Sanaz Fotouhi

Alternative Readings: Approaching Iranian Writing in English as Postcolonial Literature

Postcolonial Interventions: An Interdisciplinary Journal in Postcolonial Studies

ABSTRACT:

This paper draws on various readings of colonial and post-colonial theories to approach diasporic Iranian literature in English through a post-colonial framework. It examines the development of this literature in response to domineering and hegemonic forces within and beyond Iran, and highlights the techniques that some writers engage with as a means to re-frame and rewrite certain discourses of representation. In specific pays attention to the way certain writers reconstruct and re-imagine representation through engagement and rewriting of history, discursive and physical transgression and elements of magic realism. This paper situates the importance of this literature within the larger framework in which it is emerging, arguing for its perpetual social and political impact in the way Iran are seen and see themselves now and in the future in the West.

Keywords: *Iranian literature, Post-colonial literatures, History, Magic Realism, Iranian women*

Introduction

When it comes to naming colonized nations and consequently postcolonial literatures, Iran is probably not one that would immediately spring to mind. This is, however, if we were to define a colonized society in the traditional sense of physical and political occupation of a country by another. In this case, then Iran has never been colonized. But as we know colonial forces (and postcolonial reactions) do not necessarily equate a bloody conquest and years of occupation. However, as history has proven, colonialism can also mean an imposition of power through ideological and political influences. This form of colonialism does not necessarily always come from external forces and its meaning can be extended to also include internal and forceful impositions of dominant ideologies over groups of people. In explaining this approach to colonialism (and consequently postcolonial reactions) Elleke Boehmer's definition is useful: "colonialism [is] not different from other kinds of authority, religious or political, in claiming a monopoly on definitions in order to control a [. . .] reality" (35). From this perspective, then the Iranian nation, with a history of foreign ideological influences that affected its internal operation, as well as a series of domestic policies that have continuously claimed forceful monopolies on its people to control certain realities and the way Iranian history is recorded and projected, as will be contextualized in this paper, can be seen as having a certain kind of imposing colonial history.

Consequently, some cultural products emerging in response to this could also be read as postcolonial responses, where again, the definition of the term postcolonial does not equate the traditional definition of it as "after colonialism". Rather, here it reflects the multiple meanings of the term, specifically resonating Homi Bhahba's argument that "post" does not indicate "sequentiality [. . .] or polarity" (1). Here, as he defines it, post indicates "moving beyond" to resist the attempt at totalitarian forms of social expression. It is from the junction

of Boehmer's definition of colonialism and Bhabha's interpretation of "post" as beyond in postcolonialism that this paper argues that certain literatures emerging from Iran could be approached through a postcolonial framework. Given that the study of all Iranian literature in this way would be impossible, this study is limited to examining literary productions by the members of the Iranian diaspora, specifically works produced in English, over the last thirty-five years.

Although there is a vast body of diasporic Persian literature, this paper has been limited to examining writing only in English because of the significance of this linguistic choice. English, as we will see, provides writers not only with the means to overcome power imbalances and silences in Iran, but also the ability to engage with and respond to some of the imposing Western forces and literary representations that have historically reflected certain powerfully stereotypical images of Iran and Iranians around the globe. As the rest of the paper would demonstrate, the representation of Iran and the Iranians in the West (particularly in America and expressed in English) has usually been marred by two opposing historically and politically drawn images of pre-revolutionary exoticism of Persia or its post-revolutionary representations as terrorist and religiously fanatic. These two dominantly popular types of representations have not only historically imposed certain stereotypical understandings, silencing the voices and experiences of many in the West, but also hampered and affected the visibility, integration and assimilation of the Iranian diaspora into their host communities.

It is, therefore, in the above context that this paper argues that the unifying and totalitarian pre- and post-revolutionary regimes of Iran, and some dominant pre and post revolutionary representations of Iran and Iranians in the West, could be seen as quasi-colonial and oppressive forces that have rendered many Iranians marginal both in Iran and abroad and

therefore aspects of their literature may be seen as postcolonial responses to these representations. This paper, therefore, examines specific literary techniques such as engagement with and re-writing of certain elements of history, narrative and physical transgressions of characters, and magic realism, that Iranian writers in English use in order to give voice to silenced experiences and to re-write and re-construct certain dominant representations. The main emphasis here is an analysis of how these techniques are dismantling imposing and already existing representations in order to project desired reflections of the multiplicities of Iranian experiences in Iran and abroad.

