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Queerness in Translation: Women's Homoerotics and Gender Play in pre- and post-Revolutionary Iran

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by

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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This work aims to reframe how we think of subjectivity by approaching queerness from the context of the Islamic world, which historically embraced rather than eschewed homoerotics in practice and poetry. While much of queer theory takes the opposition of "hetero" and "homo" for granted and, after Foucault, treats sexuality as the privileged site of identity as defined by the state and individual, I build upon recent work that "provincializes" Western queerness to interrogate such foundational assumptions. Analyzing women's homoerotics and gender play in a multilingual corpus of Iranian feminist literature and documentary and feature films from 1966 to present, produced both domestically and in diaspora, I theorize queerness as deviance, as female masculinity, and as anti-respectability politics. This study uses practical and theoretical questions of translation to think through such politically urgent issues as how gender and sexuality are deployed in service of state and class power and how whiteness functions locally and globally. I resist claims of untranslatability, which too often foreignize non-Western Others,

and instead argue for an ethical translation that attends to, rather than erases, difference. If *transnational* queerness is an oxymoron because of the way it divorces the subject from her geographic and historical context, then *translating* queerness, I argue, becomes all the more crucial in a globalized world.

The dissertation of Mariam Rahmani is approved.

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Vita

Mariam Rahmani is a translator, writer, and young scholar. Her translation of Mahsa Mohebali's award-winning 2008 novel, *Nigarān nabāsh*, is forthcoming with Feminist Press in 2021 under the title *In Case of Emergency* with the added support of a 2018 PEN/Heim translation grant, while her fiction and essays have been published in *Gulf Coast*, *BOMB Magazine*, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, and *The Rumpus*. Rahmani holds a BA in Comparative Literature from Princeton University and an MSt in Islamic Art from the University of Oxford, both awarded with highest honors. Fall 2021 she is also due to finish an MFA in Fiction at Columbia University, where she has been working on a debut novel.

Introduction

> In Iran, first of all, we don't have gays/homosexuals/fags [sic] like in your country. In our country no such thing exists [audience laughter]. In Iran these things [booing]… In Iran [booing]… in Iran no such thing even objectively exists and I don't know who told you that. But as to [booing] … but as to women, some think—maybe you imagine that being a woman is a crime [in Iran]. Being a woman is not a crime! Woman is God's best creation and is the manifestation of kindness and compassion and beauty.
>
> - Mahmoud Ahmadinejad at Columbia University, September 24, 2007, my translation[1]

No gays in Iran? The gaffe is well-known. In September 2007 as the so-called War on Terror raged, then-President of Iran Mahmoud Ahmadinejad assured a booing crowd of students, scholars, and others at Columbia University that there were no "homosexuals" in Iran, as the AP Archive[2] puts it, or "no gays […] in Iran," as an ABC News headline has it.[3]

A recent scholarly investment in conceptualizing sexuality and sexual practice outside the strictures of stable identity would perhaps see some limited truth to Ahmadinejad's statement, though with quite different motives: inasmuch as "homosexuality" or "gayness" constitute subjectivities constructed in and through the modern Euro-American state, then there are no "homosexuals" or "gays" in Iran *that share the same history* as those in the U.S. This is not to say that no one in Iran today identifies as "homosexual,"[4] or for that matter, as "gay"—they do in fact, transliterated as such from the English (in Persian: گی)—but that those terms are precisely

[1] "Ahmadinejad: No homosexuals in Iran." *AP Archive*, on YouTube, 21 July 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RUE0tukdr4c. Retranslated and transcribed by the author.
[2] See above.
[3] Goldman, Russe. "Ahmadinejad: No Gays, No Oppression of Women in Iran: Iranian president says country has no gays, no desire for nuclear weapons." *ABC News*, 24 September 2007, *ABC News.com*, https://abcnews.go.com/US/story?id=3642673.
[4] Indeed Afsaneh Najmabadi warns not only of the dangers of making too much of the break between premodern and modern but also of the way writing homosexuality out of non-Western contexts threatens to collude with "homophobic cultural nativists who are happy to (al)locate homosexuality in 'the West'" (2005, 19).

used to gesture to a transnational contemporaneity at odds with, and intentionally distanced from, indigenous histories of same-sex practice and their burdened modern histories, as evidenced by Ahmadinejad's palpable derision. Indeed Ahmadinejad used neither the word "homosexual," which might be best translated as "*hamjinsgarā*," nor the more colloquial "gay/گی;" rather he deployed the slur "*hamjinsbāz*," an antiquated term considered so inappropriate that Persian-language sources critical of the event will hardly print it. (BBC Persian chooses to paraphrase Ahmadinejad's answer in order to use the word "*hamjinsgarā*" rather than "*hamjinsbāz*,"[5] while the Persian Wikipedia page simply replaces "*hamjinsbāz*" with the more respectful "*hamjinsgarā*" in quoting Ahmadinejad then explains that the President in fact used the former, thus reproducing the slur only in mediated terms.[6]) Hence "homosexual" and "gay" are both insufficient as translations. The statement might be more accurately be translated as "we don't have fags [sic] like in your country," a paralepsis whose violence lays not so much in the politics of occlusion as those of visibility: the deployment of "*hamjinsbāz*" casts same-sex practice as premodern in order to exclude its practitioners from Iranian contemporaneity—a queering in the original sense, without any redemptive spin to the term.

It is no coincidence that this queering of same-sex practice comes coupled with a form of wrote feminism. "But as to women […]," Ahmadinejad struggles to get out, "[w]oman is God's best creation and is the manifestation of kindness and compassion and beauty" (my translation). An Islamic feminism premised on essential femininity (i.e., her divine nature) attempts to erase the prior violence, offering heterosexual respectability in place of stigmatized homoeroticism and

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[5] "*Sukhanrānī-yi Mahmoud Ahmadinejad dar dānishgāh-i Columbia*" [Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's Speech at Columbia University]. *BBC Persia*, 25 September 2007, *BBC Persia.com*, https://www.bbc.com/persian/iran/story/2007/09/070925_he-ahmadinejad-ny.

[6] "*Safar-i Mahmoud Ahmadinejad bih New York (1386)*" [Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's Trip to New York (2007)]. *Wikipedia*, https://fa.wikipedia.org/wiki/سفر_محمود_احمدی%E2%80%8Cنژاد_به_نیویورک_(۱۳۸۶). Last accessed 18 September 2020.

criminalized same-sex practice. In an alternative to pinkwashing, feminism rather than normative gay rights offer an image of a modern nation ready to act on the global stage.

This now infamous event thus highlights the ways literal issues of translation are necessarily under- and overwritten with political and ethical stakes while also gesturing to the fraught relationship between the queering of homoeroticism and dominant feminisms in contemporary Iranian history, which serves as one of the central inquiries in this work. It moreover offers an entryway into understanding the ways contemporary normative Iranian heterosexuality is pitched on the disavowal of indigenous forms of homoeroticism and same-sex practice that were not always held at such a distance. That is, the very binary of "hetero" and "homo" that the comment assumes is arguably, and rather ironically, the most American-friendly formulation available.

Indeed Western queer theory is premised on the opposition of "hetero" and "homo," where those terms operate as prefixes, as adjectives, and colloquially as teasing insults (in the former case) or slurs (in the latter). Though preceded by an activist and communitarian reclaiming of the word "queer" in the wake of the AIDS crisis, the academic field of "queer theory" was famously anointed as such in a conference convened by Teresa de Lauretis at the University of California, Santa Cruz, in 1990. The revised conference proceedings (published in *differences* the following summer) exhibit a foundational investment in studying sexuality in tandem with race but nevertheless limit that theorization to and from American perspectives, albeit if Chicano or Black (de Lauretis, ed., 1991). In her opening remarks de Lauretis recalls the conference's "speculative premise that homosexuality is no longer to be seen simply as marginal with regard to a dominant, stable form of sexuality (heterosexuality) against which it would be defined either by opposition or by homology" (iii). Eschewing the conscription of the "merely

transgressive or deviant," she suggests that "male and female homosexualities […] may be reconceptualized as social and cultural forms in their own right, albeit emergent ones and thus still fuzzily defined, undercoded, or discursively dependent on more established forms" (iii).

Today the latter half of this statement seems dated: far from "fuzzily defined," the gay rights movement—iconized perhaps by the image of a White House itself luminously draped in the colors of the rainbow flag in celebration of U.S. federally mandated gay marriage in June 2015, no more than twenty-five years after the conference at UC Santa Cruz—has successfully defined a normative, mainstream American gay culture that has had scholars of queer critique bemoaning "homonormativity" as just yet another oppressive culture from the early 2000's.[7] But what is more remarkable is the slippage between "homosexualities" and "queer" in an otherwise compelling claim to nonderivative cultural formation. De Lauretis defines "queer" against the politically expedient umbrella term of "lesbian and gay:" the former "is intended to mark a certain critical distance from the latter" (iv). Tracking other formulations of "gay"' and "lesbian" (including switching the order, relating them via a slash, etc.), she writes that the term "queer theory" is meant "to both transgress and transcend [such distinctions and their ideological liabilities]—or at the very last problematize them" (v). And yet despite such subtleties an alignment between "homosexualities" and "queer" persists, as does an alignment between the more geographically and historically capacious term "same-sex desire"[8] and "queer" throughout the essay.

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[7] Though possible citations abound, consider by way of one example Lisa Duggan's critique of a "new neoliberal sexual politics […] that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a semobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption" made in 2003 and quoted by Jack Halberstam in 2005 (Duggan qtd in Halberstam, Jack. *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*. New York and London: New York University Press, 2005. See 19).

[8] The term appears on viii, x, and xi.

I aim to push against just such an easy alignment. Following in the footsteps of scholars working from non-Western archives I ask: what happens to queerness in a historical and geographic context that embraced homoerotics in practice and poetry such as that of the Islamic world? What happens to queerness when the modern opposition between "homo" and "hetero" has not only been recently undermined—as is de Lauretis' claim—but was never quite fully established in the first place?

Here I do not wish to overstate my case. As Afsaneh Najmbadi writes in the seminal work *Women With Mustaches and Men Without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity* (2005)—a work that in many ways established Iranian gender and sexuality studies as an intertwined field of inquiry[9]—a Foucauldian notion of the homosexual as a modern "type" both is and is not relevant to the Iranian modern context:

> Identity categories, such as gay and lesbian, undeniably belong to a specific place and a period of history in which same-sex desire came to be scripted as "homosexual as a species." *Fixing* of types into homo- and heterosexual may not have existed before this moment in the history of sexuality, but it would be a mistake to think that prior to that time there were no identifications whatsoever by desire types. (Najmabadi 2005, 19-20; emphasis in original)

These semi-identificatory types then include the nineteenth-century figures of the *amrad*, a "young adolescent male" who in many ways becomes the paragon of beauty, a model for men and women alike, and the *mukhannas*, "an adult man desiring to be an object of desire for adult men" (both Najmabadi 2005, 3). Crucially these identities could be unstable and changing, unlike the homosexual as "type." In the case of the *amrad*, for example, a boy could quite

[9] Previous scholarship often focused on gender alone, and specifically on women. Consider by way of three influential examples, listed in chronological order, Shahla Haeri's *Law of Desire: Temporary Marriage in Iran* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1989), Farzaneh Milani's *Veils and Words: The Emerging Voices of Iranian Women Writers* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1992), and Ziba Mir-Hosseini's *Marriage on Trial: A Study of Islamic Family Law* (London: IB Tauris, 1993).

simply, so to speak, grow out of it:[10] "[t]he growth of a full beard marked adult manhood, the adolescent male's transition from an object of desire to a desiring subject" (Najmabadi 2005, 15). And yet in the passage excerpted above Najmabadi warns against a wholesale rejection of Foucualt's supposition, as historically grounded it may be in the particular of his European archive, in part because of the "radical alterity [it creates] with the past, producing the premodern as a radically different time" (Najmabadi 2005, 19). Instead, as Najmabadi's study demonstrates, gender and sexuality in modern Iran was a complex terrain in which indigenous forms—themselves of course not created in a vacuum but rather in conversation with Islamic and non-Islamic forms to the West and East[11]—came into contact, and at times clashed with, processes of modernization as Westernization and vice-versa that were driven by elites and often by the court itself (in the latter case, most systematically by Nasiruddin Shah, r. 1848-96).

If Najmabadi's 2005 work might be read as the "queering" of homoeroticism in the making of Iranian modernity—that is, as the recoding of male homoerotics as deviant throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries especially—then this study turns to female subjectivity and the contemporary moment to argue that such "queering" is ongoing and incomplete, much to the frustration of pre- and post-Revolutionary state ideologies. Given the shifting cultural and political terrain of pre- and post-Revolutionary Iran, the contemporary period, defined here as 1966 to present, offers a particularly complex site of both fracture and continuity in the ways gender and sexuality are produced and represented, not to mention,

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[10] Indeed as Najmbadi notes on 3 when first defining the *amrad* and *mukhannas*, both "were not equated with effeminacy." See 16 for a more complete treatment of misreading femininity into these figures (Najmabadi 2005).

[11] See Scheiwiller, Staci Gem. *Liminalities of Gender and Sexuality in 19th Century Iranian Photography: Desirous Bodies*. New York and London: Routledge History of Photography, 2016.

produced through their representation in the various literary and filmic media on which I center my analysis, namely, short stories, novels, documentaries, and feature films.

Queer Time for a "Queer" Place[12]

Part of my project is to trouble the very divide I have just cited between a "pre-" and "post-" Revolutionary Iran. As Amy Motlagh has shown in *Burying the Beloved: Marriage, Realism, and Reform in Modern Iran Nationalizing Iran* (2012) and as I tackle more in depth in chapter one through Goli Taraghi's fiction, redescribing the historically male[13] beloved of Persian letters as female contributed to a larger project of reorganizing the family according to European models of companionate marriage that dates back to the Constitutional Revolution of 1905-9 and was fully adopted by the Pahlavi state (Motlagh 2012, see specially 4-10). Like Motlagh I do not perceive a break as much as a revision of terms by the self-professedly "Islamic" state established after the Revolution, at least when it comes to women and the family. The anti-chronological structure of this dissertation reflects this thesis: chapter one explores an interwoven representation of a pre-Revolutionary Iran framed by post-Revolutionary exile; chapter two offers a transnational view of the 1960's and 70's, or late Pahlavi period; chapter three explores a disaffected take on twenty-first century Iran (specifically, about 2005-8) in which tenets of post-Revolutionary public life such as mandatory veiling are in many ways taken for granted, if only by the very act of their contestation; and chapter four reads a 2010 Kiarostami film in terms of Khatami era (1997-2005) debates on the so-called woman question. This temporal interweaving is not meant to elide historical differences between each of the periods at hand—to the contrary, I attempt to historicize all these works of literature and film in

[12] This section title plays on Jack Halberstam's *In a Queer Time and Place* (2005) cited above.
[13] Or historically androgynous beloved in Motlagh's description, a point of departure between us I clarify in the chapter in question.

relation to contemporaneous feminist histories and broader political discourse—but rather to explore the surprising seams and sutures that exist between not only the pre- and post-Revolutionary but also among more precise periodizations within "the" post-Revolutionary.

Queer theory offers a way of accounting for this constant and coeval defining and redefining of center and periphery, of normal and deviant, and of respectable and queer. Indeed as I address in all four chapters but especially in chapters two (on a 1970 short story Mahshid Amrishahi and a Kamran Shirdel documentary on Tehran's red light district primarily shot in 1966) and three (on Mahshid Amirshahi's gender-bending 2008 novel, *Nigarān nabash* and my forthcoming English translation thereof, *Don't Worry*), anti-respectability politics cohere in the archive at hand as one of the most consistent elaborations of the queer. Indeed to the previous point on the tenuousness of periodization, my analysis of changing women's rights discourses in Iran from the mid-twentieth century to the current day, both the state-led and grassroots—or as the case may be, as in chapter two, the state-led that is somehow also "grassroots," only with rather elite "grass"—both the secular and Islamic, demonstrates the extent to which womanhood is consistently defined in terms of respectability in all these cases, despite any apparent ideological oppositions between them. In chapter two, for example, I define midcentury secular feminist *un*veiling as a form of internalized veiling whereby the respectable, educated modern woman disciplines herself: veiling thus operates as a means by which to achieve respectability for the mid-century secular feminist as much as it does for her post-Revolutionary Islamic feminist successor. In chapter three just such a symbolic valuation of veiling as a symbol of feminine respectability as defined by twenty-first century Islamic feminists and the post-Revolutionary state alike is then rejected by a deeply cynical feminist politics: I thus theorize "floating feminism," a queer politics of refusal that embraces drug use, cursing, and an antipodal

position to everything (even the anti-Revolutionary revolution), and I correspondingly elaborate "man-wearing" (*mardpūshī*), the contemporary feminist practice of crossdressing to subvert post-Revolutionary compulsory hijab, as veiling in masculinity (i.e., anti-femininity). Again then, unveiling functions as its opposite, but to distinct ends: the post-Revolutionary secular floating feminist refuses the co-constituted femininity and respectability that her pre-Revolutionary predecessor held dear.

Veiling is perhaps the most loaded symbol of Orientalism so that I must be quite clear: this study treats both the Pahlavi and current Islamic Republican regimes as "Islamic"—or rather, *Islamicate*, if I may stretch Kathryn Babayan and Afsaneh Najmabadi's use of the term in *Islamic Sexualities: Translations across Temporal Geographies of Desire* (2008) to the contemporary moment. Explaining why they favor the term over the "geopolitical category [of Middle East] and its attendant Western ethnocentrism" in the volume's preface, Babayan and Najmabadi credit Marshal G.S. Hodgson: "*Islamicate*, with its double adjectival ending, was conceived as parallel to the term *Italianate*, which refers not only to what is understood as Italian but all that is associated with Italian styles and modes of expression" (ix). In deploying this term I contend both that the Pahlavi and Islamic Republican states have inherited nineteenth-century and even premodern Islamicate cultural forms when it comes to gender and sexuality—indeed my reading of *ghayrat*, or male jealousy, in chapter three makes such a claim explicit, building on the work of historian Mohamad Tavakoli-Taraghi—and furthermore, that the relationship between "Islam" and these forms is, as such a double adjectival ending suggests, at best tenuous. In other words, there is no pure or monolithic "Islam" to be discovered behind, or dissociated from, the "Islamicate." When it comes to constructing and cohering female subjectivity especially, secularism and fundamentalism often share goals and work in concert with one

another in order to produce and reproduce femininity in the constrained terms of respectability and whiteness. (This dynamic becomes clear in chapter two but is more explicitly engaged in chapter four with reference to Minoo Moallem's 2005 work.) But this is not to suggest either that secularism and fundamentalism use the same tools or that the precise contours of what is considered respectable—or for that matter, white—remain the same. The case studies explored in each of these chapters attempt to tend to such distinctions in the relatively brief period at hand, 1966 to today.

The Where of Whiteness

Queer of color critique has already established the imbrication of queerness and racialized alterity. Referring to the "co-constitutive production of blackness and queerness" in *Nobody is Supposed to Know: Black Sexuality on the Down Low* (2014), C. Riley Snorton offers the down low as the very "condition for black sexual representation," elaborating black sexuality "within a 'glass closet' […] marked by hypervisibility and confinement, spectacle, and speculation" (3-4). By contrast contemporary Iranian sexualit(ies), which are homogenized as Muslim sexuality by nationalism and Orientalism alike, exhibit a vexed relationship to racialization operating through a politics of visibility *while simultaneously* continuing to hold whiteness close: on the one hand the post-Revolutionary, post-9/11 Iranian subject—and in particular, the Iranian woman—is regularly subjected to systemized hypervisibility in the form of mandatory veiling in Iran and increased surveillance outside Iran and especially in the West, whether at the airport or by more subtle means; on the other hand, Iranian womanhood has historically been invested in the project of transnational whiteness, as I elaborate in chapters one and two. Layering yet another transnational space on top of the domestic/diaspora binary, there is

too the sort of "hypervisibility of Iranian queers in cyberspace" that Sima Shakhsari attributes to a confluence between the so-called War on Terror and the proliferation of Internet culture in Iran (Shakhsari 2012, see 20). There the Iranian queer subject—whether female, male, or (perhaps especially) outside that binary—is alternately made to represent the backwardness of Iran by diasporic subjects and foreign discourses alike, or celebrated as the sign of "culture" read as surpassing the bounds of "Islamic" practice as institutionalized by the Islamic Republic.

Given such ambivalences I make a case for understanding race and racialization as dynamic and contextual: that is, I theorize a postcolonial subject that claims brownness abroad and whiteness "at home." Necessarily this study then departs from more celebratory readings of female homoerotics in postcolonial sites such as that of Natasha Tinsley's *Thiefing Sugar: Eroticism between Women in Caribbean Literature* (2010), which argues that "[women's] queering of a Caribbean landscape charts a poetics and politics of decolonization" (2). Such a decolonial reading is simply not available in the ambivalent archive at hand as I see it; instead what this archive calls for is a dissection of the interlocking forms of power that produce modern subjectivities and which those subjects use to their advantage, often at the expense of others.

