’s writing about; yet, the nonspecific qualities that mark this city make the task of identifying this city difficult. Sepehri, then, doesn’t want this city to be identified as a specific locale. Suffice it for the reader to know that this city is industrialized, interspersed with nature, has poets and defiant children, and its maps are not abstractions of geopolitical relations. Instead, their maps serve the tangible purpose of providing water to a goat.

Given that he’s writing from the specificity of Kashan, repeatedly emphasizes the fact that he is “from Kashan,” and historically, returns to Kashan (the place he called home) again

⁴⁰⁶ Grey quoted in Marit J. MacArthur, “One World? The Poetics of Passenger Flight and the Perception of the Global,” *PMLA* 127, no. 2 (2012): 276. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41616815>.

⁴⁰⁷ Spivak, *Death*, 85.

⁴⁰⁸ Emami and Sepehri, “Water’s Footsteps,” 102.

and again after his travels, one wonders whether the city he's describing could be, in fact, Kashan. In the lines immediately following the aerial view of "Eastern" and "Western" civilizations,⁴⁰⁹ he writes of how he has seen many peoples and cities and valleys and mountains, water and soil, and that he's seen all of these both in darkness and in light.⁴¹⁰ He thus zooms in on the particularities of these civilizations and reminds the reader that he has seen them, literally, both in day and night, and figuratively, perhaps, at their best and worst. There is not merely order in ancient Greece or idyllic beauty in the Hanging Gardens or the lakes and mountains of the East. It is precisely at this juncture that Sepehri throws the reader off, for even though he's mentioned throughout this poem that he is from Kashan, he abruptly writes:

I am from Kashan, but
my city is not Kashan.
My city is lost.
With sufferance, with fever, I
have built a home on the other side of the night.⁴¹¹

The identity of Sepehri's poetic persona shifts unexpectedly, for while he is from Kashan, he does not belong there. Although these lines, coupled with Sepehri's frequent travels and periods of living outside the country, could indicate a tendency to suggest nomadism as a way out of the fraught socio-economic and political situation in his home country, the argument isn't that Sepehri is a citizen of the world—he is not speaking of a universalism that he wants to be a part of. Sepehri has been forced to build his own home at a dearly cost (note that at this point, he isn't talking about a new city or building one for that matter—he has merely built a home), but there is promise in this new home that has been built "on the other side of the night." The culmination

⁴⁰⁹ see note 485.

⁴¹⁰ Sepehri, *Eight Books*, 285.

⁴¹¹ *Ibid.*, 285-6.

of this promise comes a couple of pages later:

Wherever I'll be, I'll be,
the sky is mine.
Window, thought, air, love, earth is mine.
What does it matter
if sometimes mushrooms of loneliness grow? ⁴¹²

Ultimately it would seem that it doesn't matter where that city is located or where he ends up. So, once again, our perception of his locale and the place where he belongs shifts as he confirms that his location is not important. He claims ownership of crucial elements, no matter where he is. But once again, there is a cost, as he understands that he may be alone in this worldview, for nativism or nationalist sentiments are clearly not part of it. In a letter he writes from New York to another friend, he writes that "Iran has good mothers, and delicious stews, and bad intellectuals, and pleasant valleys."⁴¹³ These lines are followed by three lines of ellipses, and in the middle of the third line he writes, "and that's it," followed by his signature on the next line, "Sohrab," lest there be any confusion about the speaker of these sentiments. A superficial reading of Sepehri's statement without acknowledging his oeuvre would lead to the interpretation that Sepehri is reducing the country to these good and bad elements, emptying it of any further significance, and (perhaps problematically) preferring the location he's writing the letter from. In his poetic geography, Iran is never mentioned, neither demonized nor glorified; the only specific Iranian location that comes up in his poetry is Kashan, his hometown. Iran as a geopolitical entity, as a nation-state, is never his concern. What he provides here are descriptions that fall in the realm of the everyday human, thinking more specifically about the sociological rather than the political. Therefore, the things he seemingly praises or censures about Iran in fact

⁴¹² Ibid., 291.

⁴¹³ Leili Golestan, *Sohrab Sepehri: Poet-Painter* [in Persian] (Tehran: Amir Kabir Publications, 1980), 18.

have nothing to do with the country as an entity with power.

Neither is organized religion presented as a galvanizing force for political action. When Muslims pray, they all pray towards Qibla, and this is one symbolic manner in which they are signaling their unity as a religious group. Sepehri's poetic persona, however, while maintaining that he is a Muslim, presents another form in which his fellow Muslims could signal their unity:

I am a Muslim.
My Qibla is a red rose.
My prayer-mat a stream, my turbah,⁴¹⁴ light.
The valley my *Sajjadah*.⁴¹⁵
I perform my ablutions with the beating⁴¹⁶ of windows.⁴¹⁷

Once again, elements of the earth are closely connected to his sense of identity, signaling not only his lineage but also the religious rituals that he performs. In this sense, anyone could be a Muslim, as long as they pray to a red rose. The rigidity of religious teachings thus evaporates as Sepehri finds new ways of formulating a collective movement—ways that are connected to the shared space of the Earth. Moreover, instead of indicating *adhan*, the call to prayer, in performing his ablutions as well as the water that is necessary to perform this ablution and start one's prayer, he writes of windows with beating hearts. Windows as objects through which one can see the outside (or, inversely, peer inside) perform the task of ridding the praying subject of his impurities, preparing him for the act of worship. When he later writes of the Iranians afflicted with autoscopy, one can see that he's presented the cure for this disease years earlier in his poetics; namely, that the gateway to one soul isn't a ritualized form of purification, but an act of

⁴¹⁴ A piece of molded soil or clay that many Muslims put their forehead on when they prostrate during prayer.

⁴¹⁵ *Sajjadah* is the same as prayer mat, although in the first instance Sepehri chooses to use the Persian equivalent of the word, as opposed to the Arabic which is *Sajjadah*.

⁴¹⁶ As in the beating of a heart.

⁴¹⁷ Sepehri, *Eight Books*, 272.

transportation through a seemingly prosaic object for seeing. Later in this same poem, he writes, “Eyes must be washed, to see things in a different way.”⁴¹⁸ It is, therefore, in the inconspicuous and innocuous that we can locate Sepehri’s revolutionary language. For him, that is how lasting change can come about.

While finding power in the inconspicuous is a constant across his work, there is a clear shift between the poetic persona of 1964 (who has to build his own home, because his city is lost) and the poetic persona of 1967 (who, in “Behind the Seas,” wants to build a boat to reach the city “behind the seas,” instead of building a home “on the other side of the night”). In 1965, a year after “The Sound of Water’s Footsteps” was published in a magazine, Sepehri traveled to France, Spain, The Netherlands, Italy and Austria, and a year later, published another long poem titled “Mosafer [The Traveler].” About this poem, Dabashi writes, “Our most saintly poet, Sohrab Sepehri, had traveled around the world and written a poem that taught us the topography of our humanity at large, and prepared us for the swift magic of the Japanese haiku and the liberating joy of Latin American Realism.”⁴¹⁹ This small couplet effectively encapsulates Dabashi’s remark: “I come from conversing with the sunlight, / where is the shade?”⁴²⁰ These two lines come after he’s spent a great many lines and pages describing the places his poetic persona has visited, detailing what he has seen; for example, “the whole surface of the trip was suffocated with the chaos of industry, and was black, and smelled like oil”, or “great poets, / prayed to the migrating leaves” (318). On this journey, the traveler thus witnesses the ugliness that modernity has brought with itself and the reality of industrialization on the one hand, and the

⁴¹⁸ Emami and Sohrab. “Water’s Footsteps,” 108.

⁴¹⁹ Hamid Dabashi, *Iran: A People Interrupted* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2007), 135.

⁴²⁰ Sepehri, *Eight Books*, 319. Subsequent references will be indicated parenthetically in the text.

value of literary production that stems from a preoccupation with movement and a discourse that extends beyond the borders of one's home. When the narrator comes from conversing with the sunlight, perhaps he wants to take solace in the shade, or perhaps he wants to inform the shade about its "other." Either way, Sepehri is a master of conjoining antithetical elements and concepts so smoothly and eloquently that their conspicuously antithetical relationship is readily negated, or at least disregarded. In other words, they no longer seem antithetical, for the relationship as Sepehri presents it is not one of oppositions.

But before studying particular stanzas, it's crucial to point out that Sepehri's traveler is not actively traveling in the poem. Rather, he has arrived at his destination, at a location that is, for all intents and purposes, not home: "The traveler exited / the bus: / "What a clear sky!" / and he was taken down the stretch of the alley of foreignness" (304).⁴²¹ Here, the poetic persona is neither watching travel take place nor does he have an aerial, planetary view from the airplane. Sepehri's traveler in this poem is grounded, having just dismounted a bus—a more communal (and cheaper) form of travel compared to trains and airplanes. What's more, the traveler is *taken* down this alley by the stretch of the alley itself, indicating that he does not feign a knowledge of this location and is open to learning from the location on its own terms. When the traveler meets his host, his first utterance (after the sole comment about the "clear sky") is, "I feel blue, / I feel so blue" (305). This phrase is repeated throughout the poem by the traveler—in fact, the traveler has prepared us for this anaphora, for he says, "and I think / that this rhythmic song of sorrow will be heard / until eternity" (306). Immediately after this line at the end of the stanza, we read, at the beginning of the next stanza, "The traveler's gaze was drawn to the table: / 'What beautiful

⁴²¹ *Ghorbat*, that I have translated as "foreignness," Karim Emami translates as "exile" in *The Lover is Always Alone*. See *The Lover Is Always Alone: Selected Poems* by Sohrab Sepehri (Tehran: Sohkan Publishers, 2004), 77.

apples! Life is inebriated with loneliness.” (ibid.). This sudden back and forth in the traveler’s tone and mindset is jarring, bringing to mind claims by Derek Walcott (among other writers from the Caribbean) about the “helplessly schizophrenic”⁴²² mind of the West Indian. Iranian cultural critics, such as Jalal Al-e Ahmad and Daryush Shayegan, wrote about a similar sense of paradox or, to use Shayegan’s terminology, “cultural schizophrenia”⁴²³ in the Iranian citizen subject. Yet, in the vein of Kamau Brathwaite, who wonders about the possibility of writing in “wholes” or at the very least “broken wholes,” in spite of (or indeed, because of) the paradoxes, rather than fragmentation,⁴²⁴ Sepehri’s traveler does not emanate a sense of mental maladjustment, unable to consolidate the sparring principles within the Iranian. He may be hyphenated, but he is not unwhole. At this moment in Sepehri’s poetic landscape, the traveler is “still traveling,” even while seemingly fixed in a location in the north of Iran. While this statement may seem antithetical to the aforementioned statement about Sepehri’s poetic persona not “actively” traveling, the form of travel described by the traveler defies conventional expectations of what movement entails.

Sitting by the window, the traveler says,

“⁴²⁵I am still traveling.

I think

In the world’s waters there is a boat

and I – the boat’s passenger⁴²⁶ – have been singing

the living songs of ancient mariners

in the ears of the seasons’ apertures for thousands of years,

⁴²² Breslin, *Nobody’s Nation*, 36.

⁴²³ Daryush Shayegan, *Cultural Schizophrenia: Islamic Societies Confronting the West*, trans. John Howe (London: Saqi Books, 1992).

⁴²⁴ Kamau Brathwaite, “Metaphors of Underdevelopment: A Proem for Hernan Cortez,” in *The Art of Kamau Brathwaite*, ed. Stewart Brown (Wales: Seren, 1995), 236.

⁴²⁵ This open quotation mark is not a typographical error; Sepehri uses these quotation marks to signal his traveler’s speech.