Responding to the Iranian Past:

In looking at Iranian history, one could argue that generally, there is a certain kind of homogeneity in how facts and events are reflected, recorded and represented. As Nasrin Rahimieh observes, "...the construction of Iranian national identity has insisted upon the erasure and elision of gender, language and ethnicity" (38). This is reflected in narratives of Iranian history where voices of ethnic and religious minorities, alternative political parties, and women have nearly always been silenced by the ruling political regimes, and remained outside the mainstream discourse of historical representation, seldom publicly acknowledged. The dominant Iranian perspective of history, as seen in history books, is often told from the mainstream male perspective, politically and ideologically aligned with the government of the time, and recorded and presented in a way to ensure the appearance of a continuous hegemonic and sustained narrative of the Iranian nation.

This means that in dominant narratives of Iranian history, many alternative histories and experiences have been left out and not represented. Consequently, for those not represented there is lack of a sustained sense of historical identity. This is because as theorists such as Stuart Hall believe identities are "constituted within, not outside

representation", and "we must understand [identities] as produced in specific historical and institutional sites within specific discursive formations and practices, by specific enunciative strategies" (4). From this perspective, one could argue that by not being allowed to be publicly and historically acknowledged and represented, many Iranians including people of ethnic and religious minority backgrounds, women and those with alternative political ideologies, have not been given the possibility to fully realise their own sense of identity and historic sensibility within Iran. Consequently, this lack of public historical acknowledgement and representation, has not allowed for many to be historically "legitimised". For "what it means to have a history," according to Bill Ashcroft "is the same as what it means to have a legitimate existence: history and legitimation go hand in hand" (*Transformation* 83). What this means is that the unifying and exclusive historical narratives of Iran, like colonial forces, have not factored the multiplicity of histories in the grand narrative of history and incorporated them only "at its edges", within a "marginal reality"(*Transformation* 92).

It is in response to this lack of historical existence and hegemonic historical narratives that engagement with history through literature could be seen as a postcolonial apparatus. By engaging with history, as we will see, Iranian writers in English appear to be tapping into, rewriting, and challenging dominant historical narratives, to introduce neglected multiplicities of Iranian experiences and to bring them from the margins to the centre. As such, like postcolonial writers, they not only challenge certain elements of dominant narratives of history, but also the "the master discourse of history" ("Remembering" 709). One way that this strategy operates, according to Ashcroft, is by "interpolat[ing] the master discourse of [...] history, engaging it on its own terms" ("Remembering" 709). And one of the functions of interpolating history is "to subvert the unquestioned status of the "scientific record" by reinscribing the "rhetoric" of events," (*Transformation* 92) by injecting, inserting

and interrupting history with marginal voices and narratives. These narratives, consequently, offer alternative versions and reconstruct history.

This kind of interpolation of grand narratives of history can be seen as a recurring underlying theme, manifested in various ways, throughout the body of diasporic Iranian writing in English. We come across numerous works that tap into and narrate specific historical periods from untold perspectives and through previously silenced voices. In *Paper: Dreams of a Scribe* (2004), for instance, Bahiyyih Nakhjavani, a Baha'i Iranian writer, takes us back into the unrecorded world of a scribe in 19thcentury Persia as he tries to find the perfect paper to write his perfect work. Similarly Anita Amirrezvani in *Blood of Flowers* (2007) recounts the untold history of a little rug-maker girl during the time of Shah Abbas (1571 – 1629). Amirrezvani follows a similar theme in *Equal of the Sun* (2013) recounting the fictional story of a Princess in the 1570s, Pari Khanoom, from the perspective of a beloved servant. Told from the completely unheard voice of the servant about a woman whose story would not have been told in history books to begin with, the book interjects and interpolates the grand narrative of Iranian history, offering a completely new perspective of that period of time from what has been historically recorded.

While Amirrezvani takes us deep back in time, others engage with more contemporary historical periods. In *The Age of Orphans* (2010), for example, Laleh Khadivi explores several decades of alternative Iranian history of the Kurdish minority by following the marginal perspective of an orphan boy to adulthood. As the book begins, the unnamed narrator loses his father and is taken away from his land forcefully and renamed Reza Khourdi by those in charge – Reza after the Shah and Khourdi after his tribe. Through his story, his struggles against the Shah, the search for a sense of identity taken away when he

was renamed, and his position leading up to the revolution, we encounter an alternative view of Iranian history from the rarely seen Kurdish perspective.