Elaborating iterations of whiteness outside of the West that remain adjacent, and often loyal, to Western models is a sustained interest throughout this work. Via reading histories like that shared by mid-century Iranian feminism and so-called "Second Wave" Euro-American feminism (in chapter two) or that of another form of feminist sisterhood cohered in the figure of Juliette Binoche (in chapter four), I argue that transnational whiteness exists. I thus dissent to voices in Iranian studies that see race as either absent from or singular in an Iranian context. Whereas colleagues like Reza Zia-Ebrahimi (2016) and Parisa Vaziri (2019) are doing the

important work of inquiring into the production of Blackness in Iran,[14] however, I largely take the opposite tack of dissecting Iranian whiteness. In juxtaposing that whiteness with brownness, I argue that the same subject achieves itself through contradictory iterations of race or the absence thereof (i.e., in whiteness as universal). Another way of looking at this might be through the lens of Third Worldism. Indeed, pursuing this thread in chapter one, I do not suggest that the Revolution introduced fragility into an otherwise secure whiteness but rather identify a privileged pro-monarchical elite subject who is forced to redefine herself in exile after the Revolution in order to suggest that the tenuous whiteness of the contemporary Iranian subject may have roots in Iran's "Third World" status during the Cold War. Ultimately of course such roots extend even deeper, to the production of a "Near" and "Far" East in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European Orientalisms.[15]

Orientalism is alive and well in the Islamophobic context in which I write—i.e., Trump's America—so that reading queerness into or out of an Islamic world context is inherently a fraught project. I am as hesitant to reinscribe the Iranian/Muslim racialized other as always-already queer as I am to trade on what Shakhsari calls "the chic of queer in the Iranian diaspora" (15) in popular and academic economies of cultural cache. In *For the Record: On Sexuality and the Colonial Archive in India* (2009), Anjali Arondekar offers another spin on the famous Sedgwickian trope of the closet,[16] suggesting that the archive, like Sedgwick's closet, organizes "known and unknown" around the so-called secret of sexuality. Arondekar warns: "Such a movement from secrecy to disclosure relies on the maintenance, within the epistemological system, of the hidden, secret term, keeping all binaries intact" (8). How to write about non-

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[14] See also Vaziri's article "Pneumatics of Blackness" (2019) referenced in chapter two.
[15] The reference of course is to Edward Said's *Orientalism*, first published by Verso in 1978.
[16] In Sedgwick, Eve. *Epistemology of the Closet*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: UC Press, 1990.

Western queerness without falling into the trap of reproducing an epistemology of the closet, without constructing, to borrow from Riley, another glass closet? The method of close reading I employ is premised on such a performance of revelation, of unveiling. Yet I am committed to this methodology because of the opportunities for complexity that a sustained engagement with one, or at most a handful, of texts allows. Broadly speaking, this project attempts to disentangle the ways that distinct alterities operate with and through one another to produce both disciplined and unruly subjects. My aim then is not to disrobe those subjects but rather to explore the overlapping folds of the many robes they wear, and through which they achieve their selfhoods.

Hence it is worth reiterating: this study does not provide an account of lived queerness in Iran or its diaspora. Scholars like Afsaneh Najmabadi (2014) and Sima Shakhsari have provided sophisticated accounts of both,[17] though doubtlessly more work remains to be done. My present interest lies in representation and its beguiling relationship to the real, a twisted relationship that is perhaps epitomized in the oeuvre of the late filmmaker Abbas Kiarostami and its characteristic troubling of the boundary between feature film and documentary, as addressed in chapter four. Correspondingly in this work I treat "actual"—that is, self-professed—documentary films, as in chapters two and four, not as historical documents but as narratives whose form and content are culturally constructed and politically motivated, just like works that more openly claim to be fictions. As a literary scholar my tendency is to read all these films as texts, often quite literally, by transcribing portions of dialogue or script. As literary studies has maintained for some time now, troubling the binary between representation and the real is a project that can change not only how we think about representation but also how we think about reality. To borrow from

[17] See Afsaneh Najmabadi's *Professing Selves: Transsexuality and Same-Sex Desire in Contemporary Iran* (2014), treated throughout this work and especially in chapter 3, and Sima Shakhsari's *Politics of Rightful Killing: Civil Society, Gender, and Sexuality in Weblogistan* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2020), in addition to articles such as that treated in this introduction.

Michael Allan's formulation in outlining an approach to Egyptian literary modernity (2016), this work "considers the *world* of world literature—understood as either the site at which a literary work is produced (for world systems theory) or the site disclosed in the literary work itself (through practices of close reading)" (14), with a further caveat: it is not the world but the overlapping, contradictory, and coeval world*s* of the national literary project—a project that is of course entwined with the construction of world literature, inasmuch as that schema relies on national representation—that I attempt to mine.

Translating Untranslatables

Does queerness translate? This is the central question that motivates the study at hand. Part of my contribution is to bring translation practice to bear on feminist, queer, and race theory, and vice-versa. In each chapter I rely on my own translations, tackling issues of ethical translation alongside and through theoretical inquiry. In short, translation practice cannot be separated from politics; or put otherwise, translation practice is political practice. Rather than relegating them to the footnotes, as would be perhaps more de rigueur in academic writing, I interweave these notes on translation practice within my theoretical analysis in order to emphasize that "translation" as a metaphor relies on literal translation: in asking whether queerness translates, the two significations cannot be untwined.

Chapter three exemplifies how queerness in cultural translation can both align and misalign with queerness in literal translation. This chapter performs a reading of Mahsa Mohebali's *Nigarān nabāsh*, first published to great acclaim in Tehran in 2008, while also addressing how that reading has shaped my choices—at the minute, word and sentence level—as

I translate the novel into English (this edition is forthcoming with Feminist Press[18] under the working title, *Don't Worry*, which represents a literal translation of the Persian). The aforementioned practice of "man-wearing" (*mardpūshī*), for example, is not quite "crossdressing" inasmuch as the latter suggests tackling with normative gender and sexual politics as primarily "cultural" or even historical. Instead man-wearing is "political" in the most conservative sense of the word that suggests an engagement with the state; indeed elaborated in relation to what I cite as the anti-political stance of floating feminism, man-wearing elucidates the politics of the anti-political. As a protest against state enforced mandatory veiling, man-wearing remains inscribed in a contested circuit of femininity—and what constitutes femininity—at least as much as it constitutes a critical assumption of masculinity. Of course crossdressing in other contexts has been elaborated in terms of double critique. Butler, for example, argues for just such a reading of "drag" (1993). And yet the immediacy of quite literally breaking the law by appearing in public as a woman unveiled enacted by man-wearing defines a distinct relationship to the political than the Euro-American example. The literal translation of *mardpūshī* (man-wearing) signals that fault lines with "crossdressing" exist, even if it cannot—in that one word—point to precisely what they are: it might be seen as a signpost warning against the danger of cultural mistranslation through too loose a translation.

To return to the question at hand, "does queerness translate?," one arrives at the simple answer, yes and no. The answer is intentionally unsatisfying, suggesting that translation is, to play on a cliché, not a destination.

Due to necessary postcolonial interventions the field of translation studies has shifted toward untranslatability in the new millennium. Emily Apter's well-known work in this area

[18] This project is also supported by a 2018 Pen/Heim translation grant.

(1999 and 2013) serves as a formidable critique of translation as a tool of neo-imperialism. Yet while keeping this critique in mind, I also question whom is served by untranslatability when the argument is taken to its (perhaps uninvited) conclusions: untranslatability can, and often is, used to buttress othering rather than to deconstruct it. In particular, the untranslatability of Islamicate texts and sexualities is redeployed in a neo-Orientalist foreignization of the Muslim world. I thus offer translation as a means by which to think through difference without either erasing or essentializing alterity.

When it comes to imperialism, Persian offers a particularly fraught example that echoes the racial ambivalence I have outlined above. Persian imperialism in Iran lingers in the background of the texts at hand. Like others who preceded him in Iran's modernization project, the twentieth-century pioneer of the Persian short story Muhammad Ali Jamalzadeh was quite explicit in advocating for Persian-language fiction, and the modern novel in particular, as a tool that could be used to construct an Iranian national identity.[19] The study at hand focuses on Persian-language fiction and film (with the important exception of Kiarostami's *Copie Conforme* (Certified Copy, 2010) in chapter four) largely because of my own limitations: Persian is the only language widely spoken in Iran today in which I have the fluency required by my methodology (i.e, close reading). But this accident of biography works in concert with a larger analytic choice: in more ways than one I approach queerness—i.e., the marginal—*at* the center, trying to understand how the state and mainstream culture do and do not succeed at stamping out alternative selfhoods and ways of living and being. Almost all the texts I analyze went through

[19] For Persian see the preface to Jamalzadeh, Mohammad Ali. *Yeki bud yeki nabud* (Once Upon A Time). 1921. Ketabnak, 2011. An English translation with introductory remarks can be found in Daraghi,Haideh. "The Shaping of the Modern Persian Short Story: Jamalzadih's 'Preface' to *Yiki Bud, Yiki Nabud,*" *Critical Perspectives on Modern Persian Literature*, ed. Thomas Ricks. Washington, DC: Three Continents Press, 1984: pp. 104-123.

the hands of Ministry of Culture censors and were approved. The two exceptions had more complicated relationship to the state: Shirdel's documentary was solicited by the Pahlavi state then banned then finished after the Revolution (see chapter two), while Kiarostami's *Certified Copy* was caught in a tit-for-tat politics that is described in chapter four (and even that was widely circulated in Iran in the form of cheap, hawked CD's, like most movies).

To return to the question of language, Persian's own imperialism stands juxtaposed with Persian's own marginal status in today's world. As opposed to classical Persian poetry, contemporary Persian literature is by and large excluded from canons of world literature. In the U.S. American intellectual market in which I write and work especially, Persian is regarded as a "minor language." As a translator I can attest to the ghettoization of modern Persian letters when it comes to attracting publishers and readers; such work is, to put it rather bluntly, "sexy" in casual conversation but few editors are willing to sign off on (and pay for) it. Untranslatability then surfaces as a nexus of self-fulfulling prophecies. The relative foreignness of Persian as a language, not least of all due to its reliance on Arabic script, and of Iranian culture makes readers and editors hesitant to engage with a work, a fear that then only ossifies due to the lack of translation. Because "we" do not know Persian, it seems untranslatable; because we do not translate Persian, it becomes untranslatable.

Approaching Persian as double-edged, as both imperial and postcolonial, both empowered and disempowered, I argue for an ethical translation that attends to such complex and interwoven webs of power. Reproducing discomfort when called for is part of this method, as demonstrated with regards to the epigraph and discussed in chapter three: broadly speaking I do not believe in corrective translation—though admittedly no rule is ever steadfast. In both of

these cases, for example, an untranslatable would only serve to occlude the violent normative gender and sexual politics of the speaker.

Nevertheless, as suggested by the example of man-wearing, at other times a form of untranslatability may at times be the answer; and yet I will note that even here I shy away from a true untranslatable and instead attempt a creative solution using English building blocks (i.e., coining a neologism based on literal translation). In both theory and practice I start from the assumption of translatability while letting the exigencies of the text dictate when and how we need something new, whether that be a particular word or a new way of understanding. If *transnational* queerness is an oxymoron because of the way it divorces the subject from her geographic and historical context, as Joseph Massad famously suggests in his critique of the Gay International (2002), then *translating* queerness becomes all the more crucial in a globalized world. For today's translator, I argue, untranslatability must serve as a starting point that solicits deeper engagement and more creative solutions, not a stopping point that severs dialogue between "us" and "them." This is a truth the bilingual translator intuits, given that she assumes various perspectives on who constitutes the "us" and who the "them" from one moment to the next—or even, concurrently straddles both. My aim has been to bring some of this logic into my translation practice and theorization.

A very basic question of translation remains to be answered. What is "queerness" in Persian? In short the word is "*digarbāshī*," which notably does not appear as such in any official dictionary I have consulted (the closest one gets to an authoritative definition is a page on Persian-language Wikipedia).[20] A relatively recent introduction to Persian, *digarbāshī* is a

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[20] See "https://fa.wikipedia.org/wiki/درگاه:دگرباشان " (last accessed 14 September 2020); the article is not about "queerness" as a theory but "queers" (*digarbāshān*) defined in terms of LGBTQ identities (and with the requisite rainbow flag).

composite of "*digar*"—a prefixal foreshortening of "*dīgar*," or "other; unlike," that is thus akin to the English prefixes "anti-" or "else-" (i.e., elsewhere)—and the suffix, "*bāshī*," from "*bāshīdan*" or "existence; being."[21] The formulations of "being other" or "being unlike"—that is, of existing *as* Other—rather elegantly captures the relationality of queerness as defined by theorists since de Lauretis. But unlike the English word "queerness," which carries a sense of the strange or unusual inherited from the slur it has repurposed, *digarbāshī* foregrounds queerness's relationship to the norm: *digarbāshī* describes the processes of othering that are committed by the "we/us" at the center and points to the antithetical posture assumed by "they/them". But because the word is not used by any of the texts at hand, and because it neatly carries such theoretical resonances with the English, I rely on the English "queer" or "queerness" in the pages that follow.

Which is also to say that this study is necessarily as much about translating from English, and from a Euro-American context, into Persian and an Iranian context as it is about translating along the opposite routes. In these pages I aim to theory the ways terms like *jinsīyat*—which signifies "sex," "gender," and sexuality," as addressed more at length in chapter one—organically operate in Iranian representational contexts; and yet my comparative approach undoubtedly limits some conversations while enabling others. If this study might be said to constitute a bidirectional project of translating queerness, then it is in order to better understand how power operates in distinct historical and geographic contexts. How is the center constructed there as opposed to here? And much more occasionally, how do those two modus operandi mirror one another?

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[21] See entries "*digar*" and "*bāshī*" in *Amid Version 5.0*, compiled by Farzad Rashvand 2018, n.p., iPad application. Accessed 16 September 2020.

On Woman and Women

One of the central claims of this dissertation is that women's homoerotics can counterintuitively serve a modern project of fashioning a normative heterosexual citizen subject. Explored most in depth in chapter one as well as in chapters three and four, this claim is in dialogue with work from the past fifteen or so years on female sexuality in neighboring South Asian contexts. Writing in 2004 Geeta Patel critiques then-extant scholarship thus: "That heterosexuality and homosexuality are contiguous and necessary to each other is by now self-evident; yet recent scholarship on South Asia continues to hold the two apart, as though heterosexual desire remains the unspoken arbiter, the final culmination of the plots offered to women" (140). Though Patel's own work and that of Gayatri Gopinath (2005, engaged in chapter three) have gone a ways to correct South Asian gender and sexuality studies and contribute to queer theory's understanding of the relationship between hetero and homo (whether eroticism or identificatory sexuality), the statement continues to apply to scholarship on Iran, and on the Middle East more broadly. Complex accounts of male homoeroticism—not least among them, Afsaneh Najmabadi's aforementioned *Women with Mustaches and Men Without Beards* (2005), and Joseph Boone's *The Homoerotics of Orientalism* (2014)—have theorized male subjectivity in light of competing desires and colonial and nationalist histories, while female subjectivity remains grossly undertreated. Indeed I have only come across one monograph dedicated to the topic, and that takes "homosexuality" as its frame[22] whereas I am concerned with a wider range of homoeroticisms. Iran's "postcolonial" trajectory, which consisted of extensive Russian, British, and U.S. intervention from the eighteenth through the twentieth centuries (i.e., the Qajar and Pahlavi eras) without official, systemized colonization, necessitates a tailored lens.

[22] Habib, Samar. *Female Homosexuality in the Middle East: Histories and Representations.* New York and London: Routledge, 2012.

I thus bring queer and feminist theories in conversation with Iranian studies—where for me that signifies work on Iran from historian, filmic, or comparative literary disciplinary contexts more often than those from area studies perspectives—in order to keep my analysis grounded in place and time, as twisted and folded as each may be given negotiations of domestic and diasporic and pre- and post- discussed above.

My focus on female sexuality should not suggest that there is something essential about femaleness; there is not. But I am interested in tracking the specificities and constraints of femininity and respectable womanhood as they have been constructed, and co-constituted. Similarly I do not maintain an essential distinction between the hetero and homo. Unlike codified practices of homoeroticism, women's homoerotics, it seems to me, imbue all women's relations. In fact the single untranslatable I offer in this study arises from my desire to stress such a reframing (though it too is of course not truly untranslatable, as suggested in reference to Gopinath's and Patel's work above): throughout, that is, I develop a theory of "*dūstī*," which in Persian means both "love" and "friendship," as a form of women's erotic relationality that refuses the divide between friends and lovers that lesbianism takes for granted. The complex negotiations required by such relationships are teased out in chapter one, which treats the concept most fully, thus foregrounding it in the study as a whole. In subsequent chapters the concept then serves to define, either positively or negatively, friendships and relationships between women that both cohere and are threatened by lines of difference such as class. Maleness, I claim in an inversion and revision of Eve Sedgwick's thesis in *Between Men* (1985), made visible in the form of boys, men, or even in the gender play of female masculinity,[23] functions as a necessary third term in these texts that clarifies women's homoeroticism. The

[23] Halberstam, Jack. *Female Masculinity.* Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1998.

vocabulary of heterosexuality thus becomes essential to both occluding and marking homoerotics.

Chapters two and four address, among other issues, the related issue of sisterhood. In the former "sisterhood" signifies in the definition that is more current in the West, as a term marked by 1970's feminisms and a gesture to transnational solidarity. As in other geographic contexts, in the Iranian case at hand sisterhood is not only riddled with the contradictions of class and race but rests on ideas of difference: that is, it assumes and profits from an uneven power distribution of class and enacts racialization. But that racialization, I argue, does not operate in the usual way: rather than blackness, the lower-class other woman is ascribed with whiteness precisely in order to cohere that category as a national marker (i.e., "Iranian) that excludes other Others by rendering them invisible. Chapter four argues that heterosexuality requires the sisterhood of women's space in order to posture as a given. De-eroticizing homoerotics in favor of a sanitized homosocial Islamicate civil society of contemporary Iran inoculates both men's and women's relationalities in order to buttress proper socialization in the form of heterosexual marriage. This project acts in concert with the shoring up of transnational bourgeois marriage today as indicated, rather than disrupted, by gay marriage activism, a liberal project that constructs female subjectivity through the roles of wife and mother and the affect of loss and pain. Womanhood is thus offered as a melancholic positionality for whom the satisfaction of desire seems unavailable, whether through heterosexual or homosocial bonds (i.e., through marriage or sisterhood).

In one way then these two forms of relationality—namely, *dūstī* and sisterhood—operate as poles that embrace or eschew women's homoerotics. From chapter to chapter the study toggles between them. Yet in another way what I elaborate as *dūstī* in a literary context—that is, on the page—must be viewed in a genealogy of established modes of women's relationality off

the page such as the practice of "sisterhood vows" (*ṣīghih-yi khwāharkhwāndigī*) stamped out in Iranian modernization. These vows, which were undoubtedly homosocial but likely also sexual—Najmabadi cites an archival silence and yet Janet Afary (2009) suggests that the vows were understood as explicitly sexual before the nineteenth century[24]—thus offer a historical precedent for the "vows" of *dūstī* that the girls undertake in Goli Taraghi's 1991-2 short story (in chapter one) and for the sort of erotic friendship (or *dūstī*) manifest between the protagonist of Mahsa Mohebali's *Don't Worry* (2008) and her childhood friend (in chapter three). Note that this history seems quite forgotten by the works themselves: indeed in chapter one I argue that given the masculine gender play of one of the girls, such vows must be read in terms of heterosexual companionate marriage—and yet here I call attention to vows of sisterhood in order to suggest the multiple valences of such *dūstī* and to offer a possible genealogy.

Classical Persian love poetry, inscribed as it is in the homoeroticism of a male lover-author pining after a male beloved-addressee, then offers a literary precedent for the fiction at hand, which incidentally was authored by women. Hence many of these works might be read as a love poem in prose from one woman to another, perhaps not only between their first-person protagonists and their respective friends/sisters (*dūst*) but also between author and reader. That may be as fitting a note to end on as could be desired.

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[24] Najmabadi writes: "Were practices like vows of sisterhood, *siqah-i khvaharkhvandigi,* a celebration of homosocial bonds of women's close friendships, or did they involve same-sex practices? The question is unanswerable not so much because lesbians have been erased from history or archives do not exist, but because it arises from a naming and categorizing of desire that is not relevant to the period in which a demarcation between homosociality and homosexuality did not yet exist" (2005, 38). And yet in a section titled "Sufi women and female homoerotic traditions," Afary rather convincingly suggests: "Sisterhood vows seem to have been common between elite urban women. The most authoritative Persian lexicon, the *Loghatnameh* (1946-), includes several references to female homosexuality and sisterhood vows. It suggests that the two were the same, a designation that was lost by the late twentieth century, when bonds of sisterhood or brotherhood were assumed to be asexual" (101). I regard Afary's reliance on "homosexuality" as anachronistic but see this as testament to same-sex practice (not necessarily sexuality as identitarian and stable).