⁴²⁶ The world Sepehri uses here is the same as “traveler,” i.e. *mosafer*.

and I sail ahead.
Where will my travels take me?
Where will the footprint stop, unfinished,
the shoelaces undone
for the soft toes of leisure?
Where is the place for arrival, and laying out a mat
and sitting without worries
and listening to
the sound of a dish being washed under the nearby faucet?⁴²⁷

His travel on this boat in the “world’s waters” is imagined. This particular method of transportation as well as the landscape of his travel here allows for a movement beyond the rigidity of borders—a movement that also bends the confines of time and allows the traveler to connect to articulations of travel that go back “thousands of years.” In a nod to Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” Sepehri’s traveler is also singing the song of his travels for an audience; but this audience consists of any breaches he can find in the steady passing of the seasons. In other words, with these songs, Sepehri’s traveler is trying to create a rupture in the status quo and the linear progression of time. Moreover, contrary to Coleridge’s conspicuous mariner, Sepehri’s traveler sees himself as merely a “passenger” on this boat. There is no fixed destination in this maritime travel, nor are there extraordinary expectations of what the unknown destination should entail; once again, it is in the inconspicuous and prosaic, “the sound of a dish being washed under the nearby faucet,” where Sepehri locates the space for respite. One could also imagine a reading in which the questions posed by Sepehri’s traveler are rhetorical; there is no place for arrival and the footsteps will continue, for “sitting without worries” is not possible, nor is it ethical. It is, after all, in this same poem that Sepehri writes, “And oh all you olive trees of Palestine’s soil / address the abundance of your shades to me, / to this lonely traveler, who is coming from journeying around Sinai / and is feverish from the heat

⁴²⁷ Sepehri, *Eight Books*, 310-311.

of ‘persuasion.’”⁴²⁸ Recognizing the existence of Palestine as modern territory, yet refusing to use the modern denomination of the state of Israel and expressing his exasperation with the propaganda that is taking place in this location, the traveler wishes to take solace from these heated arguments in the shade of Palestinian olive trees. Sepehri’s use of the term “soil” diverges from his usual uses of the term and takes on a distinctly political meaning in this case; the stakes are too high for the traveler to equivocate and not take a stand—there is no sign of the aforementioned hyphenation in this regard. Yet, taking a stand in Sepehri’s poetic, geopolitical landscape takes place, once again, in a manner that is connected to the materiality of nature and what it can offer. Searching for an Edenic state can be gleaned from his poetics, and this search culminates in one of his best-known and oft-cited poems in *Green Volume*, titled “Address” (which I will discuss in closing this section). This claim begs the question: Could this Edenic state ultimately constitute the home that was built on the other side of the night? Or the city that was searched for behind the seas, that could be reached with a boat built for that specific purpose?

Sepehri, however, is not advocating a *return* to Eden: “And with a starling sitting on the branch of a cedar tree / the page of the season’s book flipped / and the first line was this: / Life, is Eve’s momentary, colorful inattention.”⁴²⁹ We owe life to Eve and her “colorful inattention.” Sepehri’s view of the Fall is not one of original sin. Eve’s consumption of the forbidden fruit is glorified and humanized— “momentary...inattention(s)” are identifiable throughout Sepehri’s work as they are part of the human condition. Eve’s consumption is thus neither vilified nor gendered. Rather, it is artfully claimed as the source of life. Sepehri’s Edenic vision for the

⁴²⁸ Ibid., 321

⁴²⁹ Ibid., 312-313

world, therefore, pertains only to its physical qualities and its landscape unadorned by industrialism and human greed and capital. According to the Bible, after the Fall and banishing mankind to the earth, God wished to limit the people's power and thus decided to "confuse their language,"⁴³⁰ spreading them out across the earth and not allowing them to build their city with "a tower with its tops in the heavens." In God's logic, "they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do now will be impossible for them."⁴³¹ Sepehri subverts this notion by reading profusely in translation, even if these readings are translations of translations. For even when one is speaking in one's own language, translation may be required to get one's meaning across. Language itself, then, is always an act of translation. When the traveler sees the apples on the table and exclaims that they are beautiful, "... the host asked: / What does beautiful mean? – Beautiful means the loving interpretation of shapes."⁴³² A few lines later,

- Why do you feel blue, it seems like you're alone.
- Oh, how alone!
- I think you're stricken [*dochar*] with that hidden vein of colors.
- Stricken means
- in love.⁴³³

At times, the traveler's statements are placed in quotation marks, and in these instances, the traveler is in a mode of soliloquy. At other times, when Sepehri wants to indicate a dialogue between the traveler and his host, he uses dashes. It is in these conversations that sometimes, as indicated above, translation is required. And in the final two lines of the citation above, the blank

⁴³⁰ Genesis, 11:7 (NRSV)

⁴³¹ Genesis, 11:6 (NRSV)

⁴³² Sepehri, *Eight Books*, 306.

⁴³³ *Ibid.*, 307.

space where “stricken” should be and the fact that there is no question mark at the end of “stricken means” indicate that they are completing one another’s statements. In the poem overall, the conversations do not hint at a language barrier. Sepehri’s signage at the end of the poem marks his location as Babol, a city in the north of Iran by the Caspian Sea, and in her biography of him, his sister Paridokht Sepehri identifies the “traveler” as Sepehri himself. She writes that in the spring of 1966 (which is also the date that Sepehri writes next to his signage) they were expecting him to arrive at their house in Babol, and from their terrace, they could see the road and witness Sepehri getting off the bus.⁴³⁴ This history demonstrates, therefore, that both personas in the poem are in fact speaking Persian (Sepehri did not have knowledge of any of the northern dialects), and there is a collaborative act of intralingual translation taking place in these lines. Yet, the translations are not entirely straightforward or precise, so to speak. *Dochar*, which I have translated as “stricken,” does not readily translate to being in love. Parallel to his experimentation with poetic form, Sepehri also, then, experiments with poetic language, expanding the meaning of words by creating “unorthodox associations...and semantically ‘non-logical’ utterances,” according to Houman Sarshar in his expansive entry on Sepehri in the *Encyclopædia Iranica*. These conceptions, Sarshar maintains, “create a crisis of meaning in language; a crisis that ineluctably mobilizes the reader to reach beyond the familiarity of ordinary language.”⁴³⁵ I would argue that the act of reaching beyond this familiarity in language, an act that Sepehri is performing in these lines, is not merely within the Persian language. In other words, by displaying an act of intralingual translation, Sepehri is underlining how all language is translation, and with this view, his translation of Japanese poetry from English into

⁴³⁴ Paridokht Sepehri, *Sohrab*, 103.

⁴³⁵ Sarshar, “Sohrab Sepehri.”

Persian or his reading of Japanese literature in French becomes unproblematic. For Sepehri, language is not uncompromising. He pushes its boundaries and negates its limits. This does not mean that Sepehri took the task of translation lightly or was a careless translator. On the contrary, he was quite meticulous about translation, both that of his own work as well as that of others. In a letter to *Kayhan Sports* [*Kayhan Varzeshi*], he questions and critiques their translation of certain words. The Persian term used for soccer player is “footballist,” and Sepehri wonders how this term has been invented, as it is a combination of the British term for the game along with an English suffix that does not exist in Persian:

How have you come up with the term *footballist*? In Persian we have created words such as *filmmaker* [*filmsaz*]. In this instance, we have taken the root of a verb [that is, “making”] and have searched for a foreign word [which is “film”]. But in the composition of this word, we have followed the rules of our own grammar. Have you taken the term *footballist* from a foreign language or have you constructed it yourself? Have you constructed it for our benefit, or for theirs? And following which grammar? I have the same question about the word *goaler*.⁴³⁶

The implication here is that, since the suffixes “ist” and “er” do not exist in Persian, in using English grammar to invent Persian words that incorporate the original English (such as football or goal), they’ve created nonsensical hybrids that neither follow the rules of Persian nor make sense in English. In this same letter, he argues that some proper names should not be transliterated as they led to errors in pronunciation on the part of some readers, thus leading to a widespread mispronunciation of a proper name. His argument in these cases is that the name should be left in its original Latinate form. In a letter written to another sister, Nazi, from London, he asks whether he can see the English translations of his poems before their publication. He raises an issue with one of Karim Emami’s translations from *Green Volume*, arguing that a word that had been translated as “shadow” should have been “reflection.” He

⁴³⁶ Paridokht Sepehri, *Sohrab*, 76-7.

emphasizes that the translator is not at fault and that his use of the original word is ambiguous.⁴³⁷

These letters are clear examples of the care that Sepehri takes with regard to translation, and more importantly, language adapted from abroad that circulates at a popular level, thus having the potential to permanently disfigure the local language. His circumspection vis-à-vis accuracy and abiding by the rules of language, however, do not negate his innovative use of language, wherein he uses tools that are borrowed from other languages and disciplines. He is, to reiterate Eliot's position on poetic language, not only "preserving" the Persian language, but also "extending and improving" it. And the discipline he borrowed from the most was painting.

Connecting Sepehri's painting to translation and his poetic language is not incidental. His poetry and painting are often seen as extensions of one another. Critics who wrote about his painting couldn't help but reference his poetry, and vice versa. Morteza Momayez, a prominent Iranian painter and graphic designer, in an essay titled "Address" (published around the time of Sepehri's death), writes, "Sepehri the poet is the same as Sepehri the painter, and in his paintings, it is that same breeze of his words that is leaping around."⁴³⁸ Paridokht Sepehri writes, "[Sohrab] believed that whomever has a hand in painting, will not be left adrift anywhere in the world and without knowing language, can convey his meaning using the language of image."⁴³⁹ For Sepehri, then, the universal language of painting could be translated into a poetic language that was straightforward and simple in its articulation. It is precisely because of "the simplicity and austerity of Sohrab's language" that, according to Emami, translations of Sepehri are

⁴³⁷ Sepehri, *...I'm Still Traveling*, 69.

⁴³⁸ Morteza Momayez, "Address," in *Sohrab Sepehri: Poet-Painter*, by Leili Golestan, (Tehran: Amir Kabir Publications, 1980), 50.

⁴³⁹ Paridokht Sepehri, *Sohrab*, 88.

successful: “The poems of Sohrab comfortably move from one language to another.”⁴⁴⁰ Another critic, Daryush Ashuri, agrees that “Sepehri’s poetry is the most translatable of Persian poetry into other languages.”⁴⁴¹ Yet Ashuri claims this is because his poetic language is not aesthetically pleasing and does not make appropriate use of the art of language; in other words, for Ashuri, the translatability of Sepehri’s poetry is due to a lack. He argues that Sepehri was not well-versed in classical Persian poetry—rather, his use of images in his poetry is indebted to the influence of European poetry on modern Persian poetry. While claims of Sepehri’s unfamiliarity with classical Persian poetry are unfounded, I want to highlight Ashuri’s statements that connects Sepehri’s translatability to a lack and to Imagism; in his essay, instead of using a Persian word for image, such as *tasvir*, he opts for a transliteration of the term “image” to make his connection to the Anglo-American poetic movement explicit. More often than not, critics emphasize the “Iranianness” of Sepehri’s work and maintain that any claims about European or Western influence on his poetics is unwarranted. My intention in this chapter is not to claim otherwise. Rather, by pointing out Sepehri’s own reluctance to participate in such binary oppositions and nationalist discourses, and demonstrating his own experimentation with language and his advocacy of translation and the study of world literatures, I would argue the following: To connect certain aspects of Sepehri’s poetic language to Imagists (whose works Sepehri read) or European modernists is not to dismiss him and his work as succumbing to hegemonic forms of knowledge production. Certain tropes in his poetry that have been mentioned thus far, such as the hyphenated subject, the multiplicity of voices, and his eschewing of industrialism are indeed tropes of modernist poetics as well. Thinking about the possibilities of these connections open up

⁴⁴⁰ Emami and Sepehri, *The Lover is Always Alone*, 19.