Throughout recent Iranian history, even prior to the revolution, those who expressed alternative political views or hinted at discontent often faced harsh punishments and were quickly removed by government forces. This is why engagement with some of those unacknowledged political activists and their histories, which have been almost completely wiped out of the mainstream pages of recent Iranian history, is one of the recurring themes of Iranian writing in English. *In Rooftops of Tehran* (2009), for instance, Mahbod Seraji brings to life characters who follow in the footsteps of revolutionaries, and whose stories would never have been told otherwise. As the book begins in early 1970s, Pasha a 17-year-old is in in love with Zari, the girl next door. But, she is about to get married to another young man, a friend of Pasha's, nicknamed Doctor. Unfortunately Doctor, a political activist, is jailed and eventually executed by the Shah's secret police. His family finds out about his death only when the police contact them to ask for the price of the bullet used for his execution. Following an emotional outcry, Pasha tells us how Doctor and others like him are altogether wiped out from the pages of history:

> No one will ever know the price of the bullet that killed Doctor. His parents are forbidden to speak of it. The stone on his grave must be left blank except for his name. […]Doctor will not be issued a death certificate, and all documents pertaining to his birth will also be destroyed. As far as the world is concerned, Doctor never existed. (143)

Pasha's outburst foregrounds the government's systematic erasure of political activists from Iranian history pages.

In the Walled Garden (2003), by Anahita Firouz, too, offers a glimpse of untold histories of political struggles and class differences in pre-revolutionary Iran. Set on the brink of the revolution it tells the story of a near love affair between Mahastee, an independent and glamorous aristocratic woman, and her childhood sweetheart, Reza, the son of their gardener, now a defiant political activist against the Shah. Through this relationship the novel reveals and foregrounds the complexity of Iranian society and history through the narratives of two marginalized characters. By highlighting their almost opposing struggles, the novel offers a different alternative kind of history of the revolution: from the perspective of an aristocratic woman and a Marxist revolutionary – both of whose voices and experiences are usually left out of the history of the revolution in Iran.

Although the writers named above, and others, interpolate history by foregrounding alternative historical perspectives, their narratives still operate within the framework of a recognisable sequence of historical events. While this interpolation is transformative it still operates and gives prominence to frameworks of dominant narratives that had marginalized them to begin with. This means that despite introducing alternative histories and voices, they are still bound by the teleology and chronology of recognisable dominant accounts. To use Ashcroft's words, they still fall victim to the "trap of the empirical narrative which privileges certain species of "facts."" (*Transformation* 88)

One author, Gina Nahai, is aware of this, and has dedicated her career to transforming history by offering an incompatible and contesting narrative, compared to the dominant teleology of events. Of her novels so far, three revolve around the lives of Jewish women and their histories in Iran. What distinguishes her work, however, is her approach to the representation of history. In *Cry of the Peacock* (1991), for instance, Nahai traces the matrilineal history of a group of Jewish women in the ghettos of Iran through 200 years

leading to the revolution. But, instead of narrating their stories through known linear dominant discourses of Iranian history, she rewrites events as we know them to highlight and foreground the underrepresented Jewish experience.

For centuries, Iranian Jews, both in their actual and historical existence, have been marginalised. While confined to their own quarters until Reza Shah's reign, they are also only marginally present in history books. Nahai draws on their collective memory and experiences to create a historical novel that reflects the lived history of Iranian Jews. Based on oral history, the novel defies the linearity and teleology of historical events as we know it. Instead it constructs a new kind of history woven of myths and unrecorded memories. It invents a mythical history of Iranian Jews through the story of Esther the Soothsayer, and her granddaughter Peacock, who lives for over a hundred years. We see Persian Kings come and go, and the regimes change. But all of these events that are usually dominant in the narratives of Iranian history are now peripheral, and highlighted only if they contribute to the flow of life and history of the ghetto, or if those from the ghetto contribute to what is happening outside. This approach, the foregrounding of alternative histories, makes the novel a site for contesting Iranian history against dominant discourses. As such it has "the potential to become the way in which the past is understood" (*Transformation* 89). It can be read as legitimizing Jewish Iranian historical identity as it provides them with a site of "struggle for authority over the past," (Ashcroft, *Transformation* 98) by transforming the teleology of Iranian history as we have believed it, interpolating the very narrativity of history.

These narratives, by transforming dominant accounts of history and offering alternative voices, could be read as transgressing and moving into what Homi Bhabha describes as the realm of "the beyond" in postcolonial narrativity. Here, as he describes it, the beyond "is neither a new horizon, nor a leaving behind of the past", but a movement in

"transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion" (2). According to Bhabha's definition, in this movement there is "a sense of disorientation, a disturbance of direction, in the "beyond": an exploratory, restless movement" (2). As he says, "it is the move away from the singularities of "class" or "gender" as primary conceptual and organizational categories, [that] has resulted in an awareness of the subject positions – of race, gender, generation, institutional location, geopolitical locale, sexual orientation – that inhabit any claim to identity in the modern world" (2). Here, to move beyond singularities, however, there is a need to think "beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences" (1).