Heterosexuality Hiding in Plain Sight: The (Un)Translatability of the Foreign

> But above the gray land and the spasms of bleak dust which drift endlessly over it, you perceive, after a moment, the eyes of Doctor T.J. Eckleburg. The eyes of Doctor T.J. Eckleburg are blue and gigantic—their retinas are one yard high. They look out of no face, but, instead, form a pair of enormous yellow spectacles which pass over a non-existent nose. Evidently some wild wag of an oculist set them there to fatten his practice in the borough of Queens, and then sank down himself into eternal blindness, or forgot them and moved away. But his eyes, dimmed a little by many paintless days under sun and rain, brood on over the solemn dumping ground.
>
> - F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*[25]

> "Help you how? Tell me. Don't be frightened."
> "My eyes."
> "What about your eyes?"
>
> Soaphead pursed his lips, and let his tongue stroke a gold inlay. He thought it was at once the most fantastic and the most logical petition he had ever received. Here was an ugly little girl asking for beauty[…] A little black girl who wanted to rise up out of the pit of her blackness and see the world with blue eyes.
>
> - Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*[26]

Introduction: Eye's and I's Under the Spell of Language

Anyone who attended high school in the U.S. will have seen the striking image that is reprinted on Scribner editions of F. Scott Fitzgerald's modern classic, *The Great Gatsby* (1925): a pair of blue eyes floating above a scrap of flaming cityscape against a vacant night sky. Despite the red lips and tear that gestures at a face, the eyes remain disembodied, two sad eyes in the

[25] Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby*. 1925. New York, Scribner, 2004, pp. 23-24.
[26] Morrison, Toni. *The Bluest Eye*. 1970. New York, Vintage Books, 2007, p. 174.

dark. The illustration by Francis Cugat was commissioned by the publisher in 1924,[27] meant to symbolize not the faded advertisement of Doctor T.J. Eckleberg described by Nick in the opening pages of chapter two (as quoted in the epigraph above), but rather, "Daisy brooding over an amusement park-version of New York."[28] Like the eyes on the cover, the eyes in the epigraph unequivocally "look out of *no face*" (my emphasis). The paragraph starts by establishing a relation between the reader's eyes via the second person—i.e., "you perceive"—and the eyes on the billboard. By the paragraph's end, the pictured eyes are imbued with their own agency: they "brood on over" the landscape, moving from object to subject. The cover art realizes this dynamic. Within the pages of the book, "you," the reader become the driver racing between West Egg and New York who sees the Doctor's eyes seeing "the solemn dumping ground;" shutting the book, "you" extradiegetically look at Daisy's eyes and have the uncanny sense that they are looking back. Inasmuch as *The Great Gatsby* engages a cultural critique of gilded era American life, the disembodied eyes act as the agent of that critique, acting on their own accord to turn the gaze inward, on the subject itself. What they reveal is the vacuity of modern life. The material object of the book more explicitly genders that critique, and in the opposite direction: the female

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[27] Melby, Julie L. "Celestial Eyes." *Graphic Arts: Exhibitions, acquisitions, and other highlights from the Graphic Arts Collection, Princeton University Library*, Princeton University, 4 May 2010, http://www.princeton.edu/~graphicarts/2010/05/celestial_eyes.html. Accessed 5 March 2019; Pinsker, Sanford. "Seeing 'The Great Gatsby' Eye to Eye." *College Literature*, vol. 3, no. 1, 1976, pp. 69-71, www.jstor.org/stable/25111112. *JStor*, accessed 5 March 2019. Whether accurate or mere myth-making, the anecdote that the original painting was rescued from the trash by the Charles Scribner III's cousin before making its way back into the publisher's hands and, eventually, to the library storage at Princeton University, the alma mater Scribner shared with his author (Melby, see footnote 3, n.p.) seems to contribute to this image's aura.

[28] Mizener qtd. in Pinsker (see footnote 3), 71. A similar contention is credited to Scribner himself in the following: Stamp, Jimmy. "When F. Scott Fitzgerald Judged Gatsby By Its Cover: A surprising examination of the original book jacket art to The Great Gatsby." Smithsonian Magazine, 14 May 2013, www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/when-f-scott-fitzgerald-judged-gatsby-by-its-cover-61925763/#t7X9IWK63k7kflC3.99. Accessed 5 March 2019.

body is made to represent, quite literally, the tragedy of and disillusionment with postwar materialism; an Eve, the female body becomes the image of a loss of innocence.

Consider now a second pair of eyes sewn into the American literary imaginary: the blue eyes desired by Pecola Breedlove, the protagonist of Toni Morrison's debut novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970). In the second epigraph above, which is excerpted from a conversation between Pecola and the pedophilic, priestlike figure of Soaphead Church, blue eyes operate as the sign of beauty and whiteness, which are in turn figured as equivalences. But they also represent a way of relating to the world, that is, a rapport of ease born of the promise that one will be loved and admired: Pecola desires not only to be *seen* with blue eyes but also to "*see* the world with blue eyes" (my emphasis). As a signifier, blue eyes transcend the corporal to become a way of knowing. In desiring whiteness Pecola wants the privilege of relating to the world with ease. Rather than the surface, whether that be iris or skin, race is figured as an epistemology by which the subject makes sense of the world, and not only as a means by which that world—inadequately, erroneously—makes sense of her. In sum, race defines the logic by which the subject knows the world but also operates as a mislogic by which the world defines her; this intuiting of the (mis)logic is what makes Pecola's impossible wish at once "the most fantastic and the most logical petition."

In interrogating how we see, ocular tropes in literature ask how the contours of our perception, and of our subjectivities, are shaped by the social structures around us. Eyes offer a window into and out of the subject. *The Great Gatsby* and its 1925 cover dramatize an antagonism between the reader-as-normative American—that is, someone white and bourgeois, and probably male, like Nick, for here it is worth remembering that women's suffrage in the US was achieved only five years before the novel's publication—and the modern world. The reader

sees the eyes and is afraid they see him, and see through him. *The Bluest Eye* more openly concerns itself with the particular subjectivity of the black American girl, as such and also as a memory held in the body of the black woman: readers witness eyes that want to see, and be seen, unencumbered by blackness. The bluest eye is an impossibility that reveals the burdens an ideology of white supremacy places on all subjects: white skin could always be whiter, the blue eye bluer.

As a trope, blue eyes in particular bring race into focus, asking how we perceive and relate to one another across lines of difference. Disembodied eyes and blue eyes riddle the pages of Goli Taraghi's short story, "The Little Friend" (*Dūst-i Kūchak*) first published in Persian in the 1992-3 collection, *Scattered Memories* (*Khāṭirih-hāyi Parākandih*). As in the American context, they signify for whiteness, in turn signaling the narrator's alterity—here, along lines of race and class, as well as sexuality. All three terms, one must note, are ambivalently negotiated: adjacency to whiteness, monarchal state power, and straightness is riddled with—indeed, in the case of sexuality, haunted by—brownness, Communist revolutionary sentiment, and homoeroticism. Characteristically for Taraghi's postrevolutionary work, "The Little Friend" features a first-person narrator writing in exile, looking back on a privileged childhood in Tehran. The short story is a typical modern coming-of-age narrative, which is to say, the protagonist learns something new and is thus disillusioned of her childish innocence or naiveté in favor of the wisdom of adulthood. And yet these genre conventions are at once adhered to and subverted by the story: as I will show, which sexualities and relationships are promoted and which put into question remains entangled by the story's end, revealing a queer sort of normativity.

“The Little Friend” unfolds as a love triangle between three adolescent girls, namely, the unnamed first-person narrator; her boyish best friend, who is never given a proper name and referred to exclusively as “the little friend” (*dūst-i kūchak*); and a new foreign student from Russia, Svetlana—or “Sivitlānā,” as I will transcribe the name, in order to transliterate its Persian pronunciation and, more importantly, to mimic the diacritics that foreignize the name in the original text, which is consistently rendered as “سِوِتْلانا” (each of the two “i’s” in my rendition represents a kasra). Synecdochized by “her big blue eyes” (Taraghi 47, my rendition) or some variation thereof throughout the narrative, Sivitlānā incarnates the ambivalent foreign that, or whom, is at once desired and feared. As the strange foreigner and third term that threatens the sanctity of the narrator’s coupled “friendship”—the term falls short, as I will soon explicate—with the little friend, Sivitlānā poses fundamental questions to the narrator, and in turn to us, about what constitutes “self” and “other.” In short, she interrogates the coherence of the modern national citizen subject.

Below I bring a close reading of this story to bear on the question of defining the queer, suggesting that far from being liberatory, queerness can also function to mask, and further, the modern nation-state’s heterosexual agenda. Scrutinizing the complex web of relations among the girls and between the girls and society—namely, that of upper crust Tehran under Pahlavi rule—I consider the (un)translatability of queer forms of relationality across culture, language, and time. In this chapter I rely on the term “relationality” in order to implicate the broader social structures that define the ways people relate to one another, sidestepping the suggestion of a willed union implicit in “relationship” to blur ideas of conscious choice or agency when they seem to me difficult to discern, or simply beside the point; that said, I do use the term “relationship” to describe a mutually willed link between two people when appropriate. By

"(un)translatability," it is also worth noting, I mean to suggest the ways in which these relations are comprehensible, and thus successfully "translated," to the sympathetic reader and yet also threatened with misreading; hence the parenthetical disavowal. Put plainly, in the context at hand, same-sex erotics are at play but not lesbianism, not because those erotics are not sexually consummated but because the field in which this friendship-relationship exists has already been alternately defined—or so I argue.

To these ends, I identify and theorize "dusti,"[29] which in Persian (*dūstī*) signifies both "friendship" and "love," as a mode of women's relationality that refuses the very divide between "couple"—or even "lovers"—and "just friends" that lesbianism often takes for granted. Indeed homoerotics are made visible here precisely by hetero-coupling, calling into question any such opposition in terms; this comes most clearly into view via an attendant theorization of what I call "*pisarānigī*," or "boyishness," a form of female masculinity afforded by the flexibility of childhood that is exercised here by the little friend. Though in my experience, dusti adequately captures a mode of relating between women of a certain class and education off the page and outside the Iranian context, in the current chapter I cede such limitations. From a literary historical perspective, then, one must note that dusti functions by drawing on the genealogy of male homoerotics in classical Persian poetry.

Interceding in this nationally sanctioned coupling, the figure of the foreigner then acts as the double edge of (un)translatability: on the one hand, Sivitlānā threatens the dusti between the narrator and little friend, calling into question whether this mode of relationality can survive in face of the foreign; on the other hand, the reason Sivitlānā is so threatening to the narrator is precisely because she *has* successfully "translated" herself into the Persian context. Ultimately

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[29] As a theorized term I drop the diacritics, both for ease and to mark it as a theoretical neologism distanced, though derived from, the Persian term.

Sivitlānā demands new forms of relationality that go beyond coupling—though this is a lesson the narrator can only afford to learn in exile, that is, severed from the nation-state and from claims to national belonging. Here it is worth noting that, given a metacritical investment in language via tropes of naming and language learning, the metaphor of "translation" is solicited by the text itself.[30]

Double-edged Dusti in the Mold of Companionate Marriage, and Vice-Versa

"The Little Friend" starts with a framing narrative in which the narrator confronts an older, initially unrecognizable Sivitlānā on a Mediterranean beach before moving to an extended flashback to the narrator's adolescence. She is twelve; thirteen will bring secondary school and, after, the promise—and, to the young narrator, threat—of being sent abroad in order, in the words of the narrator's father, "[t]o study. To Make money. [And] [t]o become somebody" (Taraghi 46, my rendition). This is a promise borne true by the closing scene, which goes back to the beach and the frame, but at a skew: rather than study abroad, the narrator is in permanent exile, a space that affords her reevaluation of her perception of and relation to Sivitlānā. (Though the Revolution is never mentioned, the common Persian reader will fill in the gaps, not least of all because Taraghi herself lives in France, while writing in Persian and being published, and

[30] By way of a note on translation, I will say that though I make the occasional reference to the extant English translation by Faridoun Farrokh (published under the title "My Little Friend" in *A Mansion in the Sky*, 2003), in trying to draw out a close reading of a Persian text while writing in English for an Anglophone comparative audience, I have provided my own English renditions of "The Little Friend" in block quotes that are marked as such, with corresponding citations from the original Persian. These block quotes should be seen as scholarly tools rather than as translations in their own right: not meant for literary consumption, they constitute an attempt to access the original text in a comparative context. In thus trying to somehow reproduce the Persian in English, an impossible goal, I follow original punctuation and syntax whenever possible, that is, whenever doing so does not render the text incomprehensible. Sometimes this results in awkward turns of phrase and "translationese," nonsense that somehow still makes sense with reference to the original (or here, upon explication). This friction is intentional; exploiting it is a methodological and pedagogical tool.

widely read, in Iran.) The story thus begins and ends with Sivitlānā, the only one of the three girls in the love triangle who is ever named. Indeed Sivitlānā anchors the text structurally and figuratively. The conspicuous sign of the foreign, she serves to clarify the relationship between the two "friends" and compatriots, and also interrupts it. And yet the story is titled—indeed, named—after the little friend; she is the object of both the narrator's and Sivitlānā's affections and gaze.

The little friend is first introduced in the text by the childlike sentiment, "The little friend is my playmate and our friendship (*dūstī*) is forever" (Taraghi 24, my rendition). The naiveté of "forever" establishes an innocence of which the narrator is, according to the conventions of the *bildungsroman*, bound to be disillusioned. The two girls make a vow: "From now on," pledges the little friend, "you and I are one person" (24, my rendition). Soon after they consecrate this friendship in blood, pricking their fingers then pressing them together (25).

But it is language, not this action, that produces an embodied affective experience. Immediately after the duo's repetition of the incantation, "friends friends to the Day of Resurrection" (Taraghi 25, my rendition), a chant first introduced by the little friend on the previous page, the narrator describes an embodied experience of change, relying on straight metaphor rather than more tenuous analogy:

> I feel that a strange event has occurred in my body. I've come to resemble the little friend. Half of her is in me and two hearts beat behind my ribcage. [That] night I cannot fall asleep from happiness and in [my] composition notebook I write "I am in love with the little friend and without her will die." (Taraghi 25, my rendition)

The vow of becoming "one person" (*yik nafar*) manifests in strangely corporal terms, and what appeared to be a figure of speech is literalized. Throughout these lines, the narrator's identification with the little friend moves from semblance, or "*shabāhat*"—as in, "I've come to

resemble (*shabīh […] shudam*) the little friend"—to incorporation in the most fundamental sense, that is, in-*corp*-oration, per the Latin *corpus* (body): "Half of her is in me and two hearts beat behind my ribcage" (*dawtā qalb pusht-i qafasih-yi sīnih-am mīkūbad*). In the original Persian, the verb "*kūbīdan*" (to beat) is conjugated in the singular, which is possible in Persian because numeral adjectives take a singular noun (i.e., "*dawtā qalb*" is "two heart[s]"); the conjugation reifies the single, unified body of lover-beloved as a linguistic singular, all while strangely preserving the singularity of each of the two hearts as discrete. Here love is transformative in the most literal sense: the lover has come to contain the beloved. The absence of modifying phrases that would render the metaphors similes—that is, of constructions such as "*it's as if*" (*ingār kih*) or "*it's like*" (*mis̱l-i īnkih*) "two hearts beat behind my ribcage"—assert this fantastic event as semiotic and textual reality, collapsing representation and the real. Such a sense of immediacy is then further stressed by use of the present tense.

One discerns too a slippage between love and friendship. When the narrator writes in her journal in the final line of the block quote above, she relies on the word "*āshiq*" to express her "love" for the little friend: "I am in love (*āshiq*) with the little friend." Unlike the flexible word, "*dūstī*," which in contemporary colloquial Persian is variously used between lovers, friends, and family members, "*ishq*" suggests an intensity of emotion often reserved for erotic love; *ishq*, for example, is not used to describe the love between a parent and child, but *dūstī* is. According to the *Dehkhoda Dictionary*, which like the *Oxford English Dictionary* traces words' genealogies by providing literary historical examples of their use, "*dūstī*" might be defined firstly as "friendship and companionship" (*rifāqat va yārī*); secondly as "love" (*ishq*) or "desire" (*havā*); and thirdly, in the Sufi tradition, as divine love.[31] Note that the secondary usage of "love" (*ishq*)

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[31] "*dūstī*." *Dehkhoda Dictionary Version 6.0*, compiled by Farzad Rashvand, 2018, n.p., iPad application. Accessed 22 May 2020.

is attributed to the Qajar physician and writer, Nāẓim al-Aṭbā' (1847-1924), and thus to the modern era. More forcefully, the modern dictionary *'Omid* lists the definition of *dūstī* as "companionship; care; love" (*yārī; muhibat; ishq*),[32] while *Mo'īn* lists "lover" (*'āshiq*) and "beloved" (*ma'shūq*) as the secondary and tertiary definitions of the concrete nominalized form "*dūst*,"[33] translated hitherto as "friend" in the titular eponym, "*dūst-i kūchak.*" Common usage would advise against translating this phrase as either "the little lover" or "the little beloved," but my point is that such additional meanings persist as a trace.[34] Indeed the trace is highlighted: the explicit use of *ishq* early on in the story to describe the narrator's feelings for the little friend thus puts pressure on the multiple valences of the term *dūstī*, attributing it with a breadth beyond the bounds of "friendship." Put otherwise, dusti renders friendship a mode of relationality that is not opposed to, but rather inclusive of, the erotic.

For the homoerotics in this text are hardly hidden. In the pages that follow the vows of dusti traded between the narrator and little friend, the narrator employs a series of seemingly mixed metaphors to describe her relations to and with the little friend, alternating between mirroring and identification—or semblance (*shabāhat*)—and difference as marked by binary gender. Consider the following passage, in which these forms of alignment and misalignment appear in quick succession:

> We sit next to one another at the front of the class. Our two spots are stuck together; everyone knows this, all the students and all the teachers. We've been together from first grade till now, like conjoined twins. The little friend resembles [a] bo[y]; [she] has

[32] "*dūstī.*" *Amid Version 2.0*, compiled by Farzad Rashvand 2018, n.p., iPad application. Accessed 22 May 2020. Note that I have listed the dictionary by the correct transliteration above, rather than by the name of the app.
[33] "*dūst.*" *Moin Version 5.0*, compiled by Farzad Rashvand 2018, n.p., iPad application. Accessed 22 May 2020.
Note that I have listed the dictionary by the correct transliteration above, rather than by the name of the app.
[34] This trace surfaces today in the idiomatic phrase for "I love you," "*dūstit dāram*."

> short, black hair and dislikes neat, prim and proper girls with ironed jackets and white collars; I am indeed one of those girls but, before arriving at school, I take off my satin hair ribbon. I rub my polished shoes in the dirt and I soil my hands with blue ink. (Taraghi 26-7, my rendition)

As in the figure of two hearts beating as one, here, too, the passage employs a singular verb that depicts the narrator's relations to the little friend as both a doubling and conjoining; that is, in Persian, "our two spots are stuck together" is literally something more like, "the spot for each of us two is stuck to the other" (*jā-yi mā daw nafar chasbīdih bih ham ast*). The expression for "conjoined twins" (*dawqūlūhā-yi chasbīdih bih ham*) repeats the same phrase previously translated as "stuck together" (*chasbīdih bih ham ast*), producing one of many textual doublings that scatter these pages. And yet that doubling and alleged "twinning" are contradicted in the very next sentence, which draws out the gendered differences between the two girls.

Binary gender thus coheres as the thin line between them, leaving one to wonder whether it is the wedge or the glue. "The little friend," we are told, "resembles" (*shabīh*)—the same word used above—"a boy." Her "short, black hair" is contrasted with the long hair implicit in the narrator's "satin hair ribbon;" as the only positive descriptor of the little friend's boyish appearance, short hair operates as the primary evidence of masculinity, suggesting in turn the overburdening of long hair as a sign of femininity. Otherwise the little friend is described by contrast: she is not one of those "neat, prim and proper girls with ironed jackets and white collars," but the narrator is. In this passage gender difference distances the two girls while also serving to explain why they fit so well together: hints at heterosexual coupling refigure the same-sex friendship as such. But there is also something queer going on: in order to please the little friend, the narrator daily unties her ribbon, "rub[s her] polished shoes in the dirt and […] soil[s her] hands with blue ink." The little friend's taste in girls—as girl friends or girlfriends?—

doesn't fall along the strict lines of gender opposition and differentiation. She "dislikes" girliness; she dislikes high femme. Thus the homoerotics of this coupling stay intact, coexisting with and coeval to the heteroerotic. We see two girl friends, two girlfriends, and boyfriend and girlfriend all at once.

Ambivalently, gender operates in this story as a boundary that is at once reified and crossed. Given that the narrator and little friend are friends from school, a gender-segregated space in pre- and post-Revolutionary Iran, the two girls' shared gender serves as their primary point of identification. But realigning the vectors of semblance by figuring the little friend as boyish fractures the mirroring that is assumed by a same-sex friendship in favor of (what is thought to be) the complementarity of an opposite-sex relationship. "Homo-" is thus seen through the prism of "hetero," and the girls' "friendship" vows are starting to look more like marriage vows.