⁴⁴¹ Daryush Ashuri, “Sepehri in the Path of Poetry,” *Caravan* 2, no. 9 (May 2016): 55.

more pathways in comparative literary studies, and as mentioned in the introduction, allow for a comparative reading of Sepehri and Walcott. More importantly, though, these possibilities lay at the heart of Sepehri's own artistic practice. His multilingual, transnational experience led to the creation of unique hybrids, indebted to no other poet before him, Iranian or otherwise. His poetics is instantly recognizable among and distinguishable from his contemporary poets. Unlike his contemporary "committed" poets, his language of revolt is not conspicuous. Ahmad Shamlou, a self-avowed political poet and Sepehri's contemporary, was bewildered at the "mysticism" of his poetry which he "found irrelevant in the social situation of the years following the 1953 coup d'état": "They're executing innocent people by the brook and I'm standing a few feet away asking them 'Don't muddy the waters!'"⁴⁴²...Our differences stem from the application of poetry...I prefer that poetry be a trumpet, not a lullaby."⁴⁴³ But Sepehri's poetry is anything but a lullaby, if read carefully and studied in a context of counterculture.

The language of revolt and revolutionary spirit of Sepehri can be found, unexpectedly perhaps, in his poem "Address." About this poem, Shayegan writes, "All of the main concepts of Sepehri's poetic geography are summarized in 'Address.'"⁴⁴⁴ The poem, dedicated to his friend, the painter Abolghassem Saidi, is as follows:

"Where is the friend's home?" It was twilight when the horseman asked.
 The sky hesitated.
 The passerby bestowed the branch of light on his lips to the darkness of the
sands
 and pointed his finger in the direction of a poplar and said:

"Before you reach the tree,
 there's a garden-alley that is greener than God's slumber

⁴⁴²Referencing Sepehri's poem "Water" in the *Green Volume* collection.

⁴⁴³ "Sohrab Sepehri's Poetry from the Viewpoint of his Critics and Friends," ISNA

⁴⁴⁴ Shayegan, *In Search*, 190.

and in it love is as blue as the feathers of honesty.
 You go to the end of that alley that pops up behind adolescence,
 then you turn toward the flower of solitude,
 two steps to the flower,
 you linger at the eternal fountain of earth's legends
 and a transparent fear will overcome you.
 In the fluid intimacy of space, you'll hear a rustling:
 you'll see a child
 that has climbed up a tall pine tree, to take a hatchling from the nest of light
 and you ask the child
 where is the friend's home."⁴⁴⁵

Before getting into the poem itself, it is worth pausing on Sepehri's dedication to the painter Saidi. Describing a painting by Saidi that includes tree branches reaching out beyond the vertical and horizontal framing of the artwork, Shayegan writes, "These branches stretching out here and there, herald 'another place' ... 'another place' that, despite constant references, is still undiscovered."⁴⁴⁶ Saidi's painting practice as described by Shayegan maps on to both Sepehri's poetry and painting practices, which are often seen as extensions of one another. Moreover, similar to his friend's paintings, a lot of Sepehri's paintings included natural landscapes. The directions that the passerby provides in the verses above, thus map on to a vivid, imagistic representation of a landscape, rendering it ideal for a visual interpretation in the form of Kiarostami's film; in fact, in "Kiarostami and the Aesthetics of Modern Persian Poetry," where Khatereh Sheibani studies his cinematic vision in direct relation to Sepehri's poetic vision, she writes that his "poetic language [is] *inherited* from Sepehri [emphasis added]."⁴⁴⁷ Sepehri's imagist language that illustrated the centrality of movement across varied landscapes, an integral

⁴⁴⁵ Sohrab Sepehri, *Eight Books*, 358-9.

⁴⁴⁶ Shayegan, *in Search*, 201.

⁴⁴⁷ Khatereh Sheibani, "Kiarostami and the Aesthetics of Modern Persian Poetry," *Iranian Studies* 39, no. 4 (December 2006), 537.

component of his practice, was thus easily adaptable for a filmmaker like Kiarostami.

The grammatical structure of the question posed in the first line of the poem indicates that the horseman is searching for a particular friend. Yet, the friend is ubiquitous in that anyone to whom the question is posed knows who is being referred to. While this has led some critics to claim that the friend is God, thus attributing a mystical element to this poem, a reading that moves beyond the identity of the friend makes clear that the path to meeting the friend is more important than the friend itself. A visit with the friend is not the matter of concern in the poem, nor does it take place. Rather, the entirety of the poem is an address. But after reading the directions in full and approaching the end of the poem, contrary to the reader's expectation, the address, and thus the entirety of the poem, provides directions not to the friend, but to the child in the tree, who can then tell the horseman where the friend's house is. Part of the act of interpreting the poem, therefore, rests on a correct interpretation of the figure of the child and his role. Kiarostami's film provides a masterful interpretation of this figure. As Dabashi puts it in *Close-up: Iranian Cinema, Past, Present and Future*, "Like his kindred spirit Sohrab Sepehri, Kiarostami sought a re-reading of reality from a tabula rasa that would make the world once again meaningful and trustworthy."⁴⁴⁸ In *Where Is the Friend's Home?*, this act of re-reading reality takes place through the figure of Ahmad and the manner in which he bypasses the power that his teacher exerts upon him and his fellow classmates. Unpacking the dynamics of power in this film, then, manifests Sepehri's inconspicuous language of revolt.

After the opening credits and a dedication to "the memory of Sohrab Sepehri," the eighty-minute film opens with the scene of an angry teacher entering a small, bleak and crowded classroom of boys in a remote village in northern Iran (not far from where Sepehri wrote "The

⁴⁴⁸ Hamid Dabashi, *Close-up: Iranian Cinema, Past, Present, and Future* (New York: Verso, 2001), 45.

Traveler,” and where he spent a considerable amount of his time when he was in Iran). The teacher is angry because he’s arrived ten minutes late and he’d expected the children to be sitting politely and waiting patiently for their teacher to arrive, as he had previously instructed. He closes the only open window, and after scolding them, he asks them to take out their notebooks so he can check their homework. A boy raises his hand and notifies the teacher that one of the students is absent. The teacher responds by telling the boy not to speak unless he’s been asked a question. One of the students, Nematzadeh,⁴⁴⁹ takes out his homework, but to the teacher’s dismay, he has written it on some loose pieces of paper instead of his notebook. The teacher repeatedly asks him, “How many times have I told you to write your homework in your notebook?” to which the boy finally and timidly responds by holding up his three fingers. The teacher continues to yell and reprimand Nematzadeh, who starts to cry. At this point the teacher decides to ask again, repeatedly, “how many times have I told you to write your homework in your notebook?” Once more, the teacher must repeat the question several times before Nematzadeh replies, in a small voice, “Three times, sir.” The teacher then explains that students need to write their homework in their notebooks because firstly, there are rules to follow when doing work, and secondly, by keeping a record of their work, the teacher can compare the homework that they’d written two months ago with what they’ve written now. He threatens Nematzadeh that should this happen again, he’ll be expelled from school.

Kiarostami’s preoccupation with the practice of homework in Iran, and the punitive and often ineffectual rote aspects of it, have been well-documented in his oeuvre, particularly in his film *Homework*. In fact, both *Homework* and *Where Is the Friend’s Home?* were produced by

⁴⁴⁹ This is the young boy’s last name. In Iran, it is customary to call students by their family name, which is their father’s last name.

the Institute for the Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults [*Kanun-e Parvaresh- Fekri-e Kudakan va Nojavanan*]. In *Homework*, made in the style of a documentary, Kiarostami sits behind the camera and asks elementary schoolboys a series of questions about their homework, including what kind of homework they're assigned, whether anyone helps them with it, and what (occasionally physical) disciplinary actions they face, both at home and in school, as a result of not completing their homework. In the opening scene of *Where Is the Friend's Home?* described earlier, we see how the act of having completed the homework does not count unless it's been written in its proper place. While the teacher with "his petty-dictatorial mandates and rules"⁴⁵⁰ tries to justify his reasoning for dismissing Nematzadeh's homework, the final scene of the film overturns any illusions the viewer may have had about the righteous intentions seemingly hiding behind the abusive, suffocating conduct of the teacher.

The final scene of the film takes place, once again, in the classroom, and the events that unfold on this second morning are almost an exact repeat of the previous day's events. What has taken place in the interim, however, is a day-long quest by Ahmad, Nematzadeh's friend, to find Nematzadeh's house, for as it so happens, Ahmad accidentally takes his friend's notebook home with him. Upon realizing his mistake, he sets out to find his friend's house. Among landscapes of expansive hills and valleys, green forests and humble homes, we see Ahmad going from door to door, asking neighbors and villagers whether they know where Nematzadeh lives. At the end of his unsuccessful search, he returns and sits down in his home, with a mix of exasperation and resolution, to write his homework. The next day, the teacher asks the students to take out their homework; the same boy as yesterday raises his hand and tells the teacher that the same boy who was absent yesterday is absent today as well; the teacher tells him not to talk unless he's been

⁴⁵⁰ Dabashi, *Close-up*, 63.

asked a question. Nematzadeh takes out a few loose pages and waits in despair for the teacher to come to his desk. But this time, before the teacher gets to his desk, Ahmad, who arrives late, slips in next to him, takes out Nematzadeh's notebook as well as his own, and opens both notebooks to last night's homework; we find that he has written his friend's homework for him. We wait anxiously with the camera to see if the teacher will notice the identical handwritings. Unsurprisingly, the teacher does not notice; he flips quickly through the pages, marks them as complete, and moves on to the next student.

The formulaic repetition of the opening and closing scenes are exemplars of the repetitive act of writing homework for Persian literature that historically has been asked of students in Iran. Teachers would normally ask a student to copy the Persian lesson they'd learned two or three times. Another common practice was to repeatedly write words or sentences that a student had blundered in dictation. A common practice among students, when forced to repeatedly copy entire sentences, was "*raj zadan*"—literally, creating threads of words: the student would write the first word of each sentence on each line, then the second word, then the third, and so on, to save time. As a result, the student would produce perfect columns of words on a page while circumventing the teacher's intended lesson, which was to learn how to copy the sentence in its entirety. In the "Sound of Water's Footsteps," we similarly see perfect columns of text. At first glance, the lines of this text remind one of the thankless and often useless job of dictation practice; but as the lines continue, the reader's expectation of what will follow is upended—the columns become imperfect:

من قطاری دیدم، روشنایی می‌برد.
من قطاری دیدم، فقه می‌برد و چه سنگین می‌رفت.
من قطاری دیدم، که سیاست می‌برد (و چه خالی می‌رفت).
من قطاری دیدم، تخم نیلوفر و آواز قناری می‌برد.

[I saw a train, carrying light.

I saw a train, carrying jurisprudence and how heavy it traveled.

I saw a train, it was carrying politics (and how empty it traveled).
I saw a train, carrying the seed of lotus and the song of canary.]⁴⁵¹

Throughout the poem, Sepehri thus starts with the implication of a traditional writing practice, a thankless chore that reminds one of dry exercises forced upon students, but changes the pattern immediately after the first few words. Each sentence is different, and the repetition at the beginning of each sentence creates, rather, a harmony and musicality, that is anything but thankless or useless. Similarly, Ahmad helps his friend mislead the teacher and fight his authority—an authority that, to cite Dabashi once again, is “not so much defied as ignored.”⁴⁵² What makes his act of writing his friend’s homework even more subversive lies in a scene we witness right after he’s arrived home. Exasperated from his fruitless search, Ahmad sits down to finally complete his homework of copying the lesson from his book (and, as we learn later, complete his friend’s copying lesson as well). His mother asks him to turn off the lights once he’s finished with his homework, and leaves the room. Some mere seconds later, the door to the room is flung open by the windy night, and through the doorframe we see his mother out on the balcony in between white sheets that are hanging from the clothes-line; Ahmad gazes into the night sky, his eyes focused not on the homework in front of him, but the horizon, and along with him, the camera fixates on the allure of the crisp night air of the village and the white sheets flapping against the dark sky for a few moments. This scene fades into the final scene of the classroom with the teacher standing at the front of the room. The teacher’s earlier act of closing the classroom window, to keep the air and reality of the outside world from creeping in and distracting the students, is thus overturned here by Ahmad’s gaze into the expansive night, even

⁴⁵¹ Sepehri, *Eight Books*, 279.

⁴⁵² Dabashi, *Close-up*, 64.

if momentarily—for we know he must have ultimately returned to his homework.