While rewriting and reframing historical narratives has been one way Iranian writers are writing into the realm of the beyond, outside of singular and dominant forms of representation, this is often only made possible through a physical movement or a journey that literally moves characters outside the physical, national and cultural borders that had limited their sense of self to begin with. Here, the very concept of going on a journey itself is important since it is, according to Dagninio "often seen to symbolize the pursuit and achievement of a sense of personal identity," (65) something that Iranian women, specially, were historically not given a chance to do. The journey in literature, traditionally, also "seems to follow the paradigms of a masculine identity formation" (65). In Iranian literary tradition especially, for instance in Sufi poetry and early nationalistic literature, the journey is almost always about a man who embarks on a trip, leaving the women behind. Taking the particularly masculine form of the journey in Iranian literature, and the physical limitations that had bound a woman's sense of identity within Iranian society, the journey in Iranian writing in English operates on two levels to allow Iranian women, especially, to transgress and move beyond, recount and reconstruct dominant narratives that had defined their sense of

self. On one level it allows for women to physically transgress borders that had defined their sense of identity and dictated the nature of their relationships to others. On another level, by adapting the very formula that had hampered Iranian women's sense of identity, the journey becomes part of what Boehmer identifies as "subversion by imitation [as] [. . .] an important mode of resistance" (174) in postcolonial discourse.

This is why the journey is a prominent theme in numerous novels by Iranian women writers. For example, in Gina Nahai's *Moonlight on the Avenue of Faith*, which revolves around the conflicted relationship between the Jewish woman Roxanna and her daughter Lili, it is only through Roxanna's journey outside of the Jewish ghetto, and beyond Tehran and Iran, that she can reconstruct her own sense of identity beyond what was defined by the society. In Nahid Rachlin's *Foreigner* (1979), the main protagonist Feri finds her own sense of self by travelling to America, and then back to Iran. Similarly in *The Fortune Catcher* (1997), it is Layla's travel back and forth between Iran and America that provides her with an understanding of her own sense of freedom and identity. In all these narratives the women first overcome limitations of movement imposed upon them by embarking on a journey as a means to go beyond other limiting forces that had defined their sense of identity. Only consequently can they gradually break through and transgress other layers of oppressions, definitions and fears, giving them the space to grow and reconstruct their sense of self in their own terms, often in a new environment beyond the borders of Iran.

Sometimes, however, these physical journeys and transgressions beyond cannot be easily undertaken since numerous restrictions have formed too many impenetrable barriers. Consequently, transgressions beyond are sometimes made possible only by the intervention of some sort of metaphysical force, such as magic, that offer a break to the realist conventions of expression and existence. In fact, in some cases, the women's very physical or ontological

survival depends on the interference of such forces. In explaining the importance of magic in the work of Iranian women writers, Wendy Faris' "Scheherazade's Children: Magical Realism and Postmodern Fiction" is extremely informative. Faris defines magic realism as a genre that "combines realism and the fantastic in such a way that magical elements grow organically out of the reality portrayed" (163). She goes on to "invoke Scheherazade's children as its standard bearers because they might be imagined as 'replenished' postmodern narrators, born of the often death-charged atmosphere of high modernist fiction, but able some-how to pass beyond it" (165). According to Faris, "Scheherazade's children are all postmodern story tellers [who] may need magic to battle death, a death more depersonalized even than the one their mother faced from King Shahriyar; they inherit the literary memory, if not the actual experience, of death camps and totalitarian regimes, as well as the proverbial death of fiction itself" (164). Faris, however, argues that, while Scheherazade is "concerned with epistemological questions, with figuring out how to extend her store of knowledge to stave off her death, her children need strategies for a different, narrative, kind of survival". She believes that although these children have "come into being as epistemological objects", if they are to survive, they "must go forward as subjects, crossing into the ontological domain" (166). They must find their own voices; they have to "contend with their own narrative existence [. . .] they must invent their fictional identities for themselves" (166). But as Faris argues, these narrators need to invent their own ways to surpass the crushing forces of their past, things that realism and male-dominated realist modes of narrative would not let them do so. This is why, she argues, these narrators need magic to secure their survival. Although Faris focuses on Latin American, Caribbean and Indian writing, her argument can be applied to some of the writings of diasporic Iranian writers in English. This is not only because Scheherazade's Persian background and Iranian women's responses today make this parallel more relevant and appealing but also because many of these women also need magic to help

them cross over into the ontological domain, sometimes even just to live as subjects of their own stories.