Reading "The Little Friend" alongside Amy Motlagh's *Burying the Beloved: Marriage, Realism, and Reform* (2012) helps illuminate the social and erotic structures of heterocoupling as defined by the history of modern marriage in Iran, and specifically, by the institution of companionate marriage. But whereas Motlagh demonstrates the role of companionate marriage in disrupting a literary history of homoeroticism, I use "The Little Friend" to argue that this hetero-institution also functions to surface—rather than "bury"—the same-sex beloved and an attendant homoeroticism in contemporary Iranian literature.

In this seminal contribution to the comparative literary study of gender in modern Iran, Motlagh argues that gender roles were restructured in the twentieth century in the arenas of love and marriage as a part of modernization as defined, and driven by, the Pahlavi state and Iranian elites. Women, once identified with the "household" (*manzil*) and as "burdens" (*'ayāl*) and

objects to be “entered” (*madkhūl*) as well as bringers of bad luck (*siyāh-bakht*), were in this era fashioned into “companionate wives” responsible for engaging their husbands romantically and intellectually, roles previously fulfilled by masculine[35] lovers (Motlagh 9-10). On the heels of historian Afsaneh Najmabadi’s scholarship on the consecration of binary gender in modern Iran (treated in the dissertation Introduction), Motlagh demonstrates that practices of homoerotic and pederastic love were increasingly eschewed as time went on, establishing the centrality of heterosexual romance; “[t]he Pahlavi state’s vision of modernity,” she writes, “[…] was enchained to a vision of heterosexual love and heterosocial public sphere” (3). This required a redirection of the signifier of “beloved” (*ma‘shūq*), a central figure in Persian verse, feminizing this figure and collapsing love and marriage, previously two separate realms. According to Motlagh,

> Whereas, historically, the beloved had been a gender-ambiguous figure of fiction was now coded as explicitly feminine; so, too, did the figured love become unambiguously romantic (against more complex significations of love in classical poetry), and had to lead toward marriage or be considered deviant. (10)

This process of displacing homoeroticism in favor of heteroerotic paradigms, a large-scale heteronormativization, is enacted in novels and short stories from the period, including those by women authors. Motlagh thus explores marriage as a “metaphor” and as “an actual site of [legal] reform” (4). The intervention is a significant one as family law, as those familiar with the Iranian context will know, was a consistent preoccupation of modernists with as varied political

[35] Note that the term “masculine” here incorporates a range of masculinity, gesturing to the “fracture[d…] masculinity” of figures like the androgynous boy lover (*amrad*) or the adult male beloved (*mukhannas*), which Najmabadi cites in the introduction to *Women with Mustaches and Men Without Beards* (2005) in order to warn against anachronistically reading nineteenth-century Iran through the lens of established binary gender; in this case, the error would be to impose effeminization onto masculinities that are aslant, but (were historically) considered masculinities nonetheless (see Najmabadi 2005, 3).

ambitions as constitutional reformists and Pahlavi monarchs, and it remains a major inroad today for both secular and Islamic feminist activist reform.

Here I build on Motlagh's scholarship with one crucial caveat. As Najmabadi's work teaches, grammatical gender-neutrality should not be made to erase a shared understanding of male homoeroticism among readers and listeners of poetry prior to such nineteenth-century cultural reformation. Refining Motlagh's argument accordingly to note that the beloved was in fact not "gender-ambiguous," but rather understood as masculine, in classical Persian verse only dramatizes this story—indeed, history—of the entrenchment of heterosexuality in Persian letters. What we have in the genealogy the modern Persian beloved is a complete gender crossing from male to female, not a disambiguation.[36]

In Taraghi's "The Little Friend" I identify a case of companionate marriage "hiding in plain sight," so to speak, in the guise of female friendship (note that other fiction by Taraghi serves as one of Motlagh's main points of inquiry, as elaborated below). Given the vows the girls take, the configuration boyfriend-and-girlfriend appears in fact to be more like husband-and-wife. Indeed the consecration of the vow of dusti looks much like the consummation of a marriage. When the little friend pricks the narrator's finger so that the narrator "feel[s] the sharp edge of the blade on [her] skin" (Taraghi 25, my rendition), the knife figures as a symbolic phallus and surrogate penis. The little friend then pricks her own finger and the girls comingle their blood (25), thus exchanging body fluids. Anticipating the prick/penetration, the narrator

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[36] This point cannot be stressed enough, as alleging the gender-neutrality of the beloved is so common in extant scholarship on Persian literature one can only read it as a collective erasure of the queer, perhaps a willful one. Najmabadi, rather oppositely, concludes in her all but exhaustive historical study that "[…] in Persian (especially Sufi-inspired) love poetry, the beloved was *almost always male*. Ma'shuq [beloved] and shahid [lover; literally, witness] of Persian love poetry were *decidedly male*, even though the grammatical gender neutrality of the Persian language has made it possible for later modernist literary critics to deny or neutralize it" (2005, 53; my emphasis).

professes, “I’m ready and my heart beats from fear and happiness” (Taraghi 25, my rendition). Like a respectable girl/virgin—note that the same word, “*dukhtar*,” signifies both—on her wedding night, she feels more fear than desire. In contrast to this stereotypically feminine response, the little friend cuts her own finger “without even a sigh” (*āh ham nimīgūyad*) (25, my rendition), suggesting a masculine encounter with pain. Legally and socially inscribing the union of two individuals, heterosexual marriage preserves “two-ness” under the sign of one. Here the two hearts beat as one (25, above), so that the union manifests as embodied, rather than legal, change. Furthermore, in many ways, the relationship socially functions as a marriage: it pairs the masculine and feminine, is socially recognized by “everyone” at school (26, above), and is coded as exclusive.

This example of an occluded—“veiled,” if you will—literary representation of a queer companionate marriage turns the institution on its head: it figures (both romantic and friendly) homoerotic coupling as heterosexual marriage, and also constitutes heterosexual marriage masquerading as homoeroticism. The Orientalist metaphor of “veiling” thus works against itself (but remains useful as a reminder of the sort of readings I am working against). Indeed, more so than queering this text by “revealing” its homoerotics and thus lifting the veil of signification, I am interested in showing how the erotics of the homosocial are made to veil a state-backed heterosexual agenda. For as Motlagh’s study goes to show, the investment in heterosexual marriage as hinged upon the figure of companionate wife has served as a line of continuity between pre- and post-Revolutionary Iran, in both monarchical and Islamic Republican forms. If anything, the homoerotic is visible today more than ever, given the overburdened role the homosocial plays in Revolutionary ideology and public space.

Boyishness and the Fault Line between Sex and Gender

"Boyishness," or "*pisarānigī*," to coin a Persian neologism, constitutes an embodied experience of gender that is not only written on the body (i.e., in the little friend's "short, black hair") but also shapes the little friend's interactions with the world. Consider the little friend's steely response to pain when consummating the vows of dusti (25, above). Pain, or lack thereof, is the self's interpretation of a bodily response to outside stimuli. Here the same stimuli (a prick of the finger) invites two variegated responses that are produced by binary gender, and reproduce it. Inasmuch as pleasure and pain constitute reflexive gendered interpretations of the body—that is, readings of that body by the self, as structured by and in relation to the social—then the subject here interprets and relates to itself as a boy. The little friend's boyishness is not limited to a superficial performance but also constitutes an embodied way of being. She not only looks like a boy; she also lives like a boy in some meaningful way. Indeed, gender performance is never "just" superficial; this is a case of "and," not "but."

By locating masculinity in the body of the female child, boyishness uncouples masculinity from manliness. Boyishness/*pisarānigī* gestures to the patriarchal *mardānigī* (manliness) but remains capacious in ways adult masculinity (and male fragility) cannot afford. Later, when the narrator falls sick, for example, the little friend calls on her (Taraghi 40), taking on a socially feminine role by tending to the sick.

Crucially, the boyish little friend "is" still a girl, or else she would have no place within the semiotic system of the all-girls school. Could this legibility also be read as a case of passing, as a boy passing as a girl? As readers, after all, we have no privileged access to the little friend's "true" sex. Strictly speaking, we know only that the boyish "little friend"—a gender neutral eponym in Persian, as in English—attends an all-girls school, and taking the school at its word,

we then default to "she." Once again, I will stress that the lack of gendered pronouns in Persian does not mean the absence of gender. As in the male beloved of classical verse, the little friend is legible as a girl in this story, intradiegetically and to the reader. Indeed two girls' status as such is what keeps the intimacy between them within the bounds of feminine respectability; in this way, it is what enables it. Thus any question of passing in fact cleaves open in both directions: is the little friend a boy who passes as a girl, or a girl who passes as a boy? Both, I argue, but with the latter configuration serving as the starting point and primary identification. Recall that "the little friend *resembles* a boy" (Taraghi 26, above; my emphasis), phrasing that suggests something else lies beneath, namely, and essential "girl-ness."

In relation to the narrator, the little friend doubly signifies as a girl and as a boy. Like binary gender itself, coupled homo- and heteroerotics are thus constructed as at once opposite and complementary. The heteroerotics of companionate marriage "exposes" the homoerotics of dusti, while the homoerotics of dusti enable a heteroerotic interpretation of the relationship. Furthermore, this homoeroticism comes to the surface not through a destruction of sex but through its preservation. The story plays with gender presentation, but some idea of an essential sex remains constant. Gender and sex, in turn, are not entirely deconstructed but maintained as opposing terms.

Note that education, whether private or public, serves as a mechanism whereby the modern subject is disciplined and shaped into a respectable national citizen, and the school is thus an important site of production for national citizen subject. Here the school is failing to discipline the little friend's body into femininity. And thus it more broadly fails to produce binary gender as mutually exclusive. Rather than serving to distance some bodies from others, binary gender as conceptualized here offers a vocabulary that is utilized—or "spoken"—by the

little friend and “read” by the narrator *without* requiring that the speaker’s sex align with the gender communicated: though female, the little friend successfully communicates masculinity. If a case of passing, then the vectors of passing crisscross back and forth: the little friend is a girl who passes as a boy who passes as a girl. What we have is more of a round-trip voyage than a unidirectional crossing, a circularity that suggests a more fundamental fissure in heteronormativity: masculinity and femininity cannot be cleanly delineated.

The school as setting thus functions to uncouple gender from “biological” sex at the moment of the latter’s reassertion. From a contemporary anglophone perspective, this is rather strange. The Butlerian conceptualization of iterated gender performance (in *Gender Trouble*, 1990), whereby sex is cohered through the repetition of gender performance, is somehow both close and far: in the text at hand, gender neither proceeds from sex (as popular culture suggests, an idea Butler works against), nor does it amount to sex (Butler’s contention, exposing sex as yet another cultural product); rather, gender runs concurrent to sex. Here, sex is essential to the subject, but also incidental to her, neither wholly delineating nor deriving from the subject’s social performance and public appearance. Dusti operates as the complex relationality that weds the homo and hetero while maintaining the idea of an essential sex, and in particular, of an essential femaleness, but not femininity.

Ultimately, in disaggregating gender from sex, the story unwittingly asks how the two can continue to coexist. Stripped of gender, what does sex come down to? The shadow of masculinity cast by the little friend’s boyishness plays a significant role in constructing its opposite, femininity, while simultaneously threatening to unravel the very alignment of femininity with girlhood it seeks to assert. In brief, if the little friend can be boyish but still a girl, then what is it to be a girl? The story stops short of answering, but that’s just the point: sex only

begs the question. Like butchness, boyishness pushes against the coherence of the category "female" while also preserving the subject's claim thereto. Erasing the little friend's sex would straighten the story, effacing its queerness in favor of a typical story of boy leaves girl for other girl, swapping old for new, familiar for foreign, respectable for strange and sexy. Instead, the little friend's dually attested boyishness and girl-ness-without-girliness renders the story queer, so that queerness comes into view largely due to sex, an idea often coded as regressive in dominant, Euro-American queer theory. Of course this is not to say that sex is necessary to queerness. As trans theorists like Susan Stryker and Jack Halberstam make clear, gender identification exceeds any idea of an essential sex; one need not assert the idea of a hidden or "core" sex in order to assert the right for individual self-definition and self-actualization.[37] But it is to say that sex is necessary to queerness in this particular case, where the friction that energizes the girls' variegated gendered actions and gender actualizations, whether oppositional and rebellious or congruent and docile, results from the rub of gender against sex, sometimes producing a spark and sometimes a sanding. Such tension then resonates further in the chords and discords produced by hetero and homo.

In the introduction to the recent ethnography, *Professing Selves: Transsexuality and Same-Sex Desire in Contemporary Iran* (2014), Najmabadi stresses the significance and particularity of the concept of "*jins*" in the Iranian context. For Najmabadi, *jins* operates as a sort of untranslatable that implicates gender, sex, and sexuality: "When it came to issues of sexual/gender identification, desire, and practices, a single concept—*jins*—linguistically and culturally ke[eps] them together" (2014 7-8). Coupling the terms "gender" and "sex" in the

[37] Consider Susan Stryker's *Transgender History* (Berkeley, Seal Press, 2008) and Jack Halberstam's *Trans• Trans*: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability* (Oakland, University of California Press, 2018), to name just two works.

conjoined pairing, “gender/sex,” in her English text, Najmabadi suggests that based on her research, in contemporary Iran, “[n]ot only had no distinction between sexuality and gender emerged, but, more significantly, lives were possible through that very nondistinction” (2014 8). *Jins*, she soon explains, denotes “genus” in contemporary Persian usage as well as “sex”; it thus cannot be reduced to, or simply translated as, “sex” (Najmabadi 2014, 9). I will note that such a connection exists in English for the word, “gender:” in the etymology for that entry, the Oxford English Dictionary includes “classical Latin *gener-* , *genus* race, kind.”[38] But as Najmabadi emphasizes, in Persian, “the trace is not history. The word *jins* continues to be used as genus” (2014 9). *Jins* as sex, gender, or both (as the “/” in “sex/gender” suggests) proposes each of the two genders as a cleanly delineated category, a type of person, that is, a type of subjectivity.

In contrast to the “text” of contemporary life as experienced and described by the subjects Najmabadi interviews, the fictional text at hand suggests a Persian-language context in which the fault lines among gender, sex, and sexuality are brought into view, and a singular coherent concept of “*jins*” is fractured. With regards to the passing-not passing elaborated above, in which vectors of passing turn back to fold in on themselves, gender and sex are inextricably intertwined and yet, I suggest, not interchangeable, as connoted by “gender/sex.” To the contrary, the little friend is a boyish girl: there is no attempt to realign her masculinity with maleness, as transsexuality would imply. (The term itself is significant: Najmabadi’s study takes not transness—or as in this case, other forms of gender play—but the more codified and, in Iran, legally inscribed, institution of “transsexuality” as its purview.) Similarly, when it comes to the twinned homo- and heteroerotics of dusti as companionate marriage, gender does follow from sexuality and vice-versa, as a “nondistinction” between gender and sexuality would suggest; that

[38] “gender, n.” *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, March 2020, www.oed.com/view/Entry/77468. Accessed 31 May 2020.

is to say, the little friend's boyish gender-presentation reflects a heteroerotics, while the two girls' girl-ness suggests the homoerotics of same-sex desire (*hamjins khwahī*). The simultaneous iteration of boyishness and girl-ness—i.e., of gender and sex—then produces crisscrossed alignments as well: boyish gender-presentation enables homoerotics between girls, while the same-sex (*hamjins*) identification between friends serves as the stage for heteroerotic coupling.

As a literary scholar, I can only surmise that the explanation for such a dynamic elaboration of *jins* as that which undergirds "The Little Friend" is generic, which is to say, to be located in the genre of the *bildungsroman*, the sort of text in which narrators are given flexibility to find themselves. Put simply, the girls are not yet women; they are not initiated into the codified adult world of *jins*, or gender, sex, and sexuality, that Najmabadi so expertly describes. Childhood gives the girls flexibility as actors. Arguably, the sort of gender play the little friend exhibits is permissible because of her age, and the narrator's erotic attraction to and love for her little friend is perceived as non-threatening—or even hardly perceived—by many readers for the same reason. In the liminal space of childhood, homoerotics and heteroerotics play with each other, feeding off one another, while girliness and boyishness align and misalign with girlhood.

To make more explicit the problematics of translating gender—or "sex," or "*jins*"—implicit here, I wish to underscore that though translation from a language without gendered pronouns, such as Persian, to one with, such as English, often serves to erase queerness, in this case translation unexpectedly highlights the homoerotics between the girls by flagging the little friend's femaleness. Consider the following few sentences translated by Farrokh, in which the verb "*dūst dāshtan*" (to like or love) is translated as "to love:" "My friend waits for me at a nearby intersection to take the bus to school with me. She is often penalized on account of my tardiness. *That is why I love her* (*dūstash dāram*); that's why I'll die for her; that's why I'll do

whatever she wants me to do" (trans. Farrokh 25, my emphasis). In the final sentence, the hyperbolic clauses that elaborate the Persian phrase "*hamīn ast kih dūstash dāram*" (That is why I love her) render "love" the only reasonable translation for "*dūst dāshtan*." (Indeed, I have deferred to Farrokh's translation rather than an original one to make the point.) Far from "straightening" the text, gendering the object-pronoun reproduces in translation an unsuspecting trace of the history of homoerotic lover-beloved couplings carried in the Persian original; that is, given the understood feminine position of the "I," the sentiment "That is why I love her" opens itself up to a queer reading. Here, "love" in English operates similarly multivalently to "dusti" in Persian, capturing a mode of relationality that exceeds, and ultimately redefines, friendship.

One of my central claims in this study is that homoerotics are not "always-already" queer in the Iranian context; in fact quite the opposite. But in the mid- to late-twentieth century, when Taraghi's story is set, elite respectability did in fact eschew homoerotics as backwards and déclassé. In other words, the history of gender and sexuality in modern Iran tells a story of the "queering" of homoerotics: what was once seen as normal was pushed to the margins and redefined as aberrant. In some ways, the Revolutionary period, when Taraghi's story was published, has enabled a renewed homoerotics by putting the same-sex object back under the subjective gaze, but unlike in earlier periods, that homoerotics has in public discourse largely been desexualized and made platonic, with communion reserved for a spiritual plane. I call attention to the fact that I have been working from readily available manuscripts that have passed the censorship of the Ministry of Culture: the story at hand is perceived not only by the reading Iranian public but by the state to be sufficiently non-threatening. I am not suggesting that Taraghi intentionally inscribed this story with a more explicit same-sex relationship that was then censored out; given the author's personal politics, that is next to impossible. To the contrary,

what interests me is twofold: firstly how this story continues in the tradition of homoerotic literature perhaps despite itself; secondly how a same-sex "friendship" becomes the stage on which to project, and the means by which to push, heteroerotic coupling, almost as if to sugarcoat a pill.

Class, a Failed Crossing, and the Translating the Foreign Under the Spell of Language

The little friend's difference from the narrator touches on two types of alterity, gender and class. The little friend comes from a family that is much more precariously socially positioned than the narrator's: her father is a gambler, her mother lives "abroad" (*farang*) (27), and they are moreover Communists (i.e., members of the Tudeh Party).[39] In contrast to this (scandalously) broken family, the narrator's own pro-monarchy family is the model of elite respectability, composed of a strict father, a gentle mother, and a handful of household servants. The mirroring and twinning the narrator insists on vis-à-vis the little friend before Sivitlānā's arrival is thus contradicted by their disparate class and status positions per the narrator's own reckoning: such semblance has been a fantasy from the start. Viewed in this light, the narrator's claims to identification constitute an attempt to cross class boundaries. In feeling that she "[has] come to resemble" the little friend (25) and not vice-versa, in dirtying herself to match the little friend's anti-bourgeois tastes, which capitulate against the "prim and proper" (26) and against feminine respectability, the narrator tries to shed her elite class identity to become more, so to speak, "common." In so far as the little friend represents rebellion for the narrator, the narrator's attraction to the little friend is at least in part due to this class differential, and one detects a hint of class exotification. Yet in inviting the little friend home with her, thus socially resituating her,

[39] See 29, in which the little friend has the soon-to-be Revolutionary slogan "Death to the Shah" (*marg bar shāh*) scribbled on her palm.

even if briefly, the narrator tries to pull the little friend "up" to her level. The dusti between the girls serves to wed the elite subject so central to Iran's modernization process with the lower class other.

Given the crucial role education played in twentieth-century Iran and other contemporary nationalist projects around the world, the story's school setting gestures towards the production of a bourgeois national citizen subject. This bourgeois identity requires each the upper- and lower-class subject to meet in the middle, somewhere between the little friend's abject status and the narrator's aristocratic one. Willingly relinquishing her elite privilege—even if only superficially, as in scuffing up her shoes and untying her hair ribbon, or aspirationally, in her desire to be like the little friend—the young narrator does more than betray a childlike naiveté about the significance of class difference: she hints at the prerevolutionary fervor that will ultimately serve as her family's undoing and as the reason for her displacement and exile in the story's frame; recall that she narrates from an unnamed Mediterranean beach. Redeployed in the service of modern nationalism, homoerotic friendship and love (dusti) serves as much to harmonize opposite classes as it does opposite genders: the "hetero-" in "heteroerotics" thus stands for more than one kind of difference.