The “momentary, colorful inattention” of Eve and that vision of an Eden is present here. It is present in the figure of Ahmad, who, according to Dabashi, “is the Adam of an Eden yet to be created, and even if it is never created Ahmad is already there.”⁴⁵³ And going back to the origination of the film, it is also present in “Address.” The path that the horseman must travel to get to the child evokes an Eden-like landscape, and the elements of this landscape read like a culmination of Sepehri’s poetic geography, to echo Shayegan’s contention about the poem. In this landscape, even a cigarette is a “branch of light,” and the alleys are beyond what God could have envisioned in his dreams. In the same manner that Sepehri ignores the biblical God’s intention of confusing his subjects when scattering them and making them speak different languages, he undermines the creative imagination of, arguably, the highest authority figure and dares to imagine an Edenic landscape with more creativity that is as earthly as it is ethereal. In this earthly reality, an insurrectionary child will climb a tree to take a hatchling from its nest, but what the child is reaching for and taking is, in fact, light. And it is that child, like Kiarostami’s Ahmad, with his insurrection and momentary inattentions who can show the way to the “friend.” The way forward, then, is to return to one’s origins, to the fundamentals, and to find a language of revolt there. About Kiarostami’s cinema, Dabashi writes, “[it] has always been the furthest from the political, and yet it remains ‘political’ in the most subversive sense of the term. Whether intentionally or not, his cinema is actively engaged in teasing out the hidden assumptions underlying the constitution of the Iranian subject.”⁴⁵⁴ My attempt has been to demonstrate the same “teasing out” in Sepehri’s poetics regarding the Iranian subject.

⁴⁵³ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 62.

In the final lines of the letter that I read as the terminus in the roadmap of Sepehri's poetic geography, he tells Taraghi that if she visits him in New York, he'll show her some things that will allow her to go back to Iran and "claim that [she] has perceived American culture all in one place." The components of the American culture he describes, and more importantly, the fact of New York being the repository of this culture, is quite telling in his characterization of not only American culture in particular, but culture at large. Here are, once again, the final lines of the letter: "A few skyscrapers, one of my paintings, the *UN* building, a couple of lines from my own writings, two bears from the zoo, my own intelligence, a few hippies, and a fashion salon." Notably, he inserts himself within this culture as well. In other words, his own artistic and literary productions, in his view, could also be part and parcel of American culture. The more immediate implication of this could be a gesture toward a worldview that consists of an inherent diversity and multinationalism within the literary and cultural productions of nation-states perceived as fixed and unitary. But more importantly, this gestures toward his idea about culture writ large, and his qualms with the elitism of it. The American culture that Sepehri is introducing, consists, once again, of the mundane and the inconspicuous. In other words, Sepehri is not at all concerned with culture in the traditional sense of the word. To go back to his contentions about the US in one of his other letters mentioned earlier, in a "naked" American landscape and the space that it offers, there is an opportunity to use this New World as a testing ground for his Edenic imagination, to "disburden" himself and to flesh out the ideas for which he was vilified in Iran. This does not mean, however, that New York was that Eden. While he was constantly traveling, his poems were mostly written when he was at home, and mostly in villages, not in Tehran—for Tehran was the epitome of the homogenized nation. My intention has not been to argue that Sepehri was at home abroad and that he constantly traveled because he

was trying to find a space to belong. Rather, in the “best and most accurate account of [Sepehri’s] work ever written”⁴⁵⁵ according to the poet himself, Shayegan writes,

Sepehri’s poetry is filled with spaces beyond...The space beyond is a threshold, the interval between here and an imaginary land. And isn’t there always an aperture open through every passage from one manner of presence to another? ... Every poem is an invitation to the space beyond, to find the absent friend.⁴⁵⁶

One could read these lines through the lens of mysticism, which was indeed a matter of interest for Sepehri. Yet, reducing his advocacy of finding spaces beyond to a mode of spiritual presence ignores his life-long practice of traveling, whether it was physical travels across the globe, or the mental transportations he would experience reading Walt Whitman and T.S. Eliot while living in the south of Iran; journaling about their poetic practices and musing on the meaning of art, he endorsed Ezra Pound’s editing of “The Wasteland,” for, he wrote, “a work of art is not complete. It doesn’t have structure.”⁴⁵⁷ Far from being a “lullaby,” then, in his work he put into practice this very freedom of thought and form that allowed for revolutionary modes of creation—modes that took the reader back to fundamental, Edenic concepts of being. For Sepehri, New York, both as a world literary space and a New World terminal, became a “space beyond” for this poet-traveler and his traveling poetic personas to articulate manners of freedom from hegemonic modes of thinking, both on an individual level, and through engaging in dialogue via a multiplicity of languages, on a collective level. Yet this collective transcends the boundary of the nation-state and thinks beyond independence in the realm of the geopolitical and works toward a liberation from border-thinking altogether. At this point, I will turn to Walcott, who also read

⁴⁵⁵ Paridokht Sepehri, *Sohrab*, 98.

⁴⁵⁶ Shayegan, *In Search*, 189.

⁴⁵⁷ Sepehri, *...I Am Still Traveling*, 25-26.

these poets and experienced the same physical and mental transportations as Sepehri, albeit with somewhat different results.

Derek Walcott's "Fortunate" Traveler and His New World

In 1992, two years after his "epic"⁴⁵⁸ *Omeros* was published, Walcott won the Nobel Prize for Literature. Since another St. Lucian had won the Nobel Prize for Economics in 1979,⁴⁵⁹ the people of St. Lucia celebrate a Nobel Laureate week in January,⁴⁶⁰ which is the month both laureates were born.⁴⁶¹ In *Derek Walcott*, John Thieme argues that this commemoration "partly honor[s] a writer whose work is inaccessible to most of its population."⁴⁶² He points out that Walcott writes in English in St. Lucia where the dominant language is a Francophone Creole, and after mentioning his "hermeticism," he makes the argument that "Writing the kind of poetry he does, Walcott can, then, only be a 'minority' writer in the Caribbean since his potential audience is limited."⁴⁶³ Considering him in the midst of other Caribbean poets "post-independence" whose work has become "increasingly demotic" and whose focus is mostly oral and performative rather than literary, he contends, "In such a climate, Walcott's 'literary' verse has not always been seen as socially relevant."⁴⁶⁴ Thieme's characterization of St. Lucia's dominant language and its writers is not entirely accurate. In *Nobody's Nation: Reading Derek*

⁴⁵⁸ I have used quotation marks here for Walcott himself has not agreed with the categorization of his poem as an epic.

⁴⁵⁹ Sir William Arthur Lewis.

⁴⁶⁰ John Thieme, *Derek Walcott* (New York, St. Martin's Press, 1999), 2.

⁴⁶¹ Breslin, *Nobody's Nation*, 11.

⁴⁶² Thieme, *Derek Walcott*, 2.

⁴⁶³ Ibid. 2-3

⁴⁶⁴ Ibid., 3

Walcott, Paul Breslin provides a more careful and accurate description of the linguistic make-up of the island and Walcott's relationship to the island's inhabitants in terms of language:

The folk idiom is still a French-lexicon creole; it is heard at least as frequently as English in the Castries⁴⁶⁵ marketplace and more frequently out in the countryside. Walcott was relatively "middle-class," mulatto rather than "black," Methodist rather than Catholic. Because Alix Walcott [his mother] would often invite her pupils⁴⁶⁶ and their families to the house, the family was less distanced from poorer St. Lucians than might be expected. Nonetheless, Walcott felt estranged, by his Methodist upbringing, "from the common life of the island."^{467 468}

Breslin adds that both of Walcott's grandfathers were white and both his grandmothers were of African descent and of an impoverished background.⁴⁶⁹ In *New World Modernisms*, a comparative study of T.S. Eliot, Derek Walcott and Kamau Brathwaite, the term Charles W. Pollard uses to describe Walcott along with the other two poets is "public poet." He maintains that he "use[s] *public* rather than *political* because the latter term too easily overstates the poet's influence on society [emphasis in original]."⁴⁷⁰ Another term he decidedly does not use to describe him is "national poet."⁴⁷¹

I list these designations of Walcott not to discuss in detail each and every term, but to demonstrate the manner in which his poetry is seen by certain critics as engaging with (or not

⁴⁶⁵ The capital and largest city of St. Lucia.

⁴⁶⁶ She was "the Head Teacher of the Methodist Infant School, also serving occasionally as Head of the Methodist Primary School." (Breslin, *Nobody's Nation*, 12).

⁴⁶⁷ Breslin is citing Walcott himself from "Leaving School," published in *The London Magazine* 5, no. 6 (September 1965): 7.

⁴⁶⁸ Breslin, *Nobody's Nation*, 12.

⁴⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁴⁷⁰ Charles W. Pollard, *New World Modernisms: T.S. Eliot, Derek Walcott, and Kamau Brathwaite*. (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2004), 142.

⁴⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 143.

engaging with) a particular public and whether his poetry has social or political influence and meaning for that particular public. Furthermore, this influence and meaning is closely tied to the issues of class, the politics of language, and Walcott's divergence from what is perceived to be the qualities and climate of poetry in post-colonial St. Lucia. This latter issue raises one important point of difference between the context in which Sepehri was producing his poetry and the context of *The Fortunate Traveller*: Sepehri wrote the poetry studied in this chapter during the decades leading to the Revolution, while Walcott's aforementioned collection is written and published after St. Lucia has achieved independence. The disillusionment that many writers from formerly colonized locations dealt with in the aftermath of independence, when their anticolonial ideals and revolutionary dreams for their newly independent nations were unrealized, can be considered as one of the underlying reasons for differences in their tones. This difference is especially transparent when reading the final poem in Walcott's collection, "The Season of Phantasmal Peace" (which I will study in this chapter's closing), in comparison with Sepehri's "Address." While Sepehri's poetic persona was able to move quite seamlessly between the different manners of presence and modes of being, these movements in Walcott's poems are jerky and ragged, as the "fortunate" traveler of his collection moves across locations in the Global North and South; independence has not brought prosperity to the formerly colonized countries, and this is evident from what Walcott's poetic persona sees in his travels. Moreover, in Sepehri, the movement normally takes place from one poem to another, while in Walcott these sudden movements happen in the span of one poem, creating (to use a term he repeatedly returns to in describing the West Indian mind) a "schizophrenic" aesthetic. Sepehri's prescription of purposeful moment for the diseased mind of the Iranian and the nakedness of a New World, Edenic landscape as a space that offered recovery, becomes complicated in Walcott's oeuvre,

because he has actually lived in the New World and is acutely aware of and enmeshed in its struggles. Although Walcott similarly speaks of the New World as an Eden, there are disparities between his vision of Eden and that of Sepehri's.

The West Indian schizophrenia that Walcott defines is similar to the illness of *gharbzadegi* that Al-e Ahmad describes. Walcott describes the root of this disease that plagues the West Indian's mind as follows:

the West Indian mind, because of its own past, is helplessly schizophrenic. It rejects Africa, India, or China at its own convenience. It is culturally and socially drawn to Europe, but with the inherited fear of being repulsed or snobbed [*sic*], so it cultivates snobbery ... Schizoids, in a perverse way, have more personality than the "normal" person, and it is this conflict of our racial psyche that by irritation and a sense of loss continues to create artists, most of whom have chosen exile.⁴⁷²

There are, therefore, elements of this Caribbean schizophrenic mind that correlate to the "Westoxified" mind of the Iranian, with its rejection of the East and itself at the cost of trying to assume and consume all that is Western. But for Sepehri, the diseased mind of the Iranian was an obstacle to good poetry, and he thus advocated purposeful, unforced movement. In the case of West Indian artists and writers, however, Walcott suggests that the schizophrenic mind is a source of creativity, and that their movement outside of the home is not voluntary. While Walcott uses the term exile to refer to artists like himself (and he had, in fact and on occasion, referred to himself as living in exile), he later corrects himself. In an interview in 1985, three years after *The Fortunate Traveller* came out, he responds to Edward Hirsch's question about Walcott's contention that Boston was the "city of [his] exile": "I've always told myself that I've got to stop using the word exile. Real exile means a complete loss of the home. Joseph Brodsky

⁴⁷² Walcott cited in Breslin, *Nobody's Nation*, 36.

is an exile; I'm not really an exile. I have access to my home."⁴⁷³ His travels and periods of living elsewhere could therefore be seen as movement that is meant to expand the creative mind, in the same way that Sepehri advocates, yet the underlying conditions of this movement are different.