One example of this is demonstrated in Nahai's *Moonlight on the Avenue of Faith,* (from here referred to as *Moonlight).* Although the main plot revolves around Lili as she tries to find her mother, Roxanna, who had opened wings and flown away from their house in Tehran, *Moonlight* is a story that spans generations of conflict between Jewish Iranian mothers and daughters, and the society in which they live, as it follows their transgressive journey from the ghettos of Tehran into eventual exile. Even though narrated polyphonically through the voices of Roxanna, Lili and Miriam, this is not enough to guarantee their survival. It is, however, only magic that saves their lives and ensures their reunion. It is Roxanna's magical ability to fly that contributes to her epistemological and ontological survival. Had it not been for her ability to suddenly grow wings and fly she would have died as a child at the hands of her own mother who, believing her to be cursed, had thrown her off the roof. It is also the possibility of flight that allows her to escape her marriage, and to transcend the boundaries of Iranian society in which, as her husband claims, "no woman can get beyond a city's borders without her husband's permission" (Nahai 143). It is magic that also eventually takes her to Turkey through a difficult journey and into America. It is again magic that leads to her eventual reunion with her daughter in America who had searched all her life for her mother. As Roxanna settles in America magically her frail body gradually fills up with a mysterious liquid, and when doctors are tending to her, her family accidentally discovers her and informs Lili. After she is bedridden with this liquid, Roxanna is forced to silently listen to all the untold and secret stories that Lili is being told by her sister Miriam. The liquid, Miriam tells Lili, is made of sorrow and guilt, which can only be released through a magical ritual performed by Lili. Following the ritual Roxanna begins to shed tears, releasing the guilt and

gaining the ability to speak. As the result of this, for the first time, she starts to tell her own version of things and heals her damaged relationship with her daughter.

The significance of magic realism as a kind of postcolonial resistance is clearly reflected in Nahai's novel. As Stephen Slemon puts it, magic realism "carries a residuum of resistance towards the imperial centre and to its totalizing systems of generic classification" (x). This resistance is formed as it focuses on what Theo D'Haen calls the "excentric", by "speaking from the margins, from a place "other" than "the" or "a" centre," (195) by "a voluntary act of breaking away from the discourse perceived as central" (196). In this narrative, it is magic that allows for Roxanna's physical and narrative transgression as a marginal Iranian Jewish woman to having a voice as the central character of the novel.

On a larger scale, vis-à-vis traditional Iranian literature, magic realism operates in a similar way, as a kind of resistance towards the realism of unitary and coherent narrative forms of patriarchal Iranian literature in which women often had very little presence. Like Scheherzade's daughters, for these women to survive and to be heard, they need magic to breach the boundaries of realist Iranian literature. Magic provides them with a unique discursive space in which Iranian women writers can express themselves and their foremothers according to their own needs, beyond the borders of Iran that had limited their movement, as "subjects, and protagonists of their own reality rather than objects and antagonists in the Father's drama" (Wenzel 59).

Going Beyond Iran:

Embarking on a journey and resettling beyond the borders of Iran, even if with the aid of magic, however, is not enough for some of these characters to completely break free, or ensure their survival. Often, in their new setting, especially in America, many Iranians find

themselves within a different set of already established and historically defined descriptions and frameworks associated with them. This is why Iranian writing in English as much as being a response to the dominant narratives of Iranian history in Iran, is also in dialogue with representations of Iran and Iranians in the West.

If we look at the representations of Iran in the West, the sense of historical non-legitimation that existed in Iran resonated even beyond the borders. This is mainly because the Iranian diaspora, in addition to dealing with the perils of migration and exile and resettlement, also faced the burden of contradictory images, pre and post-revolution, which have historically informed popular Western representations of Iran and Iranians. As Lila Azam Zanganeh puts it, Iran has been present in Western literature since antiquity: "[W]hether as a haven of exotic sensuality or a stronghold of fanatic religiosity, Iran has, since ancient times, inflamed the popular imagination" (xi).