What seems peculiar, though, is that gender is ultimately more easily crossed in this story than class. In comparison to the consistent gender crossing the little friend manages, which empowers her to consistently call the shots—it is she who first speaks the vow of dusti, and she who bears the knife-cum-phallus—the narrator's attempt to class-cross by purposefully disheveling herself looks like a sorry excuse for drag.

The little friend's gender and class difference prefigures Sivitlānā's foreignness. In the context of the all girls' school, the boyish little friend constitutes a quasi—albeit, welcome—trespasser that acts as a harbinger of the true intruder to come.

For the narrator, coming into contact with the foreign is signaled as the path to adulthood and decency. Hence her father's demand that she study abroad, partially quoted once above: "You have to go to America. To study. To make money. To become somebody (*ādam shavī*)" (Taraghi 46, my rendition). In the social "law" (read: cultural codes) laid down by the father, going abroad represents a gateway not only to adulthood but to civility and humanity itself, for such are the implications of the Persian phrase "*ādam shavī*," which I have translated idiomatically as "to become somebody" but which, word-for-word, is "[to] become human." This directive comes near the end of the flashback portion of the story, before returning the adult framing narrative, thus marking the end of childhood in terms of form and content.

When Sivitlānā first arrives, her foreignness is marked in terms of physical and linguistic difference:

> In the doorway of the classroom stands a tall and thin girl; she does not resemble any single student in the class. She does not resemble either me or the little friend. She has long, blonde hair and big, blue eyes. The headmistress calls on her. Her name's Sivitlānā (*Ismash Sivitlānāst*). The headmistress explains that Sivitlānā is Russian and does not know how to read and write Farsi like us. One of the students in the class will have to help her the whole yearlong. Who? Her eyes roam over the faces [in the class]. The teacher calls on me. Me? (Taraghi 30, my rendition)

The inability to read or write Farsi (Persian) acts as a sign of Sivitlānā's difference, like her body and nationality, not to mention her name. Typically in contemporary Persian texts, diacritics, if employed at all, are used only upon the first appearance of a foreign word or name, but the

editions of "The Little Friend" with which I am familiar[40] employ diacritics throughout. The narrator's resistance to domesticating Sivitlānā's name in Persian—as indicated by repeated, foreignizing diacritics—mirrors Sivitlānā's own illiteracy in Persian, so that written Persian reifies as a border between the girls. Spoken language is not at stake here, but rather the literacy in which the Iranian girls can take pride given modernization and women's increased access to education. The narrator's astonished "Me?" at the end of the passage enacts an Althusserian moment of interpellation wherein the narratorial "I/me"—contained in the single Persian pronoun, "*man*"—is summoned by the teacher-cum-police, an individual subject forged in communion, and conversation with, those of "us" who "read and write Persian." The orthography of the name, "Sivitlānā," then suggests an ambivalence to the foreign that poses the question of translatability. On the one hand, the name's foreignness is preserved via diacritics; on the other, rendered into Persian script, the name is partially naturalized, though in a way that purposefully creates friction. It is, in short, at once untranslatable and translatable.

Curiously, this passage introduces a linguistic and psychic resistance to the foreign that it then works against; it resists its own resistance to the foreign. In the phrase first introducing the yet unnamed foreign student, the name, "Sivitlānā" is further naturalized into the Persian text via a contraction. In the Persian phrase "*Ismash Sivitlānāst*" (Her name's Sivitlānā), the final *alif* ("*ā*") of the name is elided with the starting *alif* of the verb "*ast*" (is), so that in lieu of the more bookish, "*Ismash Sivitlānā ast*" (Her name is Sivitlānā), we are given the colloquialism, "*Ismash Sivitlānāst*." In a single stroke, both literally and figuratively, the sign "Sivitlānā" is marked as foreign and seamlessly incorporated into the conventions of vernacular Persian. The diacritics

[40] This includes the edition upon which I have relied (cited above) as well as the following: Taraghi, Goli. "*Dūst-i Kūchak*" (The Little Friend). *Khāṭirih-hāyi Parākandih* (Scattered Memories), 1992-3. Tehran, Intisharat-i Bāgh-i Āynih, 2015, pp. 31-58. In Persian.

produce and reproduce foreignness while grammar suggests an easier rapport: “untranslatability” appears to be more of a preoccupation than a claim. The extra syllable in the Persian transcription of the name can be read as similarly double-edged: rendering the trisyllabic (in Russian, as in English) name as tetrasyllabic so that “Svet-la-na” becomes “Si-vit-lā-nā” can suggest a xenophobic rejection of the borrowed sign, but this adaptation also serves to sonically “translate” the name, harmonizing it with the surrounding Persian text. The name is orthographically foreignized and orally Persianized.

I contend that the diacritically inflected orthography of “Sivitlānā” iterates the other’s otherness both despite and because of the other’s familiarity. In the recent monograph, *Another Place: Identity, Space, and Transcultural Signification in Goli Taraqqi’s Fiction* (2018),[41] Goulia Ghardashkhani theorizes the ambivalent foreign in Taraghi’s late, autobiographical works, using Homi Bhabha’s idea of “third space” as a springboard. Like Bhabha, Ghardashkhani trains an eye on the marginal and liminal spaces of culture, “the spaces *in-between* identities,” as she puts it, “or *in-between* cultures” (162, her emphasis). For Ghardashkhani, intimate interrelationality, and the confrontation between the “I” and “you,” serves as the first site of culture formation (163). Third space is then defined as “a semantic realm within which meanings are shifted and displaced from their original and illusively stable points of reference; it is the site within which different, and even oppositional meanings are simultaneously possible” (Ghardashkhani 164). Both dusti and childhood, as I have elaborated them above, operate in this story as third spaces that enable seemingly “oppositional meanings” like the marrying of homo to hetero and femaleness to masculinity. Exile, I contend, is another such third space. Indeed, given the setting

[41] Ghardashkhani, Goulia. *Another Place: Identity, Space, and Transcultural Signification in Goli Taraqqi’s Fiction*. Leiden and Boston, Brill, 2018.

of the frame, exile crucially serves as the primary third space and blueprint for such configurations in the flashback.

In the postcolonial imaginary, the Mediterranean serves as a border between North and South (i.e., Europe and Africa), West and East (i.e., Europe and the Middle East), but also as the site of contact and trade. Indeed, the story's opening lines seem to destabilize the narrator's sense of place as much as anchor it: "Summer nineteen eighty-four; the Mediterranean beach is covered with people. The turquoise ocean is dirty and gray[…]" (Taraghi 23, my rendition). To a Persian-language audience, citing the Gregorian year, rather than that of the Iranian Shamsi calendar, signals the narrator's displacement and reorientation in exile. In the same breath, the Mediterranean is described as "turquoise," an emblem of the Persianate. As a third space, the Mediterranean offers the possibility of translation and cross-cultural communication—but it also portends failures in translation: the turquoise ocean is muddied, "dirty and gray."

In the flashback, the narrator consistently asserts contradictory opposites. Several pages after claiming that "Sivitlānā does not resemble any single student in the class… [n]either me [n]or the little friend" (Taraghi 30, above), the narrator claims that "Sivitlānā is exactly like the little friend" (Taraghi 34, my rendition). She moreover attributes to Sivitlānā characteristics previously associated with the little friend, mapping one alterity onto the other. Consider the passage in full:

> Sivitlānā is my enemy. She's taken my place and, like a demon, stolen my friend. Sivitlānā is Russian. Sivitlānā is Communist (*Tūdih-ī*). Sivitlānā goes to the Sitārih Cinema. Sivitlānā is free. She comes and goes on her own. Sivitlānā can sleep over at this person or that person's house. Sivitlānā has no mother and lives with her paternal aunt. Sivitlānā is everything I am not. Sivitlānā is exactly like the little friend. How can I compete with her? I don't have the power to. (Taraghi 34, my rendition)

Affiliation with the Communist Tudeh Party, attending the (notably, also Communist) Sitārih Cinema, being motherless, and coming and going as she pleases are the same markers of class and politics that distinguished the little friend from the narrator. They are also privileges of the brand of masculinity I have defined as boyishness. Unlinked from the mother, each Sivitlānā and the little friend lives "free" (*āzād*). In contrast to the narrator's highly regulated movements, a sign of her feminine respectability, these two have wide access to public space, like boys; they "com[e] and g[o] on [their] own" (*khudash mīāyad va mīravad*), meaning, at their own prerogative. Farrokh's translation spells this out, combining these middle two sentences into the single sentiment, "She enjoys liberties I don't" (trans. Farrokh 30).

But the sleepovers allowed to Sivitlānā and the little friend ultimately bring their girl-ness, and lack of feminine respectability, back into view. In Persian as in English, the verb "to sleep" (*khwābīdan*) can either connote resting or having sex. That the girls are allowed sleepovers at once suggests a boyish, and classed, range of movement and hints at a failed femininity; to be less of a proper girl—that is, to be a lower class or foreign girl—is to be less of a girl, tout court (i.e., to be boyish). Yet, here, the project of re-describing dusti as companionate marriage serves to save the little friend from herself. An important fault line between her alterity and Sivitlānā's surfaces. Whereas the little friend's (adolescent) boyishness is sanctified by the institution of (adult) hetero-marriage, recoding her failed femininity as a successful masculinity, Sivitlānā's status as a foreigner only emphasizes her failed femininity: as interloper, the foreigner is a third that menaces the national citizen duo. Though eventually Sivitlānā steals the little friend away from the narrator, forming a union that enacts a sort of exogamy—as opposed to the endogamous companionate marriage—the passage at hand suggests an opposite vector of attraction: in mirroring the little friend, Sivitlānā threatens to take the place of the beloved.

Protecting herself from such exogamous desire seems to be another of the narrator's preoccupations; the foreigner is feared as a "demon" (*dīv*) and also as a femme fatale. The simultaneous negotiation of childhood and adulthood in adolescence enables such multiple significations and ambivalences.

Returning to the framing narrative, one sees that the narrator's rivalry with Sivitlānā, at least at the moment of writing and remembering-cum-story telling, is tied up with the narrator's own identification with Sivitlānā. If desire, there is an attenuated masturbatory desire at play here, a woman's mourning for the girl she used to be. Sivitlānā is introduced into the story in the first paragraph, as a "half familiar face" (Taraghi 23, my rendition). Lying on a crowded Mediterranean beach, on a trip she undertook "for the sake of the kids" and "regrets" (23, my rendition), the narrator states: "I close my book and look at the people around me, and my gaze indiscriminately passes over the bodies, turns around, comes back and stays [lingering] on a half familiar face" (23, my rendition). The narrator sees Sivitlānā despite herself; in the second clause, her gaze—and not the "I"—acts as subject. Throughout the course of the sentence, the concept of will or agency that is implicit in grammatical subjectivity is unlinked from the "I" and realigned with the gaze.

That gaze seems to reveal as much about the self as the other. Yet unnamed, the woman (i.e., Sivitlānā) mirrors the narrator's gender and age; she is described as "close" (*nazdīk*), spatially, but also, we will soon discover, psychically:

> Close to me, a woman alone, who is around my age, is lying on the sand, and a strange feeling tells me that I know this woman. My thoughts become entangled and in the depths of my mind, confused memories, light up electrically like glowworms. I turn around but my attention remains on her. I'm uncomfortable and I want to switch spots. I call the kids. She takes off her sunglasses and searches for something in her purse. She lifts her head. She sits. She turns herself

> around and suddenly stares at me; it's from her eyes that I recognize her, from those two big blue circles that still, as in the days of [my] childhood, cause the depth[s] of my heart to shake. (Taraghi 23-4, my rendition)

Though lost in translation, in the original, the repetition of the word "*barq*" (electricity, lightning) in the construction "*barq barq mizanand*" (light up electrically) manifests (but remaps) such mirroring at the most basic level. And yet the narrator resists identifying with the woman while drawing out such reflections between them: "[she's] uncomfortable (*nārāhat*) and want[s] to switch spots." An identification *of* Sivitlānā is attendant to an identification *with* Sivitlānā that threatens the narrator's sense of self, which must be shored up in turn. The descriptor "a woman alone" (*zanī tanhā*) names she who is cast out of feminine respectability, the lone woman, unattached to a man or motherhood. As if to treat her "discomfort" (*nārāhatī*) by highlighting her own motherhood and thus dissimilarity from the lone woman, the narrator "call[s] the kids."

Throughout the passage, the foreign and familiar are consistently paired and juxtaposed, like a heterosexual couple. "A strange feeling" (*ḥissī gharīb*) causes the narrator to suspect that she "knows"—or is "familiar with," the other denotation of the verb "*shinākhtan*"—the woman. In Persian the word for "exile," "*ghurbat*," is derived from the same root as the adjective "strange" (*gharīb*), accentuating the ways the narrator herself has been rendered "strange" by the setting: Sivitlānā is strange or foreign to the narrator, but given the Mediterranean setting, the narrator is also strange and foreign to her surrounds, not to mention, *es*tranged from the culture and social structures of the world of her childhood, into which she soon dives.

Sivitlānā's eyes, described as "two big blue circles," give her away, inspiring fear in the narrator, "caus[ing] the depth[s] of [her] heart to shake." It is here, from the spring of a wound, that Sivitlānā's identity is first revealed in the story, preceding her introduction in the flashback,

as if naming were a trauma to be rehearsed and relived. The moment of naming in the frame goes this way:

> Sivitlānā! Without my wanting to, this name jumps out of my mouth and an old wound at the center of my chest smarts again. She is and isn't herself. Something more vicious than time has devoured her beauty and verdure. She's become ugly and old and seems depressed and battered. I search after her long blonde hair, after her pink cheeks and her white teeth. My heart's seized [with sadness]. My heart stings [with sympathy]. I can't believe it. (Taraghi 24, my rendition)

The narrator's identification of (and with) Sivitlānā happens "without[…] wanting to;" the name "jumps out" on its own accord. Naming serves to animate the story, causing the narrator to turn back the block and move us from post-Revolutionary exile to pre-Revolutionary Tehran. Language does a great deal of work in this story: taking vows of dusti inspires an embodied experience of love in the narrator, while Sivitlānā's illiteracy and need for help incites the narrator and little friend's initial separation in class; here, the word—i.e., the name, "Sivitlānā"—again effects embodied feeling, as written on the narrator's "heart" (*dil*). In the story at large, words have a great deal of power, but here in particular they exhibit a peculiar form of agency, an ability to act independently of the body and subject through which they've been channeled. At the level of plot, language is more than descriptive in this story; it is productive.

In the frame, an uncanny version of Sivitlānā, robbed of her beauty, is described as a paradox—i.e., "She is and isn't herself" (Taraghi 24, above)—that draws out a sense of displacement. But the paradox is more than a figure of speech. Without "her long blonde hair, […] her pink cheeks and her white teeth," all signs of an idealized white femininity, Sivitlānā is unreadable, a contradiction in terms. For the narrator's childhood self, Sivitlānā was the image of

"beauty and verdure" (*zībāyī va ṭarāvat*); without those superficial characteristics, she is meaningless.

Yet ultimately the framing narrative attributes more power to Sivitlānā's name than her image. The interjection "Sivitlānā!" is repeated once again before the flashback: "Sivitlānā! Even still, saying her name fills me with dread and remembering her makes me anxious" (Taraghi 24, my rendition). Like the vows of dusti, the name operates as an incantation. It produces an embodied feeling that is extreme, even incommensurate—in this case not love but a feeling of "dread," or "*vāhimih*," which is also the Persian word for "phobia." The flashback that is conjured as a result is figured violently as an onslaught: "I want to forget her but the memories attack [me]" (24, my rendition). The narrator forgets not only where she is, but also her status as a mother: "[…] I forget the Southern Ocean and the kids" (24, my rendition). Such effacement opens the door to her girlhood, and to Iran. Significantly, it is the pronunciation of the name "Sivitlānā," not seeing her on the beach, that most immediately incites these feelings and the story-within-a-story. The name invites the "images" (*taṣvīr*), or memories, and not vice-versa: "Hundreds of scattered images of Sivitlānā, frenetic like a windstorm, whirl around in my mind and smash the thin barriers [therein] against one another" (24, my rendition). The word thus precedes the image. Whereas storytelling is often considered a way of describing a world that exists outside of it, here, the world of the story is conjured by a word; the idea is almost biblical.

In this text, the power of language starts with the performative speech act—of which the marriage vow (and in this case, the vow of dusti) serves as preeminent example, an utterance that realizes its meaning by virtue of being said—but it does not stop there. Rather, embodied feeling—that is, the subject's experience of the self, and of the world around her—is frequently produced by a word or phrase that is spoken in dialogue, whether between characters or in the

narrator's dialogue with herself, as in the interjection, "Sivitlānā!" Rather than limit myself to an anodyne observation about the ways metalanguage blurs the line between representation and the real, I claim that in this story, the real is uncoupled from place or time, hinging instead on feeling as manifested in the body by the word. Put simply, speaking inspires real experience for the characters. Furthermore, time surrenders to feeling, so that scenes that are decades apart all take place in the present tense, as employed in flashback and in the frame. Place too is either as vague or defined as the narrator's corresponding affective state: the details the narrator uses to describe her home in Shemiran (an old neighborhood in north Tehran), including explicitly naming her old school (i.e., the Fīrūzkūhī School), contrasts sharply with the lack of specificity of the unnamed Mediterranean beach, as if her discomfort had dislodged her.

By Way of Conclusion: (Don't) Play Games with My Heart

In the flashback to childhood, the rivalry between Sivitlānā and the narrator comes to a head in the context of a game of hopscotch. The little friend is playing captain and gets to choose her teammates. The narrator is confident: "Everyone knows the first teammate (*yār*) she [always] picks is me" (Taraghi 36, my rendition). But the stakes are high—indeed "*yār*," the word for "teammate" also means "partner" or "friend," highlighting the game's significance of the game as a test of their friendship—and she remains nervous. "This is the most important moment of my life; it's either me or her," she states with childlike hyperbole (36-37, my rendition). Much to the narrator's consternation, however, the little friend refuses to choose, opting to change the rules of the game rather than pick one friend over the other:

> The little friend is ready. She says: "Today we'll choose two by two [i.e., in pairs]." What? Everyone protests; there's no doing it two by two. Impossible. Okay, fine, it's possible. Three by three is possible too. The little friend is the boss and the chief of games.

> They agree to what she's said. She chooses me and Sivitlānā. I won't play. (Taraghi 37, my rendition)

The little friend's masculinity operates as a shorthand for power; as "*farmāndih*" (chief), or he who has the power to decree firmans, she is likened to the Shah himself. But the narrator exercises a different sort of gendered power derived from the practice of *qahr kardan*, or actively ignoring someone. Notably, this is also how the dusti finally ends; the narrator ignores the little friend altogether. "I am ignoring (*qahr kardam*) the little friend and keep on ignoring her (*qahr mīmānam*)" (47, my rendition). Culturally coded as feminine, *qahr kardan* functions as a radical politics of refusal that altogether rejects participation in a game in whose rules one had no hand. In the context of the game, the narrator is punishingly called a "brat" (*lūs*) by the little friend (37), and yet she stands strong. Sitting a math exam afterwards, she returns to the unspoken ultimatum, "Either me or Sivitlānā" (37, my rendition). By refusing to play the game, she has rejected the form of triangulated relationality it represents.

The narrator thinks about the voodoo she recently tried to unleash on Sivitlānā, availing upon the household servant Tūbā Khānūm (Ms. Tuba) for help: "Please to God do something so that this stranger, this demon, who's come from the other end of the world, will go back" (37, my rendition). A "stranger" (*gharībih*) and "demon" (*dīv*), Sivitlānā is perceived to be "from the other end of the world," though in fact no more than the Caspian Sea separates the girls' two countries. The servant's classed, antimodern witchcraft acts as a confused, desperate attempt to shore up the eroding edges of the national citizen subject, a gesture to "tradition" meant to shield the self against the other-as-foreigner. For Sivitlānā is threatening on the playground not so much in her untranslatability as in her translatability: she can be easily incorporated into the game and is interchangeable with any other team member. The narrator fears that in relation to the little friend, she herself is also interchangeable.

In this burdened scene, the little friend shows how easily the rules of the game can be bent and the structures of exclusive coupling—that is, of dusti coded as companionate marriage—adapted to create new forms of relationality. This is a lesson the narrator is only willing to learn in retrospect, as an adult. As a child, she falls sick and is bedridden in an embodied form of lovesickness spurred by the beloved's rejection (Taraghi 39-40). When the little friend comes to see her, it is little solace (40-41). In other words, without its exclusivity, the relationship means little to her. Effectively renouncing triangulated friendship and love, she cedes her place to Sivitlānā and postures as if she hardly cared.

Here one must note that the appellation "the little friend" (*dūst-i kūchak*) destabilizes the narrator's hold on the beloved from the start, as if to ask, whose little friend, the narrator's or Sivitlānā's? This subtlety is lost in the published English translation. Presumably in order to make the story more readable, a consideration to which I am sympathetic, Farrokh consistently refers to "*dūst-i kūchak*" as "my friend" and renders the title "My Little Friend." But the ambiguity attendant in "*the* little friend" is significant: Persian has no definite articles but specifies the indefinite and possession via suffixes; Taraghi chose to do neither. Indeed the phrase is as awkward in Persian as in English; such friction is productive in the original and should be maintained in translation. "The" little friend is one node in a triangle that can be turned to stand on any side.