From the 1950s through the 1970s, Walcott lived mostly in Trinidad, where he founded the Trinidad Theatre Workshop, with occasional trips to North America. It was during this time that he created his most famous play, *Dream on Monkey Mountain* (1971). According to Breslin, though, most of his output during these years was in the form of essays and poetry rather than plays. His collection of poems titled *The Fortunate Traveller* was published in 1982 in New York by Farrar Straus Giroux. The collection has three sections: "North," "South," and "North" respectively. A number of its poems had originally appeared in magazines and journals ranging from the *Kenyon Review* and *The New York Review of Books* to *The Trinidad and Tobago Review* and *London Magazine*.⁴⁷⁴ A chunk of them (including "Upstate," "North and South," and "The Season of Phantasmal Peace," all being studied in this chapter) were originally printed in *The New Yorker*. Like the "fortunate" traveler of his poems, the poems themselves had also traveled, primarily in the United States, and more specifically, in New York. Furthermore, in the years leading to the publication of this collection, Walcott himself had been traveling extensively. Breslin describes the years leading to the publication of the collection: "After 1976, Walcott continued to live in Trinidad, but he began spending more time than previous in the

⁴⁷³ Derek Walcott, *Conversations with Derek Walcott*, ed. William Baer (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996), 116.

⁴⁷⁴ From Title Page of the book.

United States. These years are marked by travel and a sense of uprootedness.”⁴⁷⁵ Even before he started traveling, therefore, his primary place of residence was not his birthplace of St. Lucia. In writing about Walcott’s position in *The Fortunate Traveller*, Breslin describes it as “The Derek-Sans-Terre, cosmopolitan stance.”⁴⁷⁶

Thinking about these terms—uprooted, *sans terre*, cosmopolitan—I want to investigate, by looking at a few of his poems from this collection, the extent to which displacement figures in his work, and whether this sense of being without a home makes him “cosmopolitan.” In their introduction to *Cosmopolitanisms*, Bruce Robbins and Paulo Lemos Horta make a distinction between “old cosmopolitanism” in its singular designation as “an overriding loyalty to and concern with the welfare of humanity as a whole”⁴⁷⁷ and what they describe as “new cosmopolitanisms:”

Less an ideal than a description, the new cosmopolitanism merely assumes that wherever and whenever history has set peoples in transnational motion, sometimes very forcibly, it is to be expected that many of them and their descendants will show signs of hybrid identity and interestingly divided loyalty. In cosmopolitan circles, self-identification is increasingly assumed to be optional rather than mandatory. Cosmopolitan politeness discourages strangers from demanding to know *where one is from*.⁴⁷⁸

This delineation of cosmopolitanism as “description” sets a few parameters. Firstly, it is directly tied to “transnational motion,” and it seems to encompass all the different forms of motion that “history” has led a people to undertake, including forced movement. In other words,

⁴⁷⁵ Breslin, *Nobody’s Nation*, 41.

⁴⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁴⁷⁷ Bruce Robbins, Paulo Lemos Horta, and Anthony Appiah, eds. *Cosmopolitanisms* (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 1.

⁴⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

cosmopolitanism can be used to describe the “mixed cultural belonging”⁴⁷⁹ of a descendent of slavery as well as those whom, like the generation of Mehdi Bazargan,⁴⁸⁰ traveled to gain an education that wasn’t available in their own country. It can, therefore, encompass an extensive range of travelers, migrants, and diaspora, which could lead to a valid claim of differences being erased. Moreover, in this mode of cosmopolitanism, the question of loyalty has been transformed from a loyalty to the universal human in old cosmopolitanism to a “divided loyalty” in its new form. It would seem, then, to whom one is loyal is an important parameter in designating that person as cosmopolitan; more important for the purposes of this study is the presence of loyalty itself as an indicator in one’s self-figuration. For as I have argued regarding Sepehri and will argue regarding Walcott, loyalty, commitment, and allegiances aren’t matters of concern for these writers—at least, not in their political sense and as it was expected of poets in their situations. King argues against simplistic generalizations that seek to categorize Walcott in terms of his identity and subsequently determine his socio-political ties:

To think of Walcott as black or West Indian can be as much a misleading generalization as that of New World poet or any broad category that ignores the social specificity of a life, its many identities, and their relationships to their contexts. For most of his life Walcott has had a British passport ... He is also a Methodist, a native English speaker on a Francophone island, and bilingual in also speaking Creole. He might be thought as a second-generation immigrant, his light-brown father being born in St Lucia but raised as a Bajan, his light-brown mother being born in Dutch St Maarten. If he is part ‘black’, he is more than half ‘white’.⁴⁸¹

In a similar vein, what Robbins and Lemos Horta repeatedly return to in their introduction is that the cosmopolitan figure no longer has to respond to the question, “Where are you from?” Or

⁴⁷⁹ Ibid., 10.

⁴⁸⁰ See p. 157

⁴⁸¹ King, *Derek Walcott*, 5.

more accurately, this question is no longer posited. Up until this point in my study, however, I have demonstrated the significance of location, landscape, and geography in Sepehri's poetic formulations. In other words, asking where one is from is asking the wrong question. It is perhaps more important to ask where one has been, and how have those presences, those modes of travel and being affected where one is now. While there are definitely elements to these descriptions of cosmopolitanism that Walcott would agree with, such as hybridity and a "Mixed cultural belonging [that] signifies cultural detachment,"⁴⁸² by reading these selections along with his essays and interviews, I will demonstrate the force of geographical location in his work. It is not, therefore, as important to demonstrate that he doesn't feel at home anywhere; rather, it's more important to demonstrate how he responds, personally and formally, to the different locations he travels to and how these locations and landscapes shape his work.

Following the line of interrogation of Sepehri's work in the previous section, I am specifically interested in the poems from the two "North" sections of the collection, uncovering the part that North America plays in Walcott's personal geography. New York in particular pops up in these sections of his collection, as this city was central for Walcott in the first two years of the 1980s. As mentioned earlier, Breslin solicited the help of King in locating Walcott throughout the early 1980s, and at this time, Walcott was in effect a New Yorker, pursuing North American accolades (something that Sepehri never pursued, thus making Walcott's traveler more "fortunate" than Sepehri's). He attests to this in the aforementioned interview with Hirsch. When asked, "Do you think you've been Americanized in any way?", he responds: "If so, voluntarily. I don't think I've been brainwashed. I don't think I have been seduced by all the prizes and rewards. America has been extremely generous to me—not in a strictly philanthropical sense;

⁴⁸² Robbins et al., *Cosmopolitanisms*, 10.

I've earned that generosity. But it has given me a lot of help.”⁴⁸³ There is, then, a manner in which Walcott, akin to Sepehri, sees himself as a part of America, yet in a manner that is more closely tied to its geographical location and its people, as he describes falling in love with both its landscapes and its people, and their “gentleness” and “courtesy.”⁴⁸⁴ In fact, in “The Caribbean: Culture or Mimicry?”, he openly identifies as American:

...being both American and West Indian is an ambiguity without a crisis, for I find that the more West Indian I become, the more I can accept my dependence on America as a professional writer, not because America owes me a living from historical guilt, nor that it needs my presence, but because we share this part of the world, and have shared it for centuries now, even as conqueror and victim, as exploiters and exploited. What has happened here has happened to us.⁴⁸⁵

A consequence of this is that the intended readership of Walcott is not necessarily—or not solely—West Indian. Walcott alludes to this himself in one of his earlier essays, “What the Twilight Says” (1970), when discussing the language that the West Indian uses—in his case, English: “But one did not say to his Muse, ‘What kind of language is this that you have given me?’ as no liberator asks history, ‘What kind of people is it that I’m meant to ennoble?’ but one went about his father’s business. Both fathers.”⁴⁸⁶ In other words, Walcott will use the language he’s been given, even if that language is the language of the colonizer—although Walcott does not articulate it in the stark terms of colonizer versus colonized; the term he mostly uses is colonial. Moreover, if he sees himself as a poet-liberator, there is not a particular public that he is “meant to ennoble.” In contrast to *Omeros* in which he makes liberal use of francophone Creole,

⁴⁸³ Walcott, *Conversations*, 116.

⁴⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸⁵ Derek Walcott, “The Caribbean: Culture or Mimicry?” in *Postcolonialisms: An Anthology of Cultural Theory and Criticism*, Gaurav Gajanan Desai and Supriya Nair, eds. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 257.

⁴⁸⁶ Derek Walcott, *What the Twilight Says: Essays*. (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1998), 9.

The Fortunate Traveller is entirely in English. Among his various collections of poetry, this latter collection has arguably the least amount of criticism about it, because of its overabundant allusions (in the eyes of critics) to works of the Western canon.⁴⁸⁷ About the titular poem of the collection, Paula Burnett writes that “it represents an extreme case of Walcott’s intertextual method—some would say, its test to destruction.”⁴⁸⁸ cursory readings of the poems in this collection, therefore, could corroborate Thieme’s contention about Walcott’s poetry as socially irrelevant to the Caribbean and not “demotic,” in contrast to his Caribbean contemporaries. But careful readings of his poems in this collection that seemingly are about the “North” (specifically, North America) demonstrate his belief in what he refers to as “not only stylistic” but also “geographic sympathy” that writers of the Caribbean share with North American writers and the landscapes that they inhabit.⁴⁸⁹ According to Pollard, Walcott “rel[ies] on tropes of traveling to express how art can unite the fragments of experience to create the *possibility* of a transnational, interethnic, cross-cultural sense of *individual* and *collective* wholeness [emphasis added].”⁴⁹⁰ This “cross-cultural sense” that Pollard refers to demonstrates the American (read: New World) geographic sympathy that Walcott believes in and practices, while simultaneously drawing from his extensive readings of European culture, representations of which abound in this collection. In the readings that follow, these “fragments of experience” that Walcott is presenting at a time that he was, for all intents and purposes, a resident of the United States, will be studied

⁴⁸⁷ Paula Burnett, *Derek Walcott: Poetics and Politics* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000), 176.

⁴⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸⁹ Derek Walcott, “An Interview with Derek Walcott: José María Pérez Fernández,” in *Approaches to the Poetics of Derek Walcott*, eds. José María Pérez-Fernández and José Luis Martínez-Dueñas (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2001), 172.

⁴⁹⁰ Pollard, *New World Modernisms*, 12.

in view of the above-mentioned possibility of a wholeness both on a collective level and on an individual level.

Any attempt to map Walcott's poetic geography must consider the modes of transport within that geography as well as the figures that appear on the landscapes. In the second poem of the collection, "Upstate," the speaker is traveling on a bus:

A knife blade of cold air keeps prying
the bus window open. The spring country
won't be shut out. The door to the john
keeps banging. There's a few of us:
a stale-drunk or stoned woman in torn jeans,
a Spanish-American salesman, and, ahead,
a black woman folded in an overcoat.⁴⁹¹

In the first half of the poem, the desolate interior of the bus matches the landscape they are traveling through; that is, the "upstate villages—repetitive,/ but crucial in their little differences/ of fields, wide yards with washing, old machinery—where people live/ with the highway's patience and flat certainty."⁴⁹² The rhythm of the banging bathroom door is resonated in the first three and a half lines: the pauses at the end of each line and the sudden full stop in the middle of the next line create the cadence of that banging. The passengers on the bus also match this bleak interior, demonstrating the parallel between this inferior mode of travel and those who use this mode of travel. While they come from different racial backgrounds (African-American and Spanish-American), the socio-economic conditions that bring these groups together (including, presumably, an inebriated white woman) seem to be of higher importance for Walcott. The idyll that one would expect of the upstate villages is nowhere to be found yet. And it would seem that the aforementioned Muse that has been responsible for giving Walcott his language, English

⁴⁹¹ Derek Walcott, *The Fortunate Traveller* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1981), 5.