Images of pre-revolutionary Iran, flourished in the Western mind through dated explorer travelogues and tourist accounts, and fictional narratives, often emphasized its exotic atmosphere. Put another way, the representation of Iran throughout Western history often resonates with Edward Said's definition of the Orient in Orientalism, as a land that "had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscape, [and] remarkable experiences" (1). Descriptions of Persia (as it was known up to 1935) were often depicted by male narrators through stereotypical and effusive elaborations of it as "a pleasant dream,"(Amory 1) with "the most cheerful people in the world" (Ibid). In these accounts, however, despite florid descriptions, there is still reflected a sense of Western superiority, lacking the agency and presences of locals altogether. This is especially evident in the depiction of the condition of women, who occupied a separate territory, out of the Western male narrators' reach and understanding, and remained a mystery. Western writers, who were

both "fascinated and repelled by the veil" and by the situation of women, created the assumption and convention that "veiled women were necessarily more oppressed, more passive, more ignorant than unveiled women" (Mabro 3). This historically constructed image, led to "exaggerated statements about the imprisoned existence of women in "the Orient"" (Mabro 3). These accounts of pre-revolutionary Persia, often emphasizing its exoticism, presented a historically stereotypical image of the country, creating a dominant narrative that silenced the individual histories and voices of the locals.

However, the exotic image of Persia changed dramatically after the 1979 Islamic Revolution. While the forced re-veiling of women reinforced some already-existing negative images, it was the American hostage crisis that led to the emergence of strong anti-Iran, and negative attitudes in the West. The crisis, which began in November 1979 when a number of Americans were taken hostage at the American embassy in Tehran and kept for over a year, unfolded a nightly media drama for the American public. This constructed a negative perception of Iran and Iranians as they were portrayed as "non-rational", "hungry for martyrdom", and "unwilling to compromise" (Mobasher 119). Public interest on this issue gave rise to many popular narratives that resonated and reaffirmed these negative beliefs and representations. For example, amongst other similar narratives, it was during this time that accounts such as Betty Mahmoody's *Not Without My Daughter* (1987), which recounts the seemingly true story of an American woman held captive in Iran by her Iranian husband soon after the revolution and during the war, became extremely popular and contributed to the already negative Western popular imagination of Iran. Consequently, amidst these post-revolutionary representations, the exoticism of Persia was soon replaced with images of Iran as a demonic, inaccessible, anti-American dystopia with escalating numbers of human rights violations. While the non-stop coverage of the hostage crisis played an especially important role in the construction of an anti-Iranian attitude during that time in history, it resonated far

into the future, continuing to affect how Iran and Iranians are seen and represented in the West even today.

This meant that when Iranians migrated to the West, especially soon after the revolution and into America, they entered a society where their sense of identity was already dictated by a kind of dominantly historically informed representation based on either a sense of exoticism or negative religious fanaticism. As a result, many Iranians were faced with dealing with a new sense of identity crisis, one that stemmed from open discrimination in their new home. This is why for many diasporic Iranian writers, writing, especially in English, has also become a means through which they are regaining and reconstructing the dominant historically imposed representation to regain their sense of identity in the West. Here the use of the English language becomes especially important, acting as a postcolonial apparatus, as a means to tap into and re-construct dominant historical narratives that have informed the Iranian sense of identity in the West. This is because language and how it is used can be far more than a mere tool for communication. In many cases, language could be seen as an imposition by domineering forces, "a strategy of cultural hegemony" ("Remembering" 708) that is often exclusive and "impose[s] a way of talking about the world that privilege[s] certain kinds of distinction and representations and debase[s] others" (*Caliban* 3). It is for this reason that for postcolonial writers and others resist dominant forms of expression or language and experiment as to how it can be adapted as a vehicle for resistance and challenge. This is also why in postcolonial resistance, "colonial languages have been not only instruments of oppression but also instruments of radical resistance and transformation" (*Caliban* 3).

Consequently, to write in English becomes a conscious decision for employing the dominant language, appropriating it to "make it do a different cultural work" (*Caliban* 4). For

many diasporic Iranian writers, as well, to write in English is a conscious strategy that allows them to speak against the oppressive historical forces, both of their host as well as their home countries. In relation to Iran, accounts of Iranian history have, almost always, been written by male members of society and through a dominant language which has caused many silences, particularly for women and those of minority backgrounds. Beyond Iran, however, especially in America, things were not too different as they found themselves in a culture where the dominant historical narratives (told in English) had already limited and constructed hegemonic views of Iran and Iranians. This is where their engagement and choice to write in English becomes a strategy that not only offers them a new language with which to write beyond the limitations they faced in Iran, but also the means to adapt the dominant language of their host country to resist and transform it to make it do something different.