Indeed the triangle finally rests on the pairing of the little friend and Sivitlānā. Going back to school after she has been out sick, the narrator observes: "Sivitlānā is sitting right there in my spot but it doesn't matter" (39, my rendition). But it does matter, evidently; the narrator has simply steeled herself against the pain: "My heart is strong to the core" (41, my rendition). Like walking away from the game, enduring the pain reads as a feminine response, a form of

empowerment in the face of a situation she cannot change. Loneliness turns to solitude, then dissipates. Summarizing the end of her childhood at the end of the flashback, the narrator describes moving on to attend a different high school and to make other friends. Far from wasting away, she “fall [s] in love time and again” (47, my rendition). The feminine role is active; she is subject, not object.

The story’s final paragraph makes reference to playing, relying on games as a trope that more broadly represents relationality and the willingness to accept others, and the other/Other:

> My son calls me from a distance. He is busy playing with the other children on the water’s shore. I breathe. A heavy burden over my heart falls [away]. The burden of an old jealousy, bitter and destructive. If only I had consented to three-person games. I sit beside the kids. Someone coils inside me. (Taraghi 47, my rendition)

The narrator’s son, who is not an exilic subject like she but an immigrant, has managed to adapt; he plays with “the other children,” who one presumes are as foreign to him as much as they are familiar. With the benefit of not only adulthood but also of the liminality of the Mediterranean, the narrator wishes that she had “consented to three-person games.” Exile is thus figured as a space of possibility, and not only one of loss. Confrontation with the current-day Sivitlānā deflates her in the narrator’s eyes, and the “heavy burden” of a jealousy that was “bitter and destructive.”

In other works by Taraghi, exile similarly operates as a space for reexamination and self-critique. It is, moreover, a feminine space where women might meet again, and meet anew. In a chapter on the relations between female protagonists and domestic workers in works by Taraghi and Simin Daneshvar (most well known as the author of *Savāshūn*, the first Persian novel by a

woman to be published, in 1969),[42] Motlagh elaborates an elite female subjectivity hinged on the othered body of the servant. Othering in this context variously codes race or class difference; Motlagh analyzes the representation of so-called “Iranian” domestic servants—as in, those perceived to be included in the national body—and black domestic servants, who recall the figure of the *dadih* (or black “mammy”) inherited from Qajar slavery. Though critical of all the works under its purview, the chapter is nevertheless more sympathetic to Taraghi’s work. (Indeed, I would argue that Taraghi’s first-person narrators are often foisted on their own petards, and thus act as agents of their own critique.) By way of one example, Motlagh suggests that the narrator in the short story “*Safar-i Buzurg-i Amīnih*” (whose title she translates as “Aminih’s Long Journey”[43]) foreignizes the domestic servant Aminih, only to be foreignized herself when she and her household move to Paris after the Revolution. There, in exile, “it is she [the narrator] who is categorized as ‘third world’ by French servants” (Motlagh 89). Aminih, contrastingly, has only been “improved” by the move: “Her foreignness,” Taraghi’s text reads in Motlagh’s translation, “[there] had a taste that improved her” (Taraghi qtd. in Motlagh 90, Motlagh’s bracketing). Ultimately the narrator recognizes Aminih as a sort of peer, recognizing her “womanly soul” (*rūh-i zanānehash*) (Taraghi qtd. in and trans. Motlagh, 90). In Motlagh’s reading, the narrator tries to learn from her former servant rather than trying to reform her (90). Moreover, the mysterious absenting of the male of the household in the move abroad is what creates such space for a renegotiation of power between the two women, and between the family and its servants more broadly (Motlagh 91-3).

In “The Little Friend,” the framing narrative similarly makes mention of the narrator’s children without any mention of a father: it seems the absence of the father is required for the

[42] “Ain’t a Woman?: Domesticity’s Other” in Motlagh 2012, pp. 59-93.
[43] Published in *Jāyī Dīgar* (Another Place), Tehran, 2000-1.

narrator to reconsider her relation to the "foreign" as multivalently defined. Torn from the motherland, freed of the law of the father, she can in her exile-cum-orphanage create a more expansive subjectivity that accepts three as well as two, the foreign as well as the familiar.

But racialization, I argue, operates in these two stories in distinct ways. In contrast to Motlagh, I contend that the final reckoning in "Aminih's Big Journey" complicatedly reinscribes the servant's othering by essentializing her femininity while also productively forcing the narrator to a self-critique. If whiteness is defined as a project of categorizing self and other, coding the former as unmarked and the latter as marked (i.e., racialized), then the narrator in "Aminih's Big Journey" inscribes herself with a refined sort of whiteness in Iran—and thereby codes her servant as somehow less white, if not nonwhite—only to witness that whiteness collapse in another context: in Europe, the narrator can no longer unequivocally claim whiteness. However, in "The Little Friend," the other is not negatively racialized, but rather racially idealized. Sivitlānā's body is produced as the paragon of white beauty, a model for even the narrator. As a child, the narrator pines after Sivitlānā's whiteness as metonymized by her hair and eyes, even as she rejects her foreignness. Above, when introduced to the class, Sivitlānā's "long, blonde hair and big, blue eyes" (Taraghi 24) are objects of admiration and desire, if also fascination. At home, where the narrator is a member or the respectable elite, her vexed Third World subjectivity only surfaces in face of the (Western) foreign; note here that in Persian, "foreign" and "Westerner" are united under the same sign, "*farangī*," derived from Frank (i.e., French). But abroad, in the West—namely, in France—the narrator's foothold on the cliff's edge of whiteness slips.

The third space of the Mediterranean, plus the lack of a man, help the narrator see somethings differently, but not all. Early in the frame, the narrator refers to the Mediterranean as

"the Southern Ocean" (Taraghi 24, above), revealing a Northern European position and hinting at France. In Europe on the heels of the Cold War—recall that the story was published in 1992-3—Sivitlānā is excluded from the First World and hence from idealized whiteness: though not quite a Third Worlder like the narrator, she is nonetheless a Second Worlder. Given the reference to Sivitlānā's "devoured […] beauty and verdure" in the first half of the frame (Taraghi 24, above), a cynical reading suggests that the narrator is rid of her jealousy at the end of the story not because she realizes that Sivitlānā's idealized whiteness was all along an overburdened sign, but because that whiteness has been marred; the dream has been ruined, not disappeared. Recontextualized, Sivitlānā has lost her magic:

> Sivitlānā has, after years and years, appeared again. Like a lost messenger pigeon, she has arrived from [her] travels, tired and with shed wings and feathers and incapable. I look at her and see that Tūbā Khānūm's talisman, in the end, has worked its magic and my heart seizes [with sadness]. Her big, blue eyes are empty of distant memories and, in the invasion and attack of thousands of bitter and sweet experiences, and in the dizzying passing of days and tales, have forgotten the Fīrūzkūhi School and the little friend. (Taraghi 47, my rendition)

Witchcraft, in the mouth of the adult narrator, offers a feminized proxy for the complex network of politics and history that has resituated the characters as we now find them. Meant figuratively and not literally, the antimodern symbol of the talisman triumphs: the lived experience and harsh realities of exile and time are better expressed by reference to fable than fact. The last sentence, as tortuous in Persian as in my English rendition, attributes the failure to remember to the "big, blue eyes," not to Sivitlānā, as if her personhood might be collapsed with—indeed, contained in—that symbol. Seemingly, as the more powerful one in the power gradient, Sivitlānā was less marked by their encounter.

The narrator, nonetheless, clings to her beloved even as she claims to have learned the lesson of acceptance, and of "three-person games." "Someone coils inside me," read the story's last lines: "Someone stirs beneath my skin, and a voice at the depths of my ears says, "Friends, friends, to the Day of Resurrection" (Taraghi 47, my rendition). The story thus ends with a repetition of the vows, slowed by the insertion of commas absent hitherto, stressing the word "*dūst.*" The beloved's voice haunts the narrator as the simultaneously homo- and heteroerotic story of dusti haunts the mainstream, state-sanctioned Iranian modern project. The process of "burying" the beloved referenced in Motlagh's title remains ongoing—and ever incomplete.

Skins, Veils, and Knives: White Feminine Respectability in pre-Revolutionary Iran

> She waited in the same place where she had met him yesterday. When he appeared in the street, she lunged towards him with her body, fully conscious. It was him, with his face and eyes and human expression. Nothing had changed except for a black moustache that had grown over his upper lip. Her closed lips parted from underneath the thick cloth, emitting a word without a sound: 'Male!' Never in her whole life had she uttered that word. She had thought he was simply a human being, without sex, but this moustache meant he was… her feet remained nailed to the ground, and her hand inside the black glove moved up to cover the two small holes in the thick cloth.
>
> - Nawal El Saadawi, "Eyes," trans. Ali Badran and Margot Badran[44]

> I asked [the station chief], "Is the buyer of the coat here?"
>
> With his hand he gestured to a chador-clad woman who was sitting on the wooden bench between the man in the brown suit and another man. It was strange that I hadn't noticed her—other than me, the buyer of the coat was the only woman present. Her face was ovular and pleasingly sculpted, and she had a pretty moonlike color, and her chador played no role in hiding her neck and head. She had sewn her gaze to the thread of my choker, and I thought I should have taken it off before coming.
>
> - Mahshid Amirshahi, "Name, Surname, Birth Certificate Number…," my translation, pp. 61-2

Introduction: Unveiled Desire in the Veiled Gaze

Tehran, 1970. In less than a decade the monarchy will fall and the nation refashioned as an Islamic Republic; for now the Shah clutches to power. So-called "women's issues" are essential to this strategy. For several years the state-sponsored Women's Organization of Iran (*Sāzmān-i zanān-i īrān*) has tried to fend off anti-imperial feminisms in favor of an elite secular

[44] El Saadawi, Nawal. "Eyes." *Index on Censorship* vol. 18, no. 2, 1989, pp. 25-28. See 25.

feminism ideologically and explicitly in conversation with the so-called Euro-American white "second wave." Mahshid Amirshahi's short story, "Name, Surname, Birth Certificate Number…" ("*Nām... shuhrat... shumārih shināsnāmih...*") first published in the student journal of the then-Pahlavi University (now Shiraz University), *Abnūs*, and reprinted in the author's collection, *In the First Person Singular* (*Bih sīghiyyih aval shakhs-i mufrad*, 1971), is both imbricated in this web of 1960s to seventies transnational feminism and contains the seeds of an immanent critique thereof. Set at a police station in the aftermath of a robbery, the story switches between the unnamed first-person narrator's memories of the crime committed by the domestic laborer,[45] Reza, and the protagonist's experiences at the station, where she meets Munir, a woman from the red-light district who purchased her fur coat on the black market.

Zooming from Tehran to Cairo and two decades forward, Egyptian doctor and writer Nawal El Saadawi interrogates the veiled woman at the vanguard of a wave of global Islamic "fundamentalisms" that arrives on the heels of the Iranian Revolution. In this 1989 short story, a modest woman is tempted away from her faith when she discovers desire. Taking the form of an ancient stone figurine the woman encounters at her museum job whose likeness she then sees on the street, the "male" named then absented (via ellipses) above operates more as a conduit for the raw charge of desire coursing through her than he does as the object of her affections. As evidenced in the epitaph, it is the eyes, rendered sexless here as opposed to the mustache that gives away his "sex"/gender (whether there is a distinction here is unclear), which serve as the stage for veiled fantasies whose thrust seems not to be the other's body but rather the woman's

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[45] I refer to Reza and others in the narrator's household staff as "domestic laborers" or "domestic servants" in order to hint at the particularly disempowered position suggested by the Persian "*mustakhdam*," which the narrator uses to describe Reza on page 58. Amy Motlagh in *Burying the Beloved* (2012) opts for the nominalized form "domestic," which prevent imposing foreign models of labor or servitude on the text, but my discomfort with the totalizing force of nominalization leads me to opt for toggling between the former two in order to prevent one-to-one mappings.

own embodied pleasure: "she lunged towards him with her body, fully conscious." Desire, "fully conscious" and intentional, confronts the purity of faith and a ritual practice of modesty as not just physical veiling but the maintenance of a veiled gaze. The desired other both mirrors the self in its ungendered "human[ity]" and acts as a black hole that consumes the disciplined subject, rendering her own eyes as "two small holes" that must be covered in order to disrupt this destructive carnal force. In turn the desiring gaze is at once heteroerotic, masturbatory, and, in its initial attachment to the sexless object while at once recognizing the impossibility of sexlessness and a humanity free from gender, bisexual.

In the second epigraph excerpted from Iran in 1970—that is, published seven years after Khomeini's 1963 exile, as the seeds of revolutionary unrest with the Shah began to take root in various communist, Maoist, and Islamist circles—such a multivectored erotic gaze assumes a homoerotic[46] and violently charged tint, staging an encounter between the upper-class woman and her lower-class "Other." Here too motifs of veiling mix with desire and the gaze, but the elite gaze is returned, rendering the narrator both subject and object. The woman "thief" (as black-market customer) wears chador, suggesting a contrast between the Other's veiling and her unveiled gaze. Thus as in the Arabic text, the gaze enacts a failure in veiling. Interestingly, however, the unveiled (read: naked) desiring gaze, which is directed both at the seductive neckline and the necklace itself, does not occur in spite of the physical veil but is instead enabled by the chador. Indeed the chador itself serves to reveal more of the woman's nakedness than it covers: "her chador played no role in hiding her neck and head." While El Saadawi's short story takes hijab's injunction to modesty at its word to then interrogate the difficulty of fashioning an embodied, desiring human self within its terms, the Iranian secular feminist text accuses hijab of

[46] Note that I do not read the masturbatory gaze attributed to the El Saadawi epigraph as homoerotic; in this project I am concerned with homoerotics as relational.

hypocrisy, suggesting that it fails to produce the modesty it claims. Hijab as physical veiling represents not a site of personal spiritual struggle but a stage for interpersonal deceit: the physical veil represents and enacts a breakdown in the social, a rip in its moral fabric.

In this story, in a dynamic all too common in modernity, the subjectivity of the "lady" (*khānūm*)—where "lady" means feminine, "white," and wealthy, valences also implied by the Persian—is constructed through two significant oppositions, to the lower-class man and to the Other Woman, whose difference in turn coheres in class and an idea of feminine respectability that exceeds it. As I aim to show, I understand class as a structure of organizing a society whereby literal, social, and cultural capital is accumulated in some bodies and groups as opposed to others; the upper-class subject not only possesses such capital but also the power to use it.

Exploring the upper-class woman's opposition to the lower-class man in my first section, "Rape?" I contend that power as located in the phallus is in this context ambivalently masculinized and adhered to femininity. Rape then doubly signifies as a form of castration meant to punish the empowered female (where empowered is used quite literally and not in a celebratory way) and "correct" the feminine phallus by rendering it impotent. In the second section, "Rage?" I then further elaborate the complexities of the feminine phallus to suggest its gender and political ambivalence and potential for violence, elaborating the narrator's male-less lifestyle as a socially deviant, and thus, queer one. Reading the rage the narrator directs at the lower-class man and patriarchy (as perceived by her) both with and against black feminist rage, I analyze the narrator's problematic respectability and equally problematic queer rebellion and thus lay the groundwork for an examination of the politics of sisterhood.

In "Sisters?" I ground my analysis in the history of cross-class and transnational feminisms in Iran, interrogating the possibility of sisterhood. Such historicizing also asks how

fictions like this one helped shape the contours of sociocultural movements like the Iranian Revolution, contending that literature—and even "social realist" literature, as modern Iranian literature is often called[47]—is not only reflective of social norms but also engaged in producing and reproducing those norms. Placing this story in conversation with a contemporaneous documentary by Kamran Shirdel on the Qaleh, Tehran's red-light district at the time, I ground a reading of the character of Munir in a history of institutionalized coerced sex labor. I furthermore introduce an intellectual history of veiling in modern Iran in which physical unveiling was inscribed as "true" veiling and in turn as feminine respectability, to define the veil a disciplinary apparatus integrated into the self that structures the subject's relationship to itself, to others, and to the world. That is, in short, in secular feminisms superficial unveiling came to embody veiling. Then further elaborating literacy as a synecdoche for respectability and physical unveiling in this period, not to mention class privilege, I read the ways the Other Woman speaks back, historically and in this story, to reject literacy and respectability. Inasmuch as this anti-respectability politics constitutes a defiant embracing of deviance and marginality, I deem it an elaboration of queerness—and indeed, as a more trenchantly rebellious stance than the narrator's, a queerer queer.

An inquiry into embodiment and the surface of the body intensifies in the final section, "Race?," where I examine women's homoerotics in relation to the burdened sign of the narrator's fur coat (*pāltu-yi pūst*)-cum-skin (*pūst*) to offer the fur coat as an example of a secular veil. Reading this "skin" alongside the Other Woman's more literal skin, fetishized as the site of

[47] See Kamshad, Hassan. *Modern Persian Prose Literature.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966; Talattof, Kamran. *The Politics of Writing in Iran: A History of Modern Persian Literature*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000; and an argument for "social critical realism" in Parsinejad, Iraj. *A History of Literary Criticism in Iran (1866-1951)*. Bethesda, MD: IBEX Publishers, 2003, to refer to only a few foundational texts in the field of Persian literary studies.

an aestheticized and idealized whiteness, I suggest that the story conspicuously absences racialized blackness to preserve whiteness as the basis for sisterhood. Again bringing this text more explicitly to bear on queer theory, I theorize a violent sexuality borne of power that embraces both a masculinist phallocentrism and femininized desire for self-abandonment. Ultimately mirroring, the assumption on which sisterhood rests, turns back around to render the Other Woman an object of desire and a threat, at once revealing and concealing a class critique.

Throughout my analysis I promiscuously draw on as varied fields as black feminist theory, queer theory, literary and performance studies, and Iranian studies. The question marks that punctuate each section title are meant to keep close the problems inherent to such a comparative methodology while insisting on the need, now more than ever, to open lines of inquiry between the "Islamic" and "Western" worlds, and to embrace the mess in thinking, and writing, across borders.

Rape?

"The station was busy," the story starts, grounding us in the police station from which the narrator's other recollections spring, and to which they consistently return. At the story's start only Mohammad, Reza's accomplice, has been caught, and the narrator is annoyed to have been called in by the station chief when his officers' work remains undone. A branded Gilette razor, an instance of "coca-colonization"—that is, the U.S. goods and marketing flooding the world during the Cold War—is cited as evidence of the thieves' violent intentions: "There was even a Gilette razor in his pocket. They aimed to crook and kill (*kushtan u burdan*)" (Amirshahi 57, my translation). Literally "to kill and to take [as in, to steal]," the sing-songy idiom "*kushtan u*

burdan" surfaces violence in content while undercutting it in form.[48] Via a sort of poetry, the chief thus maintains control over the threat he invokes. But the narrator remains unimpressed: she herself has encountered not the signifier but the real thing, given that Hujjat, another of her domestic servants, caught the thieves. "I'd already seen the Gilette razor last night" (ibid.), she states nonplussed in narration.

And yet soon she circles back to the razor, which, it turns out, has only served to prefigure a (proper) knife absent from the chief's account:

> Last night the Gilette razor, and even the knife that they say Reza was holding, hadn't had any special significance for me, but now my spine shook from the station chief's words.
>
> What if Khanum Aqa hadn't seen Reza at the window of my daughter's room, and what if Hujjat hadn't heard Khanum Aqa's voice screaming "Thief! Oh, a thief!" over the pounding of the rain… Oh! What if Khanum Aqa hadn't been around and if Hujjat hadn't heard her voice; if Reza had gone into my daughter's room… Oh! The bastard! If I had been there, I would've killed him with my own [two] hands. (Amirshahi 57-8, my translation).

In this crucial moment, the exclamatory "what if's" and "if's" (*agar*) both mark and occlude a threat that is not named. The text stages a remove between the narrator and the event, creating a distance that exceeds the simple fact of her absence. The "significance," or "meaning" (*ma'nī*), of the razor—and more importantly, of the knife it ushers in—arrives only belatedly, through the narrator's subsequent reinterpretation, as if the memory of the previous night were a text to be read. The text she provides, however, resists specification and refuses to make explicit what exactly Reza was threatening. The ellipses act as a signifier that obscures its signified—or rather, its signifieds, for the symbol of the knife provides two possible meanings easily enough.

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[48] Indeed I have translated it as "to crook and kill" in order to recreate that sense of melody, replacing rhyme with consonance and switching the word order so as to end on the strong downbeat of a short vowel.

I argue that the ellipses and the repeated interjection "Oh!" (*Vay!*) act as obfuscating signifiers that simultaneously absent and invoke the dual threats of rape and death boded by the knife as a phallic symbol of penetration. Ostensibly aimed at the narrator's daughter, the threat of death-rape calls into question the narrator's status and success as mother while also, given the conspicuous absence of a husband throughout the story (more on this soon), challenging her role as a substitute father. For one will note that in the Iranian Islamic arena at hand, responsibility for guarding a girl's virginity falls to the father and other male kin. Here the fear of murder also stands as a substitute for the fear of rape invoked by the phallic knife that Reza "hold[s]." But to say that rape remains unnamed because of a taboo would only beg the question. What, I am interested in investigating, is the nature of a taboo that figures rape as inexpressible, to be signified but by the conspicuous absence contained in ellipses?