⁴⁹² *Ibid.*

inflected with dialect, is escaping him:

Sometimes I feel sometimes
The Muse is leaving, the Muse is leaving America.
Her tired face is tired of iron fields,
its hollows sing the mines of Appalachia...⁴⁹³

The rhythm of the banging bathroom door has given way to the rhythm of these chant-like lines, bringing Walcott's struggles with language to the forefront. The anaphora in these lines is both indicative of someone who is not fully comfortable with or native in the English language, thus falling back on familiar words, and also brings to mind the oral culture that Walcott advocates. In "What the Twilight Says," Walcott is tracing the arguments surrounding the development of a West Indian language after the twilight, which is a "metaphor for the withdrawal of empire and the beginning of our doubt."⁴⁹⁴ He advocates for an oral culture that has the language of the empire inflected with a local dialect: "What would deliver [the New World Negro] from servitude was the forging of a language that went beyond mimicry, a dialect which had the force of revelation as it invented names for things, one which finally settled on its own mode of inflection, and which began to create an oral culture of chants, jokes, folksongs, and fables" (15). When using the colonizer's language, this New World inhabitant is not merely mimicking the colonizer; it is not an empty echoing, but an aggressive adaptation and reconfiguration which is inventive, in the same manner that the first speaker of language started naming. In the lines mentioned above the repetition creates a chant-like quality, perhaps in an effort to bring back the Muse.

The Muse is leaving America, it seems, because of its ugly turn to industrialization; the

⁴⁹³ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁴ Walcott, *What the Twilight Says*, 4. Subsequent references will be indicated parenthetically in the text.

landscape described in these lines, seemingly stands in stark contrast to the Adamic vision that Walcott insists upon for the New World, that same World in which the New World Negro can name and for which he can create language. He writes about the New World as Eden in “The Muse of History” (1974): “The great poets of the New World, from Whitman to Neruda ... [have a] vision of man in the New World [that] is Adamic. In their exuberance he is still capable of enormous wonder. Yet he has paid his accounts to Greece and Rome and walks in a world without monuments and ruins” (37-8). The possibilities of creation in this Adamic landscape are endless, as long as it remains “untutored:”

Our bodies think in one language and move in another, yet it should have become clear, even to our newest hybrid, the black critic who accuses poets of betraying dialect, that the language of exegesis is English, that the manic absurdity would be to give up thought because it was white... For us the ragged, untutored landscape seems as uncultured as our syntax. (27)

Walcott writes in English, for giving up the English language is akin to giving up thought and crippling the body. So, using this inflected English, he laments the Muse leaving the landscape that is no longer ragged; if the landscape loses the qualities that make it Adamic, it will also lose the possibilities of a new syntax, and by extension, a new culture.

When speaking of the New World, Walcott invokes both Neruda and Whitman. If the New World consists of hemispheric America, the fact that, in his collection, his poetic geography of the New World would include both the developed US and the underdeveloped Caribbean islands, marks another difference between his vision of this New World and that of Sepehri’s. Granted, both writers believe in the space and nakedness that the New World offers. And Walcott similarly writes of the New World poet in “The Muse of History” (for him, this category includes Borges, St. John Perse, Whitman, and Neruda) that is “carrying entire cultures in his head, bitter perhaps, but unencumbered” and whose “hero remains the wanderer” (39) This is what he refers to as “revolutionary spirit at its deepest; it recalls the spirit to arms” (ibid.). The

unencumbered poet-wanderer who represents true revolutionary spirit is akin to Sepehri's idea of revolutionary movement and modes of being that are tied to "spaces where praise of the earth is ancestral" (ibid.).

Yet this idea becomes complicated in Walcott as the poem progresses and there are, in fact, descriptions of idyllic villages where the "spring hills are sun-freckled."⁴⁹⁵ Right after the poem's speaker continues to lament the Muse's departure that "comes over me in smoke / from the far factories," he writes:

But were the willow lyres, the fanned-out pollard willows
with clear translation of water into song,
were the starlings as heartbroken as nightingales,
whose sorrow piles the looming thunderhead
over the Catskills, what would be their theme?⁴⁹⁶

This sudden movement away from the smoke-filled, industrial village that is chasing away the Muse, toward describing willows and starlings that could create song seems to imply a shift, signposted by the use of the conjunction "but." Yet upon careful reading of these lines, the significance of how these supposedly natural elements of the landscape are used to create song becomes clear. The "pollard willows" point to interventions made in nature by man; the *Oxford Dictionary of Ecology* defines "pollard" as "To behead a tree at about head height, usually about 2 m[eters] above ground level, in order to produce a crown of small branches, suitable for firewood, fencing, etc., with foliage that is beyond the reach of deer or farm livestock."⁴⁹⁷ Trees that have been *beheaded* in an effort to provide goods to man and simultaneously, and ironically,

⁴⁹⁵ Walcott, *Fortunate Traveller*, 6.

⁴⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁷ Michael Allaby, "Pollard," in *A Dictionary of Ecology*. Oxford University Press, 2015.
<http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780191793158.001.0001/acref-9780191793158-e-4388>.

be protected from animals are, therefore, transformed into instruments to create music. And starlings are birds that are not native to the United States, were transplanted “in New York City in 1890” and are described as “originally Old World birds”; what’s more, “they destroy some insects, but they are generally considered a nuisance and an agricultural pest because they drive away smaller, desirable birds and damage fruit trees and other crops...They mimic bird songs and other sounds.”⁴⁹⁸ In an article on the one-hundred year anniversary of this import, the reason for their transplantation is explained:

The year was 1890 when an eccentric drug manufacturer named Eugene Schieffelin entered New York City’s Central Park and released some 60 European starlings he had imported from England. In 1891 he loosed [*sic*] 40 more. Schieffelin’s motives were as romantic as they were ill fated: he hoped to introduce into North America every bird mentioned in Shakespeare.⁴⁹⁹

A breed of birds, forcefully transported into the New World for the purpose of mimicking Old World culture and landscape, procreate so extensively that they are deemed a hazardous nuisance and are difficult to control.⁵⁰⁰ What’s more, instead of creating their own original songs, they mimic the songs and sounds of other birds. Walcott’s choice of bird here is, therefore, uncanny. The starling in Sepehri’s poem that “is sitting on the branch of a cedar tree” does not carry with it the implications of involuntary immigration in its Garden of Eden narrative, nor does it indicate a politics of linguistic and racial difference. A question that is thus raised in the context of Walcott’s work that is absent from that of Sepehri’s is, if conditions are created for the transmogrified tree and the transplanted bird to produce song, what would they sing about? What

⁴⁹⁸ “Starling,” in *The Columbia Encyclopedia*, ed. P. Lagasse and Columbia University (8th ed.) (New York: Columbia University Press), <http://ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fsearch.credoreference.com%2Fcontent%2Fentry%2Fcolumency%2Fstarling%2F0%3FinstitutionId%3D1878>.

⁴⁹⁹ Ted Gup, “100 Years of the Starling,” *New York Times*, September 1, 1990.

⁵⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

would the theme be? A few lines later he writes, “I am falling in love with America.”⁵⁰¹

Walcott’s New World does offer space for artistic creation, even if its Muse may well be gone soon. And these creations are born out of forceful movement and violence, and will inevitably contain adaptations and appropriations that could be disregarded as mimicry. This delineates the point of divergence between Sepehri’s view of America’s nakedness and the potential it has for his New World creations, and Walcott’s complicated relationship to a land that is not naked for him, for it is rife with the history of slavery. A question that one could imagine Walcott raising in this context, then, is, what is originality? Is it possible? Or better yet, is it desirable? The fact that he is falling in love with America despite all of this could indicate that for Walcott, originality is not the objective, nor is it possible. The starling may mimic the sound of birds in its immediate surroundings, but going back to Walcott’s claims about language in “What the Twilight Says,” the starling shouldn’t ask the Muse what this language is that he’s been given; he uses it, even when—especially when—the language is forked, for while the bird may be mimicking the birds in the North American landscape now, at one time it was mimicking the birds in the European landscape, its original home. In other words, artistic creations will invariably contain some form of mimicry. In the aforementioned essay, “The Caribbean: Culture or Mimicry?” Walcott explains, “Once the meridian of European civilization has been crossed, according to the theory, we have entered a mirror where there can only be simulations of self-discovery.”⁵⁰² Cultural productions in the Americas, then, are variants of a “self-discovery” that replicate European modes of production; yet, they make them their own.

Thinking about the role of language in these lines, it’s important to note that the pollard

⁵⁰¹ Walcott, *Fortunate Traveller*, 6.

⁵⁰² Walcott, “*The Caribbean*,” 259.

willows as lyres are *translating* water into song. The act of translation here, while presented through an imagery of fluidity and natural movement, in fact is a result of a brutal beheading. The ambivalence that is characteristic of Walcott's oeuvre makes his ideas about translation known: something that can create beauty through painful decapitation. Translation is loss, but it is a loss that is essential and primitive. For it is also what creates language and allows naming. After proclaiming his love for America, the poem's speaker continues: "I must put the cold small pebbles from the spring / upon my tongue to learn her language, / to talk like birch or aspen confidently."⁵⁰³ In this case, the act of learning a new language, which can also be thought of as learning to translate, brings with it some discomfort: "cold small pebbles from the spring" are needed in order to learn the language of America, but this will allow the speaker to "talk...confidently" like the trees. The language of America is thus directly connected to its landscape and its nature. These lines are reminiscent of lines from Sepehri's "Water" from his *Green Volume* collection. The verse "Let's not muddy the waters"⁵⁰⁴ is consistently repeated throughout the poem, as Sepehri asks that the water of a village's spring not be muddied; he thinks about what lays downstream, about who will be using that water, thus writing with a sense of urgency about the importance of not muddying it. As he's wondering about the people upstream who have kept the water pristine, he writes, "The people upstream, understand water."⁵⁰⁵ Yet, in the case of Sepehri's landscape, language can be assigned to the spring itself, to the water, rather than the land and political geography that is associated with it; the water itself is understood by the villagers, while in Walcott's case, America as the New World is front and

⁵⁰³ Walcott, *Fortunate Traveller*, 6.

⁵⁰⁴ Sepehri, *Eight Books*, 345-7.

⁵⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 347.

center of his poetic geography. This, once again, speaks directly to the differences in their poetic geographies. In the travels that Walcott's "fortunate traveller" undertakes, particular locations such as a specific island in the West Indies or the Northeast region in the United States are traversed. The specificity of these locations speaks to the specificity of Walcott's experience as a mixed-race man from a small island with a long and complicated colonial history. As Breslin notes in his introduction to *Nobody's Nation*, "For Walcott's native St. Lucia, which changed hands thirteen times between France and England before settling into English possession through the treaty of 1814, even the colonially imposed religion and language were subject to change without notice, depending on who won the most recent battle."⁵⁰⁶ Given the history of his island and what he refers to as the Caribbean basin in general, which, in agreement with Carlos Fuentes, he believes includes America writ large,⁵⁰⁷ this difference in poetic geographies becomes intelligible—a difference that includes fraught, tumultuous relationships between language, cultural productions, and personal and collective histories of these New World locations.

In his letter, Sepehri presented New York as the repository of American culture, and in Walcott's poetry, we see a similar illustration of New York in this manner. In fact, American culture, for Walcott, is arguably world culture, due to its inherently multifaceted nature. About his stay in the United States at this time, Hamner writes, "This change of scene alters little his fundamental commitments; if anything, residence in the United States has broadened his vision and deepened his appreciation of the Americas as the repository of world cultures...Rather than regretting his suspension between tropical and temperate climates, he capitalizes on their

⁵⁰⁶ Breslin, *Nobody's Nation*, 5.