One author who makes a point to demonstrate this is Roya Hakakian, a Jewish Iranian woman, who tells us why she chose to write about her experiences of the revolution and of leaving Iran, in English. In the opening pages of her memoir *Journey from the Land of No* (2004) she tells us that when as a journalist, she received a call asking her to write about student clashes in Iran in 1999, she found herself "embittered by [her] history", unable to write objectively about it. She writes an apologetic email confessing "the past and the events that followed the revolution had biased me forever," (13) and that she was not the best candidate for this piece. Instead of accepting her apology she gets a response: "tell me about them" (13). However, she initially finds recalling and sharing memories of Iran extremely difficult as she feels that she does not have the right language for self-expression. But, through encouragement, she gradually finds English as the new medium for recounting her untellable story. She says:

> To write in Persian would be daunting. Instead of re-examining the

> memories, I feared that in Persian, I might begin to relive them. Persian could summon the teenager at sea. English sheltered the adult survivor, safely inside a lighthouse. I did not know how to use the language of the censors to speak against them; to use the very language by which I had been denied so much as a Jew, a woman, a secular citizen, and a young poet. […]. The irrevocable journey I had made was not the physical one, out of Iran. It was the journey from "no," from the perpetual denials. And what I had painstakingly arrived at, greater than even the new land, was a new language, the vessel of my flight to vast possibilities. (15)

It is English, this new-found language, free from the constraints of Persian and its associations, that gives her the possibility to recount and reconstruct her history in her new setting. Here, Hakakian's narrative in English becomes the means for her to represent her own neglected experiences against a history that had denied her any space in the grand narrative of events as a Jewish teenage girl. In addition, her choice to write in English gives her the opportunity to also have a voice within her diasporic community, one that had also denied her any space for expression as a Jewish Iranian woman living under the historically constructed labels of exotic/terrorist. In fact, Hakakian tells us of a fear that had prevented her from recounting her story had been the biases of her potential audience:

> …who came in two kinds: the misinformed, who think of Iran as a backward nation of Arabs, veiled and turbaned, living on the periphery of oases [. . .]; and the misguided, who believed the Shah's regime was a puppet government run by the CIA, and who think that Ayatollah Khomeini and his clerical cabal are an authentic, home-grown answer

> to an unwarranted U.S. meddling (11).

However, when Hakakian realises that English provides her a voice with which she can speak about her experiences within her diasporic community, she taps into the system and takes hold of the very language which had historically denied her story. This linguistic appropriation interpolates the dominant narratives of history by offering alternative versions of known accounts from the perspective of a young girl, much different to the stereotypical and dominant narratives that had framed the way she was viewed. This interpolation transforms the historically imposed beliefs of her "misguided" and "misinformed" acquaintances and potential readers. Reviewers and reader were also quick to pick up on this. As Irene Wanner writes in a review of the book "This book does us the service of removing some of the region's mythical stereotypes [...] and illuminating a real contemporary culture we would do well to know better" (2004).

Stories like Hakakian's, and others like hers, by using English as the new medium of expression, interpolate the grand narratives of Iranian history, by foregrounding marginal voices and experiences, and giving them a sense of historical existence both in Iran and abroad. This in turn not only gives them, but also those who identify with them, a sense of historical belonging, and legitimises their experiences. This sense of legitimisation provides the opportunity for many to assert themselves in their new diasporic setting, as well as against the historically stereotypical portrayals of Iranians in the West as exotics and terrorists. This is because historical legitimisation, and interpolation of history by offering alternative and human perspectives, shatters stereotypes. As Anahita Firouz tells us of responses of non-Iranian readers to her book *In the Walled Garden* on her website:

> ...they didn't know that the Iran in this novel existed. Because of how Iran is shown in the media, they think it is all angry fists raised in the air. But I am getting […]

> feedback from the readers who say they like walking into this other world before the revolution" (http://www.anahitafirouz.com).

Positive responses such as this, of which there are too many for the scope of this paper, demonstrate the importance and impact of these narratives in shattering stereotypes and offering alternative perspectives of Iranian history that are full of individual human experiences.

The employment of English, especially where it taps into and draws on certain literary strategies that are already in line with postcolonial resistances, such as the use of magic realism, adds another layer of complication to the way their works can be read. Magic realism, on which this paper touched earlier, in particular, plays another important role in establishing the position of Iranian writers at large within the arena of world literatures in English. As Theo D'haen argues, magic realism can be a means of accessing the "main body of 'western' literature for authors not sharing in, or not writing from the perspective of, the privileged centers of this literature for reasons of language, class, race, or gender, and yet avoiding epigonism by avoiding the adoption of views of the hegemonic forces together with their discourse" (96). From this perspective, the Iranian engagement with magic realism, which according to Faris, "seems to provide [. . .] a revitalizing force that comes often from the "peripheral" regions of the Western culture – Latin America and the Caribbean, India, [and] Eastern Europe," (165), has not only contributed to a resistance, but also the construction of a new discourse for Anglophone Iranian literature where it can now be in a dialogue with and as part of this newly found centre, in the same manner that Gabriel Garcia Marquez contributed to Latin American literature and Salman Rushdie to Indian and Pakistani literature.