Given the multivalences of the word "*dukhtar*"—at once "daughter," "girl," and "virgin"—the "daughter's room" becomes quite literally the virgin's chambers, and its trespass metonymically represents the trespass of her body. Such echoes exist in English, resonating in translation even if more softly. In her explication of the crucial but largely forgotten role the early twentieth-century scandal known as "the story of the daughters of Quchan" (*hikāyat-i dukhtarān-i Quchan*) played in Iran's Constitutional Revolution of 1905-09,[49] historian Afsaneh Najmabadi gestures to the double significations of daughter and virgin in both English and Persian: "I have chosen 'daughter' for the English translation of *dukhtar* in this book, not only because it comes closer to the common etymological root, but also because the word *daughter* in old English, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, did carry the additional meanings of 'a girl, maiden, young woman […]'" (Najmabadi 1998, 9). Najmabadi's commentary elucidates the

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[49] In brief, the girls were "sold by needy peasants to pay their taxes in a bad harvest year," an event spun by Constitutionalists as a sign of the failings of the monarchy (Najmabadi 1998, 1).

collapse of the signifiers “mother” and “woman,” and “daughter” and “girl,” that the work at hand takes for granted. Just as the (his)story of the daughters of Quchan represented the state’s failure to protect a vulnerable national body metonymized as woman, the daughter in this fictional story stands for her mother and “mothers” (i.e., women like her), and the body of the virgin-daughter—that is, the virginal body of the daughter—is made to represent feminine respectability tout court. The male domestic laborer, Reza, threatens to destroy the sanctity of that body and its respectability through the defamation that is rape—the same threat, incidentally, that lurks behind the public scandal surrounding Quchan, where sexual violence is assumed as inevitable when a woman, or as this discourse would have it, “girl,” is sold into slavery.

Moreover, if one takes seriously Najmabadi’s suggestion in the more recent monograph, *Professing Selves: Transsexuality and Same-Sex Desire in Contemporary Iran* (2014), that marriage serves as a requisite for full adulthood in contemporary Iranian culture,[50] then rape results in a thwarted life cycle, barring the girl from realizing full womanhood while also robbing her of her “girlhood.” At the level of signifiers, rape constitutes a sort of death: inasmuch as the raped *dukhtar* (girl) will cease to be a *dukhtar* (virgin), the *dukhtar* (maiden) will cease to be at all. The two forms of violence are twinned in more ways than one, and what is marked by the ellipses is not just rape followed by death but also rape-as-death.

[50] See especially page 7, where Najmabadi elaborates a “marriage imperative” that is a dominant “social and cultural norm.” In contemporary Iran, she explains, “[m]arrying constitutes an enactment of adulthood out of adolescence. While socio-economic changes have pushed the average age of first marriage for men and women alike to beyond their mid-twenties, unmarried persons live as if they are not yet adult. Male-male and female-female couples live under the severe threat of the marriage imperative, which at times contributes to the decision to consider transitioning as that which may salvage a threatened relationship” (Najmabadi 2014, 7).

Within the world of the story, Reza's "crime" is two-fold: he claims a right to upper-class property and to the upper-class female (girl or woman) as defined by the sanctity of the sex organs (this awkward phrasing is meant to invoke the Islamicate concept of *ʻawrat*, which indicates decency in the abstract and the pudenda). But here, too, signifiers ultimately collapse: via the threat of rape, Reza claims a right to the elite female body as property, attempting to enter patriarchal society on its own terms. From his perspective, the narrator's "crime" is similarly multifold: she is not only a female boss but also a single mother, a woman without a man. As aforementioned, nowhere in the story do we find a father to "legitimate" the protagonist's child.

In this sense, the title might be read ironically in reference to the narrator. In addition to an individual's "name" (*nām*) and "last name" (*shuhrat*)—which is taken from the father's last name, as in the U.S.—Iranian birth certificates before and after the Revolution reference the father's full name, thus doubly marking individuals' codified state identities with patronymics. But in the story, the child's father's name never appears; nor does any mention of him. An exception to the law of the birth certificate, the narrator certifies an existence outside patrilineage and patronymy. In contrast, the lower-class other woman that serves as a foil to the narrator is introduced via her full state identification with reference to her father: "Ṭāhirih known as Munīr surname ʻIzattī father's name Mohammad Ali birth certificate number 570 issued in Tehran" (Amirshahi 62, my translation).

The absence of a patriarch affiliated with the narrator, either physically or by name, renders the elite woman a menace to patriarchy. Solo and in charge—of her household, of the inquest, of her identity, and of her story—the narrator represents a threat that Reza's violence tries to correct. Which is to say, alongside the knife-as-phallus there manifests in this story a feminine phallus that derives power from a masculine structural position—i.e., that of the

patriarch—but adheres to the body and person of the respectable, and feminine, lady. The phrase "feminine phallus" is of course a play on Butler's "lesbian phallus" as elaborated in *Bodies That Matter* (1993); but where Butler's disassociation of the phallus from the masculine body—which itself must be viewed in a genealogy of (though representing a significant departure from) earlier feminist psychoanalytic critiques such as Luce Irigaray's—might be thought of as a necessary springboard for this chapter, my own reading declines a lesbian phallus inasmuch as phallic empowerment remains masculinized in this story and historical context. The masculine gendering that haunts the feminine phallus is crucial, enabling tropes of heterosexual violence (such as rape) to be elaborated between women, as I explore further in subsequent sections. To return to Reza's theft and knife/dick-waving, rape operates as a form of castration in this story that is meant to "correct" the feminine phallus by disarming it, punishing the feminine body (i.e., the narrator as elite woman) and rendering the masculine female body (i.e., the narrator as faux father) impotent in one fell swoop.

Reza's knife figures as the "abject" (or "*bīchārih*," a word the narrator uses to describe the various detainees that functions nominally and adjectivally in Persian) penis of the worker attempting to assert its "true" phallic-ness, i.e., masculinity, against the faux feminine phallus of the female boss, read ipso facto as an injustice. Rape-as-castration thus attempts to defeat one form of violent power with another. This is not to do away with an intersectional[51] understanding of the narrator and Reza's race, class, and gendered positions, but instead to engage the ways the particular positions of elite female employer and downtrodden male domestic laborer are pitched against one another. The story seems to ask: what "better" way to castrate the female boss—that

[51] Crenshaw, Kimberle. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color." *Stanford Law Review* 43.6 (July 1991): 1241-1299. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.com/stable/1229039.

is, to prove her "true" femininity, her penetrability—than to rape her? In the patriarchal logic at play that is only emphasized due to the lack of a patriarch, sexual violence rights the topsy-turvy, eradicating the faux penis in favor of the "real" one, reducing the female boss to woman, and refiguring woman in terms of a lack.

It is essential to note that I am not making any claims about the lived experience of rape but am instead limited here to locating rape within the semiotic terrain of this fictional world. Indeed situating the story in a broader discussion of white, transnational feminist politics in the decades leading up to the Revolution below only further elaborates the distance between the narrator's representational world and the real world.

Rage?

Recall that the narrator finishes her hypothetical "what if's" with a threat: "Oh! The bastard! If I'd been there, I would've killed him with my own [two] hands" (emphasis added). This threat counterbalances the threat of rape that Reza posed to her daughter, and metonymically, to herself. But one wonders, how "real" is the threat of rape in the first place that solicits such rage? How real *was* it (i.e., historically)?

Statistics, even if available, would remain insufficient, necessarily reinscribed in the logic of class power that produced them, so that the second question is many ways unanswerable. Addressing the first requires attending to the issue of perspective. The first-person perspective traps us in the narrator's fantasy; yet that trap is also a map—to the fears and desires of the elite female citizen subject. The story wages a battle between the "traditional" lower-class subject and the elite, liberal citizen, but as seen through the eyes of the latter. Indeed the very binary "traditional vs. liberal" is constructed by, and helps support, the latter subjectivity. In brief, I

argue that the threat of rape by the lower-class man, made starker here via the elaboration of rape-as-death, helps constitute that subject inasmuch as it asserts her claim to lady-ness—that is, to femininity, and to an unviolated female body. This is akin to the way the perceived threat of rape by black men was and is used to shore up the position of the white femininity in the United States, though there are also fault lines to such comparisons, to which I attend at the chapter's end (in some significant way, Reza remains white).

Pondering Reza's motives given that Reza has hardly turned a profit, the narrator asks toward the story's end, "But then why? Did he harbor a vendetta? Against me and my child and my life? Why? It wasn't my fault that I, that it was just me and Reza, Reza…" (Amirshahi 77, my translation). The formulation "it was just me and Reza," suggests being left "alone" in the house with Reza, highlighting the absence of a *mahram*, i.e., male relative such as a husband, father, or brother who serves as protector. In Islamic law, the *mahram* serves as a necessary third in contact between an unrelated man and woman. This religious prescription is unlikely one the narrator follows, but the concept nevertheless carries import here as a cultural practice of maintaining distance between strangers of the opposite sex who should not be associating freely, the border between them, in this case, being class. The phrase "it was just me and Reza" ignores the other servants who labor in her household, including the aforementioned Hujjat, because they are not her peers, and thus, cannot protect her. To put it less obliquely, to be alone with Reza in the house, perhaps even at night, flirts with breaking a sexual taboo.

The narrator's halting defense that it "wasn't [her] fault" figures the narrator's empowerment as employer and head of the household as the stopgap to a situation gone wrong: the positioning of a woman in these roles is a wrong for which somebody is "at fault," and for which somebody must answer. That absent "somebody," as Najmabadi would remind us via the

tale of Quchan, describes not just this particular failing father (i.e., her absent husband) but also, in the lament of a fading empire ceding increasingly to Western nations throughout the modern era culturally and otherwise (recall that the Revolution has not yet occurred), the Shah-Father. The sick family in short represents the sick nation—and a family headed by a woman is certainly "sick," a deviance and aberration. Indeed, as a deviance that interrupts the heterosexual family structure and works against patriarchal gender norms, the narrator's marginal position as a female head of household might be read as a form of queerness, and the imagined threat of rape in turn as a patriarchal desire to "straighten" the narrator out in multiple senses of the word. But this particular queerness cannot be celebrated, for it comes at a cost, that is, at the cost of the empowerment of the lower-class Others who surround her.

The narrator soon admits to her own privilege when continuing to parse Reza's motivations, albeit circuitously:

> It wasn't Reza's fault either. Maybe he had a right to harbor a vendetta. Maybe he had the right. But it was only fair that instead of bowing his neck, he should look me in the eye with that same hatred, and look the station chief in the eye with the same hatred, and not cry. (Amirshahi 77, my translation)

The narrator's repeated admission that Reza "may have had the right" (*shāyad haq dāsht*) to want revenge concedes the injustice of the socioeconomic inequality that divides them, a critique which, of course, surfaced with a vengeance a decade later, during the Revolution, to result in massive social restructuring and the displacement of the secular elite in the early days of the Islamic Republic via voluntary or enforced exile (Amirshahi herself ended up in Paris), or still less forgiving fates. The musings above arrive soon after the narrator has courted the fantasy of being able to align herself more with the prisoners than the police. Sitting in the police car as the group is transported for immediate trial, she states: "I was more alert to the presence of the gendarmes and their bayonets than to the presence of Reza and Mohammad" (Amirshahi 76, my

translation). These ambivalent alignments might be read as an effort to see the lower-class man and the elite woman as both subject to the violence of state-sponsored masculinity. This nascent critique of state power, and possibly institutionalized violence, is compelling, and yet it is not the dominant narrative the story pursues.

Indeed, does the gesture assume solidarity where there is none? One will note that at the court to which they are due to arrive after the ride is over, Reza and his accomplice will be subject to judgment by the state as a representative of the narrator, who as plaintiff has the right to prosecute or forgive the crime. Lines of solidarity, then, are not quite as simply established as the narrator imagines. And any gesture to compassion does quickly fall flat, for the tenuous admission that Reza "*may have* had a right to harbor a vendetta" in the block quote (occurring a page later) comes in the same breath as a challenge. If Reza wants to be her equal, then he should act like one: boys don't cry. This sort of dick contest reasserts the feminine phallus, and reinscribes it within masculinity (if a masculinity adhered to the female body).

The struggle between the narrator and Reza is thus largely a struggle over power coded as masculinity. Who has the right to masculinity? Who has the primary claim, the upper-class person, whether man or woman, or the born male, regardless of class? In this war, the gendered body—where masculinity and femininity both are read as gender (and not just the latter, as in foundational psychoanalysis)—functions at once as weapon and battlefield. While Reza's aim might be interpreted as an attempt to assert the narrator's essential femininity, demonstrating her ultimate ineptitude for wielding the phallus by utilizing his own penis-as-phallus-as-knife (figured more veiledly in the story in the reverse), the narrator in turn expresses her class power over Reza by disciplining his body in smaller ways. When he is first caught and brought to the police station, she states: "His neck was bowed and when he spoke, he'd rub his hands on his

soiled shirt. I said, 'Reza, please stand up straight'" (Amirshahi 64, my translation). The command to "stand up" constitutes a command to "man up."

Indeed, elsewhere Reza's failure to do so is more explicitly interwoven with his class status:

> Reza was crying. His crying produced neither sympathy nor consent [to forgive him]. It conveyed only the impotence of an evil, washed up person. It was unbecoming. He had that same air of wretchedness as the first day, the day he came to me for work. (Amirshahi 71, my translation)

The Persian idiom "*zisht būd*" (literally, "it was ugly") establishes the elite narrator as the guardian of propriety, as my translation "it was unbecoming" aims to draw out. In a highly mannered society riddled with rubrics of respect especially, propriety means upholding the social order. Part of this order is gender itself, and more particularly, the congruence of masculinity and femininity with, respectively, male and female sexed bodies. Reza's crying is a feminine response inappropriately and unbecomingly located in the body of a man; citing his "impotence" (*'ajaz*) is an emasculation that elaborates such inappropriate (read: misaligned) feminization as an insult.

Gendered behavior thus acts as a vocabulary, and its proper alignment—that is, the bracing of binary gender—functions as a grammar. But failed signs abound. The crying itself is a sign that says the opposite of what it means to say, "producing neither sympathy nor consent." Reza's crying thus threatens the language of binary gender, and in turn threatens to expose still more inequalities essential to the fabric of the social—say, for example, class. Indeed the ultimate legibility of the crying—it conveys *some*thing, after all, just not what it "should"—suggests the very systematic flexibilities termed failures that the narrator herself has exploited to her advantage. For though at this moment she is seemingly caught in a game of feminine propriety—in Persian "*zishtih*" [present tense, "it's unbecoming"] is a phrase more often on the

mother’s tongue than the father’s—emasculating Reza is a way of masculinizing, and empowering, herself.

Moreover, Reza’s “vendetta” (*kīnih*) may not all be in her head. It is in some sense true that the narrator’s “life,” as she puts it, or queer lifestyle, comprising a family of a mother and daughter without a male guardian, threatens the social fabric and propriety itself, perhaps even morality, in some significant way. Furthermore, it rings true that the men in the story would treat the narrator’s assumption of a masculine role as posturing, a ridiculous attempt to peacock as the faux father. Our task is, as I see it, a vexed one: How do we attend to the narrator’s class politics without erasing the kernel of critique carried in her claim, that is, the claim that the position of woman is coded in patriarchy as vulnerability? How do we attend to inequality in the context of multi-vectored violence?

It behooves us to return to a sentence quoted in the previous section hitherto elided from my analysis: “Oh! The bastard! *If I’d been there, I would’ve killed him with my own [two] hands*” (emphasis added). This vow exists a register above anger and conveys a form of rage. The question of the legitimacy of claiming a threat of rape solicits another question: is her anger justified? If feminism at its best aims to restore justice, then this is a feminist question. What role does the narrator’s feminist rage play here—whose justice is it serving?

Though it may at first seem naïve to take the (in Persian and English) idiomatic expression “to kill someone with one’s own hands” too literally, in fact the exercise raises the important issue of commensurability. If the crude language of the law is adopted and rape is elaborated primarily as detriment to the body, then entirely obliterating the offending body goes beyond an eye for an eye; hence death is not fair punishment for rape, much less for the threat of rape. But there is a way in which much of mainstream modern Islamic law in both Shi’a and

Sunni elaborations operates according to a principle of purposefully incommensurate punishment in order to dissuade offenders. The (in)famous punishment of death by stoning for adultery might be thought of this way. Equally importantly, and as many Islamic feminists have suggested, it might be thought of as pure rhetoric, in light of the stipulation that there be eyewitnesses to the act of copulation.

If we read the narrator's threat within this wider cultural context, in whose cadre it exists despite the text's alleged secularism (you cannot simply erase centuries of legal history), then the extreme violence of death seems if not exactly a *commensurable*, a nevertheless "appropriate," *cited* punishment for rape: I put a stress on "cited" to draw attention to the way the threat of death remains at the level of language. Or does it? The answer lies in ascertaining whether the narrator would have enough power to make that threat a reality. Is her daughter—or she herself, as metonymized by her daughter—more or less vulnerable to the threat of rape than Reza is to the threat of death doled out by the state, whether the slow death of social inequality or otherwise? Again, this is in some sense an impossible question. What can be said is that the narrator's feminist rage seems to be caught between the unrealized realm of rhetoric and the menacingly real on account of her elite position, an elitism not tempered (as she would have it) but in fact *accentuated* by her gender. To occupy the subjectivity "woman" is here to render the self vulnerable to rape *and* to hold the threat of rape as a trump card: the position she enjoys is a precarious one, but a powerful one nonetheless. The feminine phallus thus hides the power she holds as a female body defined (in this context) by its lack of a penis. In other words, in calling rape, the narrator's masculinized power is afforded to her precisely through the disavowal of masculinity.

Just as intriguingly, rage functions in this instance as a form of feminine respectability. Black feminist anger as elaborate by Audrey Lorde and beyond has often been elaborated as a response to the (here, coded white) idea that anger and respectability are always-already opposed. And yet, in this splice from 1970s Iran, we have a *dominant*—indeed, “white,” in this context, if whiteness is understood as a structural position—feminism that uses rage to reassert its own respectability and to reinscribe itself in the language of power, and in particular, of the law. In a story that manages to generate as its dominant affect the sickly feeling of an unnamed fear, an affect produced by menacing ellipses, the violence of “killing” Reza with bare hands ultimately falls out. Rather than the image of the narrator’s bloodstained hands conjured by this idiom, we are left with the afterimage of the razors and knives wielded by Reza and his accomplice.

In her chapter on anger in *Scandalize My Name: Black Feminist Practice and the Making of Black Social Life* (2017), American studies scholar Terrion Williamson suggests that Toni Morrison’s early novel, *Sula* (1973), offers not an easy polarization of its eponymous character and her childhood friend, but rather “an insight into the latent commutability of Sula’s outlawry” (34). Williamson builds on Hortense Spillers to read Sula as representative of rebellion and Nel of respectability (and the questionable politics thereof) within a social reading that focuses on the interactions between these two instead of seeing them as mutually exclusive polarities. “Nel’s own ‘will toward rebellion,’” Williamson writes, “was both concealed by and embodied within Sula, the presumed antithesis of her own godly respectability” (34). Respectability and rebellion thus appear as two strands of concomitant and even cooperating black feminist practice, and the two characters represent ways of being and acting which might be joined in the same (black) woman. Particularly pertinent to the discussion at hand, furthermore, is the idea that

respectability can contain rebellion within itself. The body of the rebel, in this case, Sula's body, becomes a depository, or safe, for the will to struggle. In this way, the rebellious body is in a sense burdened with the agential work of change rebellion serves to effect. Sula "embodies" Nel's "godly respectability" but she also "conceals" Nel's rebellion, allowing respectability to continue unscathed.

In the story at hand—published contemporaneously with Morrison's novel, as geographically and culturally distant as the two contexts may seem—respectability is tied to rebellion in comparably complex and sophisticated ways: the narrator's respectability is what allows her to rebel against gender roles, serving as head of a household and claiming masculinity; her respectability thus in some significant way "conceals" her queer rebellion in lifestyle and a-patronymy, ensuring the success thereof. But where *Sula* offers a meditation on the relationship between respectability and rebellion through the prism of the relationship of love and friendship between Nel and Sula, however complicated that love may be, Amirshahi's short story configures these two feminine/feminist modes within the same character in a terrain of striking inequality. When the Other Woman arrives on the scene as a more realized signifier for rebellion, as I will detail in the next two sections, a much darker dynamic built on a stark power differential results: there, respectability uses the body of another woman to dream of rebellion.

Sisters?

The figure of the "Other Woman"—where othering happens in terms of class and gender—manifests in the form of "Ṭāhirih-known-as-Munīr," the buyer of the narrator's pawned fur coat, and in a point too pat to belabor, literally the only "other woman" in the police station.