⁵⁰⁷ See interview with Pérez Fernández, 171-2, and interview with Hirsch in *Conversations*, 106.

dialectical tensions.”⁵⁰⁸ In “Piano Practice,” which is set in Manhattan, there is an echo of the Adamic man who is walking in the New World, yet in this case, the ruins and monuments of Europe continue to exist in parts of it. Describing the surroundings of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Walcott writes

the fountains trot like percherons round the Met,
clip, clop, clip, clop in Belle Epoque Manhattan,
...
down avenues hazy as Impressionist clichés,
their gargoyle cornices,
...
their subway stops in Byzantine mosaic—
the soul sneezes and one tries to compile
the collage of a closing century,
the epistolary pathos, the old Laforguean ache.⁵⁰⁹

Mimicry is thus not limited to language and the artistic creations that arise out of that language. Allusions that cover centuries of European dominance in culture and politics can be found in one of the centers of this New World, in a setting and building that is mostly a monument to this dominance. Yet, as mentioned earlier, an aggressive adaptation and reconfiguration that surpasses mimicry is what Walcott calls for. At the precise moment that the Adamic man feels out of place in this landscape that eerily echoes and nostalgically pines for old Europe, there is a breakthrough. Before this moment, the poetic persona from the Caribbean had called for the Muse: “I called the Muse, she pleaded a headache, / but maybe she was just shy at being seen / with someone who has only one climate” (10). The “one climate” of the Caribbean islands is seemingly not conducive to original artistic creations. But while this man from the Caribbean who is walking in Manhattan, at first feigns disappointment at the Muse’s rejection, he

⁵⁰⁸ Robert D. Hamner, *Derek Walcott*. (Boston: Twayne, 1981), 117.

⁵⁰⁹ Walcott, *Fortunate Traveller*, 9. Subsequent references will be indicated parenthetically in the text.

understands how the notion of cultural production as mimicry can be challenged and subverted, and how the pain and discomfort of translation and adaptation can be, once again, turned into music:

Maybe the Seine outshines the East River,
maybe, but near the Metropolitan
a steel tenor pan
dazzlingly practices something from old Vienna,
the scales skittering like minnows across the sea. (ibid.)

The music that the street musician creates on this instrument with roots in the Caribbean, is connected to the sea that has brought the musician and his instrument here. Two points are once again underlined and made explicit here: the connection between artistic creation and the creator's personal geography, and the manner in which the music from old Vienna can be reconfigured by changing the instrument on which it is played. It is in this manner that Walcott "capitalizes on [the] dialectical tensions" between the different climates that he is experiencing. In "North and South," the traveler is living in Manhattan during the winter, and the descriptions immediately evoke Dante's *Inferno* and its final circle of hell that is made of ice:

and the side streets of Manhattan are sown with salt,
as those in the North all wait for that white glare
of the white rose of inferno, all the world's capitals.
Here, in Manhattan, I lead a tight life
and a cold one, my soles stiffen with ice
even through woolen socks. (11-12)

The world capitals, including Manhattan, are all thus associated with a European vision of hell. But Walcott's traveler does not shy away from them. In the opening lines of this poem, the traveling persona of the poem says, "I accept my function/ as a colonial upstart at the end of an empire, / a single, circling, homeless satellite" (11). In the aforementioned interview, Hirsch cites these lines and asks Walcott, "Has the Castaway given way to the Traveller? Do you still feel the

old tugs between home and abroad?”⁵¹⁰ Walcott responds: “I’ve never felt that I belong anywhere else but in St. Lucia. The geographical and spiritual fixity is there.”⁵¹¹ In this interview, Walcott identifies with the traveling poetic persona of this collection on several occasions, creating a slippage between himself and his “fortunate traveller.” In Sepehri’s autobiographical poem, “The Sound of Water’s Footsteps,” I discussed how he writes about being from Kashan, but that his city is not Kashan, and that he has built his own city at a dear cost; the location of that city is not important—the point of connection is the material elements of the earth. In this interview, Walcott talks about the fixity of St. Lucia for himself, and thus, the traveller as satellite can be read as orbiting around St. Lucia. Yet, at that moment, he is located in Manhattan, with its icy, inferno-like conditions. Both poets present their difficult relationships to home through their poetic personas that, at certain junctures, overlap with their own selves and personal histories. And in these personal histories, both men find themselves in New York City at critical junctures in both their personal and collective histories. In Sepehri’s case, I’ve read New York as the terminus in the roadmap of his poetic geography, thinking about what the space of New York (and not the city itself as a geopolitical, world capital) offered him at the height of revolutionary activity in Iran.

In Walcott’s case, the actual locations of New York in particular and North America in general are important. Yet, superficial readings of his position there after St. Lucia’s independence could indicate a cosmopolitan embrace of New York as a world capital, where he is producing literature that is argued to be removed from the concerns of his own people. In my readings of his poems thus far (coupled with his essays and interviews), I have demonstrated the

⁵¹⁰ Walcott, *Conversations*, 115.

⁵¹¹ Ibid.

manner in which Walcott's poetry proclaims a North American experience as part of the larger New World experience and connects their histories and use of language by way of their painful transformations and translations. But the collection's title poem draws a stark contrast between the nations of the Global North and South. Critical readings of "The Fortunate Traveller" abound that analyze the poem with clarity and effectiveness; since I do not wish to replicate those readings, I will cite here sections of those readings that are important for the arguments presented here. Burnett writes that the poem is

about the guilt of empire, spoken primarily from the South to the North. It discloses a binary world, split between haves and have-nots, distinguished by race as well as geography, and it anatomizes the betrayal of one by the other. But it does not just point an accusing finger; it appeals to the privileged to reform themselves and the world over which they wield power—in other words, it directs them to redemption rather than damnation.⁵¹²

Hirsch says the poem "elaborates the crisis of a fortunate traveller who goes from one underdeveloped country to another."⁵¹³ Writing about the collection in general, Breslin describes how "in the north, the empire, in decline, drifts toward apocalyptic destruction" and "The title poem...catches this apocalyptic anxiety powerfully."⁵¹⁴ In "One World? The Poetics of Passenger Flight and the Perception of the Global," Marit J. MacArthur, writing about air travel in the poem, maintains that "the jet becomes synecdoche for globalization."⁵¹⁵ He further states that Walcott "demonstrates a deep concern with class and regional divisions within the Pan-African community and the world at large, of which his frequent travels between the Caribbean, the

⁵¹² Burnett, *Derek Walcott*, 177.

⁵¹³ Walcott, *Conversations*, 115.

⁵¹⁴ Breslin, *Nobody's Nations*, 219.

⁵¹⁵ MacArthur, "One World?", 276.

United States, and Europe make him especially aware.”⁵¹⁶

“The Fortunate Traveller” thus makes explicit the political and economic power that a location like the US has over the Caribbean. And it demonstrates how the “fortunate” traveler in this poem is both painfully aware and complicit in this structural inequality. Burnett reads this traveler as a “self-projection for the poet, honest enough to recognize his own privilege and his own guilt.”⁵¹⁷ She adds, “The volume in which this poem is published was the first to appear after Walcott had moved to the United States, abandoning (as it must have seemed to him) his long-standing and much-publicized commitment to remaining in the Caribbean.”⁵¹⁸ But as mentioned earlier, she claims that the poem offers the possibility of redemption. Herein lies the possibility for both individual and collective wholeness that Pollard refers to. Breslin reads this desire on Walcott’s part as an attempt to resolve what he refers to as the “Walcottian paradox,” the central conflict and schizophrenia that is present in his oeuvre: “Walcott is poised on the cusp between a modern aesthetic, which takes desperate measures to salvage some sort of artistic order from what it perceives as mere “anarchy and futility” (Eliot), and a postmodern one that accepts brokenness and disorder as the way things are, abandons the ambition to make them whole, and tries to be cheerful about it.”⁵¹⁹ He connects this central conflict in Walcott’s work to “the language of paradox” in the modernist poetry of the New Critics, and states that, similar to the New Critics, Walcott is not inclined to use poetry as a tool for making political commitments; yet while for the New Critics (including Cleanth Brooks), this paradox was seen

⁵¹⁶ Ibid.

⁵¹⁷ Burnett, *Derek Walcott*, 177.

⁵¹⁸ Ibid.

⁵¹⁹ Breslin, *Nobody’s Nation*, 7.

“as a way of ensuring Kantian distance from the pressure of warring interests,” Walcott does not shy away from these “warring interests”: “Walcottian paradox may be resistant to political position-taking, but it is often an extremely effective way of dramatizing rather than sublimating, social conflict. It may decline to make a political argument, but it is not disinterested in the sense that Brooks recommended; it is rather a metaphor for an agonized state of unresolved conflict.”⁵²⁰ Similar to Sepehri, Walcott’s focus, then, is on social (and in Walcott’s case, socio-economic) rather than political conflict and through his poetics, he is imagining resolutions to this conflict. He does not merely succumb to the agony of the diseased mind; rather, he works through the pain of reconfiguration and adaptation to offer artistic creations that work through the warring tensions.

He remains painfully aware of these tensions, however, and the poem on which the book ends seems to suggest that any resolution that may be reached is temporary and mythical. “The Season of Phantasmal Peace” begins as follows:

Then all the nations of birds lifted together
the huge net of the shadows of this earth
in multitudinous dialects, twittering tongues,
stitching and crossing it. They lifted up
the shadows of long pines down trackless slopes,
the shadows of glass-faced towers down evening streets,
the shadow of a frail plant on a city sill—
the net rising soundless as night, the birds’ cries soundless, until
there was no longer dusk, or season, decline, or weather,
only this passage of phantasmal light
that not the narrowest shadow dared to sever.⁵²¹

While I have not found any archival evidence to suggest that Walcott was familiar with Farid ad-Din Attar’s *Mantiq ut-Tair* [*The Conference of the Birds*], there is an uncanny resemblance

⁵²⁰ Ibid.

⁵²¹ Walcott, *Fortunate Traveller*, 98.

between these lines and Attar’s mystical narrative about a group of birds’ spiritual journey to find their leader, the mythical *Simorq* (the literal translation of which is “thirty birds”). As the birds embark on this journey, with each one representing a certain characteristic of human beings, they start diminishing in number due to fear, death, illness, and so on. Thirty birds remain, realizing that they are, collectively, the mythical *Simorq*. Attar’s book is described as “a long allegory of the soul’s search for divine truth.”⁵²² The first four lines of Walcott’s poem signal a revolutionary transcendence akin to what we witnessed in Sepehri’s worldview—a traveling and transport to spaces beyond that was often compared to mystical forms of transformation. Yet the timelessness and ingrained light that such a transportation could entail is, as we see in the final lines of this stanza, “phantasmal.” The view from above, of the “trackless slopes” and “our earth” and “fields,”⁵²³ is a combination of the “undivided “natural” space” of Spivak and Sepehri’s planetary vista, along with “glass-faced towers” and “cities.”⁵²⁴ This passing of the birds is merely “seasonal,” indicating “from the high privilege of their birth, / something brighter than pity for the wingless ones/ below them who shared dark holes in windows and houses.”⁵²⁵ There is no mystical or revolutionary transcendence here, as the poem ends with merely the illusion of long-lasting peace: “and this season lasted one moment, like the pause/ between dusk and darkness, between fury and peace, / but, for such as our earth is now, it

⁵²² “Farid ad-Din Attar,” in *The Columbia Encyclopedia*, eds. Paul Lagasse and Columbia University (8th ed.) (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018)
http://ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fsearch.credoreference.com%2Fcontent%2Fentry%2Fcolumency%2Ffarid_ad_din_attar%2F0%3FinstitutionId%3D1878.

⁵²³ Walcott, *Fortunate Traveller*, 98.

⁵²⁴ Ibid.