Conclusion

In conclusion, one can argue that by tapping into the derelict private and collective histories of their homeland and going beyond it through literature, and by "rethink[ing] the very codes and norms that consign them, as woman and other, to the margins," (Rahimieh 2002, 241) and by foregrounding alternative narratives, Iranian writers in English are offering new possibilities of existence in the realm of 'the beyond'. These seemingly postcolonial acts of literary resistance and transgressions, as demonstrated, can offer new possibilities of expression on different levels that can reflect into the real world and eventually provide an alternative space. Although this paper does not have the space to explore this concept further, these literatures, can have a profound effect on challenging and reframing the way Iranians are seen and see themselves, both in their home and host countries. Giving them a sense of legitimisation in relation to their homeland, these narratives can give them the confidence and the historical grounding to rewrite and overcome dominant narratives in their host cultures, consequently making for smoother integration, and assimilation in their new homes. After all, as Ashcroft tells us, "it is by narrative, by stories we tell, that we have a world" and it is through "narrative[s], that we may have a conception of a radically changeable world" ("Critical utopias" 418).

Works Cited

Amirrezvani, A.*Blood of Flowers.* New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2007. Print.

——— *Equal of the Sun*. New York: Scribner, 2012. Print.

Amory, C. *Persian Days*. Methuen: London, 1928. Print.

Ashcroft, B. *Post-colonial Transformation*. London: Routledge, 2001. Print.

——— "Critical utopias." *Textual Practices.* 21.3 (2007): 411-31. Print.

——— "Remembering the future: utopianism in African literature.' *Textual Practices.* 23.5 (2009): 703-22. Print.

_____ *Caliban's Voice: The Transformation of English in Postcolonial Literatures.* London: Routledge, 2009. Print.

Bhabha, H. *The Location of Culture*. New York: Routledge, 1994. Print.

Boehmer, E.*Colonial and Postcolonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995. Print.

Dagninio, P. "Quest of Question." *Literature and Quest.* Ed. C. Arkinstall. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1993. Print.

D'Haen, T. "Decentering privileged centers." *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community.* Ed. W.B. Faris & L.P. Zamora. Durham: Duke University Press, 1995. Print.

Faris, W. "Magical realism and postmodernism." *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community.*Ed.W.B. Faris & L.P. Zamora. Durham: Duke University Press, 1995. Print.

Firouz, A. *In the Walled Garden*. New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2003. Print.

Hall, S. "Who needs identity?"*Questions of Cultural Identity*. Ed.S. Hall& P. du Gay. London: SAGE, 1996. Print.

Khadivi, L. *The Age of Orphans*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2010. Print.

Mabro, J. *Veiled Half-truths: Western Travelers' Perceptions of Middle Eastern Women*. I.B. Tauris, New York, 1991. Print.

Mahmoody, B.*Not without my Daughter*. Corgi, New York, 1987. Print.

Mobasher, M. "Cultural trauma and ethnic identity formation among Iranian immigrants in the United States."*American Behavioural Scientist.* 50.1 (2006): 100–17. Print.

Nahai, G. *Moonlight on the Avenue of Faith*. Sydney: Scribner, 2000. Print.

———*Cry of the Peacock*. Sydney: Scribner, 1991. Print.

Nakhjavani, B. *Paper: Dreams of a Scribe*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2004. Print.

Pari, S. *The Fortune Catcher*. New York: Warner Books, 1997. Print.

Rachlin, N.*Foreigner*. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1979. Print.

Rahimieh, N. "Marking gender and difference in the myth of the nation: a postrevolutionary Iranian film." *The New Iranian Cinema: Politics, Representation and Identity*. Ed. R. Tapper. New York: I.B. Tauris, 2002. Print.

Said, E. *Orientalism.* Penguin: New York, 1978. Print.

Seraji, M. *Rooftops of Tehran*. London: New American Library, 2009. Print.

Slemon, S. "Post-colonial critical theories."*New Nationaland Post-Colonial Literatures: an Introduction*. Ed. B. King. New York: Clarendon Press, 1996. Print.

Wanner, I. "*Journey from the Land of No:* A Memoir paints child's life in shifting 1970s Iran." *Seattle Times*, 22 August, 2004. Print.

Wenzel, V. "Introduction to Luce Irigaray's "And the One Doesn't Stir without the Other."' *Signs* 7.1. (1981): 56 – 9. Print.

Zanganeh, L.A. *My Sister, Guard your Veil; My Brother, Guard your Eyes: Uncensored Iranian Voices*. Beacon Press: Boston, 2006. Print.