⁵²⁵ Ibid., 99.

lasted long.”⁵²⁶ While in Sepehri’s worldview, this pause between dusk and darkness, this interval could act as an aperture that would invite the reader to “the space beyond, to find the absent friend,”⁵²⁷ in Walcott’s worldview, there is no such possibility. The manner in which Sepehri decenters the world capital is absent from Walcott’s account, for although “the spiritual and geographical fixity” is still in St. Lucia, he admits his privilege in being able to leave whenever he wants (in a language that resembles the birds’ view in this final poem): “One is bound to feel the difference between these poor dark, very small houses, the people in the streets, and yourself, because you always have the chance of taking a plane out. Basically, you are a fortunate traveller, a visitor; your luck is that you can always leave.”⁵²⁸

Breslin compares the poem to a fallen Eden.⁵²⁹ In a different interview with Hirsch four years before the collection was published, Walcott insists upon his vision of the New World as “a kind of Eden”; when Hirsch asks how “literally should we take the comparison?” Walcott responds:

I think it remains valid. I’ve just come back from Jamaica, which is in a terrible state. The violence is incredible and terrifying. The country is in great despair; it is very divided. On this trip we left Kingston and went just a little way up into the mountains. There is a dramatic contrast between the problems of Kingston, which are known, residual problems of the Third World, and the beauty of the surrounding countryside. Looking across the mountains isn’t simply seeing one of those ‘views’; it isn’t panoramic, it is a spiritual thing. In Jamaica you can have this spiritual experience standing on a mountain looking across and seeing the light on the hills; or else you may be on a very small island in the Caribbean, looking out at the sea, at an empty beach. The fact is, the beauty is overwhelming, it really is. It’s not a used beauty, there are no houses there; it’s not a known beauty, and so the privilege of just looking at these places and seeing their totally uncorrupted existence remains an Adamic experience. Looking across at the mountains,

⁵²⁶ Ibid.

⁵²⁷ See note 560.

⁵²⁸ Walcott, *Conversations*, 115.

⁵²⁹ Breslin, *Nobody’s Nation*, 224.

or walking on a beach that is really deserted on an early morning, you can't avoid the feeling that this is a new world.⁵³⁰

Interestingly, in spite of the terrifying violence in Jamaica, Walcott's vision of the Americas as a kind of New World does not change. In fact, it would seem that the violence is part and parcel of what makes it a new world. The contrast between the violence and the untouched landscape results in a spiritual experience, which is why reading the initial lines of the final poem in terms of a transcendent experience is warranted. Yet, to return to Breslin's characterization of the Walcottian paradox as a "metaphor for an agonized state of unresolved conflict," the privilege of the fortunate traveler and the birds with their view from above, similar to the "Fortunate Traveller" in the jet, and distinctly separate from Sepehri's traveler on the plane, ultimately negates that possibility of an Adamic experience, of an individual and collective wholeness.

⁵³⁰ Walcott, *Conversations*, 54.

Afterword

The Conception of a Postcolonial Project

The original rubric for this dissertation was postcolonial discourse. In one version of my prospectus, I wrote, “my use of the term postcolonial is not historical, but methodological, by which I mean I am not strictly concerned with the post-independence period of formerly colonized nations. Rather, I use the term to signify a methodological approach in studying the literature of nations that have been affected by European imperialism and whose texts demonstrate a continuing preoccupation with this effect.” That methodology is still present, to some extent. This dissertation is, at its heart, preoccupied with the effects of European imperialism on Iran and the Caribbean region, and how this effect manifested itself in the cultural productions of these areas.

But discourses, by definition, are attempts to organize ideas, concepts, and values into formal representations, and at the heart of this dissertation, there is also a preoccupation with disorder. As the chapters in this dissertation were nearing their final shape and I continued to closely read these texts, attempts to unsettle formal discourses materialized at their center. In the connections that have been made between Iran and the third-worldist, anticolonial discourse of post-World War II, the discussions have mostly been about shared forms of cultural resistance exemplified by the canonical, anticolonial texts of the time. I, on the other hand, was interested in forms of cultural production that were not simply about resistance, nor did they purport to effect social change, but a preoccupation with the same anticolonial discourse could be read in their works. Therefore, while many of these texts and/or their writers were not immediately associated with the prevailing political movements in their respective literary discourses, they nonetheless can—and should—be read as alternative modes of liberation from European

imperialism and all of the hegemonic discourses it imposed.

While the through line of this dissertation has been these writers' response toward (or total disregard of) the idea that literature must be "engaged" or "committed" in order to be socially effective, in each chapter, I have identified subcategories of this totalizing discourse; these subcategories have connected the particular pairings of texts. So, in my first chapter I demonstrate how the marginalization of women in the development of a nation leads Daneshvar and Condé to create narratives that center women and their political thought. In my second chapter, I analyze how the dominance of native histories as integral to nationalist movements is challenged, and the efforts of the native individual that is unable to locate herself in this history are outlined in these narratives. Finally, while it would seem that travel is a trope that signals disloyalty to one's nation and its political struggle, I demonstrate the effect that travel has in the poetics of Sepehri and Walcott to lay bare the struggle and to offer a revolutionary poetics of liberation that is, in fact, predicated on movement.

The exigencies of the Caribbean situation versus that of Iran results in differences in these literary productions that can't be ignored. The relationship of the Caribbean individual and nation with Europe is incontrovertibly different. This difference presents itself in the politics of language and place, among others. In the works of Condé, Glissant, and Walcott, the travel back to the metropole, errantry, and wandering are all significant ways in which these writers represent their protagonists' efforts to resolve their split identities. The note on which their texts end, therefore, is, in certain ways, less sanguine than their Iranian counterparts, for there is not really a resolution, even if, in the case of the Iranian novels, this resolution is presupposed by a necessary death. This could also be attributed to the fact that the Caribbean texts have all been written during an era that is characterized by disillusionment with the nationalist projects. After

the deaths presented in the Iranian novels, there is an opportunity for (re)birth, which could signal the inherent optimism of revolutionary struggles. In the case of the Caribbean, the struggle is over and thus there is less cause for optimism. Surrounded by the sea, then, wandering and wayward travel is, perhaps, the only possibility for forward movement.

The Conception of a Comparative Literature Project

Beyond the social and geopolitical exigencies of these locations and their similarities and differences that I've pointed out as justifications for these comparisons, a more pertinent cause for (and effect of) these comparative readings was comparison for the sake of comparison itself. When I first read these texts without the intention of placing them together in this fashion, I saw points of connection. These connections primarily had to do with the formal and thematic qualities of the texts. And these qualities are what I draw upon at the start of each chapter to frame the comparisons. In order to justify the frameworks for comparison, however, it seemed necessary to conduct research into the immediate contexts in which these writers were producing their work, to try and rationalize the connections that were materializing in my readings. And perhaps this is where the problem lies: the need to rationalize and justify the comparison of literature from Iran and the Caribbean using a historical framework, without accepting the comparative reading conditions that this unique constellation of texts is presenting.

In order to explain what I mean by the comparative reading conditions of this constellation, I must go back, once again to the genesis of this project. Originally, the comparisons in this dissertation included more authors, texts, and locations. I had envisioned each chapter as a triangulation of texts and locations: the chapter on Daneshvar and Condé would include Assia Djebar's *L'amour, La Fantasia* as well; to the poetics of travel in the chapter on Walcott and Sepehri, I would add the poetry of Mahmoud Darwish and his experience of exile,

grappling with the notions of home and belonging; and I would discuss Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* in the same vein as the narratives of Golshiri and Glissant and their creation of indistinguishable filiations—in Rushdie's novel, the lineage of the brothers Saleem and Shiva are intertwined, and difficult (if not impossible) to trace. Yet, as the research on the historical, cultural, and political contexts of each text started to accumulate, the difficulty of establishing a meaningful framework for comparison beyond the postcolonial rubric became increasingly clear (and the postcolonial rubric itself, as I have demonstrated, wasn't entirely feasible). Therefore, I limited the comparison to Iran and the Caribbean, and the connections that Nabavi and Prashad had made in the realm of cultural activity offered the logic and starting point for my comparisons. And in terms of organizing the chapters, it made sense to move forward both chronologically and by genre, neatly packing each chapter into its own frameworks for comparison, whether that framework was gendered nationalisms, genealogical disruptions, or the politics and poetics of travel.

Ultimately, however, in this final product, the chapters cannot be separated into their own neat categories. Rather, a continuum of comparative reading conditions surfaced; the gendered narratives that seemed to arise out of the lived conditions of their authoresses, seeped into the disruptive genealogies of the subsequent chapter, and out of the comparative and transnational poetics of Sepehri and Walcott, that intimated multiple literary and linguistic traditions (without being reducible to them), a model for the comparative literary studies I had in mind emerged. The fluidity in narrative and genre that I pinpointed in my reading of Condé, continued in the narrative of Golshiri; Daneshvar's incorporation of the folkloric and her play with divergent literatures and languages could be found in Glissant's novel. The culmination of these experimentations could be seen in the poetry of Sepehri and Walcott, where the fixed notion of

home was abandoned and the cross-cultural affects read in the previous chapters were taken to their compelling conclusion. This conclusion is itself the framework and criteria for comparison: a cross-cultural poetics that comes out of traveling concepts, texts, languages, and peoples—one that refuses to become thwarted by claims of belonging to this or that tradition or nation.

In this dissertation’s abstract, I wrote of the larger, overarching argument for undertaking this comparative project, and that is to place Persian literature front and center of a comparative literature study that is coming out of an English department; moreover, by overturning the more traditional modes of comparison (which, in the case, could include a comparison of the Caribbean or Persian texts with anglophone texts, primarily from Europe or the United States), I simultaneously sought to challenge what Lawrence Venuti laments is “the Anglocentric work on transnationalism coming out of English departments...where the aggressive monolingualism of the US academy entirely excludes foreign languages and literatures.”⁵³¹ In the same essay, Venuti refers to efforts by the American Comparative Literature Association in the 1990s to amend the Eurocentric nature of comparative literary studies:

Yet not much changed. Postcolonial theory emerged, decades after the militant anticolonial movements, amid an already expanded canon that encompassed African, Asian, and Latin American literatures. By the 1990s, this expansion had been institutionalized in myriad courses, publications, conferences, and professorships. Nonetheless, canons are by definition exclusionary because they necessarily create margins where literatures, authors, and works lie in the shadows of neglect.⁵³²

My dissertation, then, as mentioned earlier, was initially an attempt at a postcolonial literary project that included hitherto unacknowledged locations in the field, with a particular focus on Iran. Yet, as it is evident from Venuti’s statements, there are connections to be made between the

⁵³¹ Lawrence Venuti, “Hijacking Translation: How Comp Lit Continues to Suppress Translated Texts,” *boundary 2* 43.2 (2016), 183. DOI 10.1215/01903659-3469952.

⁵³² *Ibid.*, 181

blind spots of comparative literary studies and postcolonial literary studies and the institutionalization and canonization in both fields that overlook a great deal of texts from marginal locations and literary traditions. For Venuti, one way in which this issue could be resolved is to include translated texts in comparative literary studies. In this logic, insisting that comparative literature scholars master the foreign language of the literature they wish to study, ensures that texts from the aforementioned marginal traditions will remain unnoticed and unstudied in the realm of Comparative Literature. Subsequently, Persian literature, for example, would continue to be limited to Area Studies departments. But insisting that Comparative Literature include the study of translated texts does not resolve the marginalization of texts and locations, for it is, most commonly, these same marginalized texts that are seldom translated and published in global markets.

In his introduction to his translations of Sepehri's poetry in *The Lover Is Always Alone*, Karim Emami writes, "A book of English translations of Sepehri's poems should have been published abroad. But it was at home, in Iran, that willing publishers were to be found."⁵³³ After asking Peter Magierski, the Middle East and Islamic Studies Librarian at Columbia University (who has nearly omniscient knowledge of Persian literature in translation), to purchase the book for the library, he informed of the difficulty he'd had in locating it, not to mention the unusually high price it had due to its obscurity. Moving forward with the project, I hope to expand upon and demonstrate the valence that incorporating neglected works can have in understanding the hegemonic structures of power at play in knowledge production, both locally and globally—structures that determine what gets included in the discipline of Comparative Literature, thus limiting the comparisons undertaken in this discipline to more familiar territories and texts.

⁵³³ Emami and Sepehri, 21

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