In referring to her I will opt for her common name, “Munir,” over “Tahirih,” though the narrator favors the latter (more on that soon).

In order to unpack the narrator and Munir’s complex relationality I rely on two works to tell the story of 1960’s and 70’s Iranian feminisms. Sisterhood, defined domestically and transnationally, surfaces as a salient organizing principle that defines the way the Iranian feminist subject relates to women at home and abroad, including and especially, in the latter case, to her American and European counterparts. Nima Naghibi’s *Rethinking Global Sisterhood: Western Feminism and Iran* (2007) interrogates this history and traces its genealogy to the nineteenth century, while Negar Mottahedeh’s *Whisper Tapes: Kate Millett in Iran* (2019), excavates archival materials around American “second wave” feminist Kate Millett’s trip to Tehran in solidarity with feminist activists in the wake of the Revolution, in March 1979. Millet, who was in Mottahedeh’s description, someone “*Time* magazine had called […] the Mao Zedong of the women’s liberation movement in 1970” and author of the dissertation-cum-manifesto, *Sexual Politics*, also published in 1970, as Amirshahi’s story, which “circulated as the *Kapital* of the women’s movement” (2)—spent two weeks in Iran with her partner, Sophie Keir, recording her surrounds almost constantly on cassette and thus creating a sort of unwitting *audio verité* soundtrack of the Revolution. The only American feminists to make such a trip, Millett and Keir left Iran on March 19th, kicked out by Revolutionary authorities, on the same day the Comité International du Droit des Femmes arrived in Tehran with Simone de Beauvoir’s blessing (Mottahedeh 33).

Below I bypass a biographical reading of Amirshahi’s feminist ideas or alignments in favor of this historical contextualization. Instead of trying to parse the author’s own ambivalent politics—Amirshahi (b. 1937) was known and often admired for not adhering to a political line,

though she did take a public stance in the fervor of the Revolution to notoriously become, in the words of BBC Persian producer Maryam Erfan, "the only person to defend Shapour Bakhtiar's prime ministership" in writing,[52] an act that led to her ultimate exile (Bakhtiar led a short-lived, interim government bookended by the Shah's fall from power and Khomeini's ascent)—I read the social and political landscape mapped by the story in terms of the twentieth-century discourses around cross-class and transnational sisterhood, claiming that the text participates in that discourse while demonstrating, if inadvertently, the failures thereof.

In Iran, the Women's Organization of Iran (*Sāzmān-i zanān-i īrān*, heretofore "WOI") was key to activating a program of sisterhood. Established in 1966 to replace the High Council of Iranian Women (*Shaurā-yi 'Ālī-yi Jamā'at-i Zanān-i Iran*, est. 1961), the WOI was part of mid-century monarchical efforts to centralize and gain control over the project of women's rights; indeed, both groups were headed by Princess Ashraf, the Shah's twin sister (Mottahedeh 37 and Sanasarian 80-81). The organization's budget and funding sources are a matter of debate: Mottahedeh writes that the WOI "was largely funded by upper-class women connected to the royal court," while historian Eliz Sansarian, perhaps not mutually exclusively, accounts for a mix of "donations, membership fees, and classes [i.e., class fees]" and direct state support for "special projects that were of the interest to the government [such as…] literacy courses, family-planning clinics, day care centers, and the like" (86). The WOI's reach was accomplished through local branches and Family Welfare Centers that provided a range of services including health care; legal counsel; childcare; and literacy and vocational training courses, the latter of

[52] *Writing Experience: An Interview with Mahshid Amirshahi*, produced by Maryam Erfani, aired n.d. on BBC Persian. On *YouTube* uploaded by BBC Persian, 15 July 2011, https://youtu.be/7htGu2aVPRY. In Persian. See 8:05-9:06. Amirshahi is shown speaking of the article as her "swan song" and a representation of her long-held belief in the necessity of separating church and state in democracy; she further depicts it as a portentous call of the failure of the Revolution to bring about democracy.

which, as Sanasarian points out, focused on gendered work such as sewing, carpet weaving, typing, and hairdressing for years before moving on to also teach radio and television mechanics and repair (Mottahedeh 38 and Sansarian 87-8). Though perhaps not all of these functions were in place at the time of Amirshahi's writing, the Welfare Centers were established in 1967, with education only growing increasingly important to the organization's expressed goals over time, including as made explicit in its 1975 constitution (Sanasarian 83-88). Women's literacy, in short, was a part of the project of sisterhood from the start, a point to which I will soon return.

The WOI existed in uneasy relation to the feminist project as interpreted varyingly by disparate factions. In deriving continued legitimacy and funding from the state, the WOI was both enabled and limited by its connection to the monarchy. Sanasarian puts it succinctly: "The condition for survival was the organization not take any antiestablishment stand. It had to function within the limits set by the authorities" (87). Broadly speaking, the WOI could hardly define goals that went against Pahlavi interest, though over its relatively long tenure, the organization did also agitate for controversial rights like abortion. Waging a successful campaign with other activist groups in the mid-1970's, the WOI helped to secure legalized abortions in 1977 (Sanasarian 99)—rather notably, given the current political climate in the U.S., only several years after Roe v. Wade (1973).[53] In 1975, the monarchy's institutionalization of a so-called single party system under the Rastakhiz (literally, Resurrection) Party had prompted the WOI to change its apolitical stance (as defined by the organization's constitution) and enter electoral politics (Sansarian 87), presumably also enabling such legislative lobbying. In the brief period at hand, 1966 to 1970 (as defined by the Shirdel documentary and Amirshahi short story's

[53] Mottahedeh attributes the legalization of abortion to the 1975 iteration of the Family Protection Act, but I am wont to trust Sanasarian's detailed historical account, which explains that a 1977 bill gave the right to "[a] married woman with the written consent of her spouse, and an unmarried woman simply by her own written request" (Sanasarian 99-100).

respective dates of production), its activities were more limited to what was evidently seen as less political terrain, the betterment of women's lives, and especially those of the "urban, lower-class women" whom the Family Welfare Centers were built to serve (Sanasarian 87).

Achievements by women's rights activism in this period, which was selectively supported by the WOI, included enfranchisement and the right to run for public office, both in 1963 (Mottahedeh 38 and Sanasarian 83), as well as the landmark Family Protection Act, passed in 1967 and expanded in 1975, which I will not detail at present but which made sweeping changes to marriage and divorce law perceived to be in women's favor, if still inadequate (Sansarian 94-97).[54] One might note that the Family Protection Act was almost immediately overturned by Khomeini in early 1979 (Mottahedeh 38 and Sansarian 138), though some rights have been partially regained by Iranian feminists since and family law has remained a lynchpin of Iranian feminist activism.[55] This fact alone goes to show how the Family Protection Act and the women's rights it represented were made to iconize the Shah by both his supporters and detractors, an equivalence for which Iranian women were made to pay. For Mohammad Reza Shah, "championing" women's rights abroad and for international audiences was a way of advertising himself in the West, thus strengthening his hold at home after the democratically elected Mossadegh government had nearly cost him the throne, had it not been for a U.S. and U.K.-led coup in 1953 hat consolidated his reign (for the time being). His disingenuousness, nevertheless, comes out in a 1973 interview with the relentless Italian journalist, Oriana Fallaci, quoted by Mottahedeh, in which the Shah slips from his image as a Westernizing messiah of

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[54] For a contemporaneous and detailed summary of the act and its significance, see Naqvi, Ali Reza. "The Family Protection Act of Iran." *Islamic Studies* 6.3 (September 1967): 241-265. *JSTOR*, https://www.jstor.org/stable/20832884. Accessed 23 May 2019. Mottahedeh mistakenly cites 1975 as the year the Act was passed, ignoring the earlier 1967 iteration (38).
[55] For one example of such use of the courts, see Osanloo, Arzoo. *The Politics of Women's Rights in Iran*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009.

modernity to derisively refer to "[t]his Women's Lib business" (37), while Sansarian similarly cites the Shah's hypocrisy, depicting it as a sort of backwards thinking (see especially 90-91). Indeed, what one concludes from a look at the history of pre-Revolutionary women's rights activism in Iran is that this top-down commandeering of feminist activism in service of the Shah's international and domestic agenda resulted in a dangerous elision between "Western" and "feminist" that soon cost the women's movement dearly in the anti-Western, nationalist discourse of a young Islamic Republic; as post-Iran-Iraq War (i.e., early nineties) Islamic feminist activism shows, even staunch Revolutionaries would soon be unsatisfied with the role of women delegated in the Revolution's first decade.

In the climate in which Amirshahi was writing in the late 1960's, sisterhood was celebrated in mainstream women's rights and feminist intellectual spaces such as those that she would have been afforded as a college-educated woman (Amirshahi obtained a bachelor's in the UK, returning to live in Iran before her ultimate exile)—indeed, such spaces often overlapped. As the driver of contact between Iranian and Western feminists, the WOI serves as Naghibi's example par excellence of the often-objectionable politics of global sisterhood. Though the WOI does not tell the whole story of feminist activism, the idea of sisterhood encapsulated in its Family Welfare Centers—and in particular, its literacy project—only institutionalized a broader feminist ideology. In refencing the feminist Revolutionary slogan "Freedom is neither Eastern nor Western, it's global!" (*Āzādī na sharghīst, na gharbīst, jahānīst*) heard on Millet's tapes, Mottahedeh offers a less cynical view of an ideal for a feminism that favors the collective over the individual, the "planetary" over the national (114-115; Mottahedeh translates "*jahānī*" as "planetary"), while remaining suspicious of both the WOI and Millet's imperialisms throughout the work: this is, perhaps, sisterhood at its best. But such optimism must be—and is for

Mottahedeh, as I read her—couched in the social parity between Millet and her Iranian Revolutionary feminist counterparts, most of whom were educated and seemingly secular (as to the latter, consider an Iranian feminist defense of makeup captured on tape that cites henna and gold to argue that bodily adornment is traditional as opposed to Western, as reported by Mottahedeh on 84-5). In other words, the sisterhood Mottahedeh in turn uncovers and interrogates, whose narrative she presents as one of consistent frustration and final failure, is only imaginable among peers. Considering wide disparities in global wealth and realities of globalized and local racisms, this prerequisite suggests that a "global" feminism is impossible.

Via Spivak's now canonical essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988), Naghibi argues that a call for global sisterhood such as that made by late Pahlavi feminisms required a great deal of privilege. Her elaboration of the politics of claiming sisterhood is worth quoting at length:

> […] women who are placed in a position of economic and social security can afford to celebrate international alliances. The women of what Spivak calls the 'urban subproletariat,' on the other hand, find themselves in a position complicated by their disadvantaged social position in relation to the elite feminist groups and to the dominant patriarchy ([Spivak] 1988, 288). Thus, the agential power and the subject position of the anti-imperialist Iranian feminist are elided in the moment of collusion between two dominant discourses of international feminism and anti-imperialist patriarchy. Through the act of representation, then, the dominant classes affirm their own subject constitution by "cathecting" the figure (and the voice) of the subaltern woman. By transforming the subaltern into an object of study and, by extension, into an object of desire, the dominant classes impede the articulation of subaltern voices. (Naghibi 104)

Naghibi thus provides a historically grounded language by which to describe the dynamic between the narrator and Munir, that is, between the elite woman citizen subject and the Other Woman. As I have already suggested, the representation of the Other Woman serves to "constitute" the subject of the narrator. Within the mise-en-scène of the police station, the former's presence becomes a necessary way to demonstrate the power the narrator holds

(supposedly) *despite* being a woman—and yet she also acts a marker of the narrator's vulnerability as a woman, a "cathecting" of the subaltern woman's disempowerment that the elite woman uses to her advantage, in order to secure her power. Shared vulnerability is furthermore a fantasy afforded by privilege, for the oppressions experienced by the two women as dramatized by their relationships to the men around them (i.e., the station chief, other prisoners, etc.) are *not* in fact commensurate. Finally, as Naghibi suggests, the narrator's "transform[ation of] the subaltern into an object of study and, by extension, into an object of desire" bars, rather than enables, our access to the voice and desires of the latter.

And yet I argue that the narrative voice at hand also contains the seeds of its own undoing, so that one might read this 1970 short story both as an instantiation of what Naghibi rightly criticizes and as an echo of that critique. For in this story, comradery and sisterhood ultimately fall flat in the face of class.

To this effect let us return to the epigraph and the discussion of veiling started in the chapter's Introduction. Munir is introduced thus, reprinted here for the reader's ease:

> I asked [the station chief], "Is the buyer of the coat here?"
>
> With his hand he gestured to a chador-clad woman who was sitting on the wooden bench between the man in the brown suit and another man. It was strange that I hadn't noticed her—other than me, the buyer of the coat was the only woman present. Her face was ovular and pleasingly sculpted, and she had a pretty moonlike color, and her chador played no role in hiding her neck and head. She had sewn her gaze to the thread of my choker, and I thought I should have taken it off before coming. (Amirshahi 61-2, my translation)

The Other Woman is thus introduced in the story as "a chador-clad woman" (*zan-i chādurī*)[56] whose chador hypocritically fails to veil both her hair and the neck, a body part then figured—but on the body of the narrator—as the seductive site of femininity and wealth/femininity-as-

[56] Note that by 1979 this phrase was more explicitly derogatory when used by secularists.

wealth in the form of a gold necklace. Soon after we learn that the narrator's fur coat was sold in the red-light district of the Qaleh, which is, significantly, referred to in the text by Reza's accomplice as "that place where women unveil" (Amirshahi 62). At play here is the familiar Oriental (here, self-Orientalizing) fantasy of veiling as promiscuity: Munir's loose chador is contrasted in the mind of the reader with the liberal elite woman's bare, unveiled head. Associating Munir with the Qaleh literalizes the always-already assumed promiscuous sexuality of the veiled Other Woman as so-called "prostitution," where "prostitution" refers not to sex work but serves as the means by which the elite subject defines and adjudicates feminine respectability. Yet defining the Qaleh as the site of such physical "unveiling," I argue, does not so much read physical unveiling as a form of disrespectability as it criticizes the hypocrisy of veiled unveiling, whereby wearing chador in the streets only serves to hide promiscuity in the sheets. In this secular feminist context, so-called "prostitution" and disrespectability are synonymous, but no such easy equivalence between "prostitution" and physical unveiling exists. Indeed in Persian the word translated above simply as "unveiling" is rendered as a verbal phrase, "*bīḥijābī kardan*" (broken down: "without-hijab doing"): such an active inscription of the "unveiling" that occurs in the Qaleh indicates not a singular removal of the veil but more so a doing (*kardan*) that deploys the body in ways antithetical to veiling as proper comportment; such "doings" could hardly be achieved when properly veiled, either physically or behaviorally.

This logic, in turn, reads true veiling as feminine respectability, as realized by the body, mind, and heart of the enlightened elite woman who acts as an unveiled feminist subject. Najmabadi explicates such a dynamic in the 1993 essay, "Veiled Discourse—Unveiled Bodies," arguing that in Iranian modernist discourse, unveiling as realized by the liberal woman came to signify veiling. "The woman of modernity," Najmabadi writes,

> Thus crafted through the construction of a veiled language and a disciplined de-eroticized body, as well as through the acquisition of scientific sensibilities, could now take her place next to her male counterpart in public heterosocial space. Instead of being envisaged as a threat to social order, her very disciplined language and body became the embodiment of the new order. Unlike her traditional Other who was scripted not only illiterate but crudely sexual, a shrew if not a whore, she could now be imagined unveiled. (1993 510)

Veiling operates as superfluous to the disciplined body of the elite woman, who has integrated respectability into the self. The "de-eroticized body" incorporates modesty into itself—indeed, as I further elaborate below, in this story, modesty encoded in and as skin—while "scientific sensibilities" and literacy—signifying at once the ability to read, being widely, and speaking the right language—equip the woman for coed public space. Embodying respectability, the unveiled woman "embodi[es…] the new [social] order." Embodying the law, she becomes the measure and product of progress.

Thus defining the veil as, as stated in the introduction, an internalized disciplinary apparatus that structures the subject's relationship to itself, to others, and to the world, modernist veiling figures unveiling as the sign of its success. Though discarding the physical veil, such "unveiling" in fact reifies veiling as a necessary condition of feminine respectability.

Via the whisper tapes Mottahedeh offers historical documentation of this definition of veiling at play in anti-veiling feminist activism during the Revolution, less than a decade after the story's first publication. In response to Khomeini's decree on March 6, 1979, that required women to wear hijab when appearing in public, a decree rescinded on March 11th before being reinstituted soon after to remain intact to this day (though its early implementation would take a year or so to ossify), tens of thousands of women hit the streets, including at the following major events: a Tudeh Party rally on March 7th when the decree was announced in the papers, a major

pan-feminist protest on March 8th, and protests at the University of Tehran and the Ministry of Justice on March 10th.[57] Listening to tapes from the last-listed of these events, Mottahedeh writes:

> Rejecting the absolutism of compulsory veiling, the women claim their dignity, modesty, honor, and worth, with and without the veil: *Be gofteh-ye mullah Ali hejab-e zan daroonist*, "According to Mullah Ali, a woman's *hejab* [dignity] is within." *Hejab-e ma ezzat-e ma*, "Our own dignity is our veil." *Hejab-e ma, paki-ye ma*, "We veil ourselves with our own purity." (Mottahedeh 80, transliterated as in original)

While Mottahedeh elaborates hijab as "dignity" in brackets in the first slogan, modesty may be a more appropriate interpretation in the context. According the revered Shia figure of the first Imam (referred to here by the title "Mullah [or Mowla] Ali") himself, the women claim, a woman veils her desires "within" herself—i.e., in her heart and soul—so that veiling the body is both unnecessary and little proof of such internalized veiling. The other two slogans describe hijab as "dignity" and "honor" (*'izzat*), and "purity," "chastity," and "sinlessness" (*pākī*). Veiling is, in short, a way of *being*, not a way of appearing.

Far from rejecting veiling, this anti-mandatory-veiling activism responds to a discourse of veiling by accepting its premises: a respectable woman is honorable and pure. She *does* veil, but from the inside-out. Such an advocation of non-Islamic and even secular (i.e., communist Tudeh, etc.) forms of veiling suggests that what was at stake in feminist debates in this period was not a fight between the secular and Islamic, as is sometimes retroactively read into pre-Revolutionary Iran, but rather a battle between respectability and disreputability. Feminist discourse on both/all sides required the disrespectable woman as a foil and a social case ripe for "saving." These two positions were of course classed, so that, as I will soon detail in terms of a documentary on the Qaleh, the "goal" in sisterhood was to make respectable women of disreputable ones. When

[57] Mottahedeh provides a concise timeline of these events on xv-xviii.

Revolutionary women protested the interim government's move to gender segregate all schools, considering such coed educational institutes "centers of prostitution" (Mottahedeh 77), I would correspondingly argue, the critique served more to distance respectable women from "prostitution" as a status and class position than to question the easy alignment of sex labor with deviance and dishonor.

And yet, here I must note that the contemporary, and sometimes liberatory, discourse of "sex work" in dominant Western feminist circles does not capture the classed violence I am interested in mining and exposing in this twentieth-century Iranian context. Instead I refer to "coerced sex labor," in order to highlight the unpaid or underpaid, and often forced, labor a fictional character such as Munir was likely to have performed if she had actually lived and labored in the Qaleh ("work" is too often associated with the free market). My goal is to examine the ways the violent institution of coerced sex labor—violent in all senses: physically, socially, and at the level of language and signs—was then abstracted and ideologized as "prostitution," which in turn served as the keystone to ideas of feminine respectability and respectable unveiling. In pointing out the insufficiency of the term "sex work," I gesture to Sherene Razack's work on gendered and racialized violence in North American law and society, and in particular, her understanding of prostitution (Razack insists on the term) in the 1998 article "Race, Space, and Prostitution: The Making of the Bourgeois Subject" as a site where the tripartite systems of hegemonic masculinity, race, and class, "operate in and through each other" (339). Razack trains an intersectional eye on the ways sex labor (or what she calls "prostitution") not only inscribes a gendered—and I would add, heterosexual—violence of men against women, but also enacts raced and classed "hierarchical relations among women" that ultimately "benefit women who are not prostitutes" (340). Her methodology results in the claim that "prostitution secures a

bourgeois and white social order" while also considering "conversely, the ways in which a bourgeois social order requires prostitution" (Razack 340). I take Razack's method and argument as a point of departure, considering the ways the imagined figure of the "prostitute" helps create the upper-class woman's subjectivity within a web of multiple masculinities. And yet, so as not to confuse a critique of the term "sex work" with an investment in the term "prostitution" as a shorthand for feminine disrespectability—an investment that is, notably, made by both the elite woman and "respectable" society more broadly—I call on a third term, if an imperfect one: sex labor, which in the current context of the mid-century Qaleh must be modified as *coerced* sex labor.

A contemporaneous short documentary on the Qaleh, also known as Shahr-i Nau, commissioned of Kamran Shirdel by the WOI to draw attention to the plight of the women laboring in that district, proves the inadequacy of the term "work" in this particular historical context: many of the women cite being sold into sexual indentured servitude, often by family. As explained by the short copy accompanying the film on the website the Internet Archive, where the documentary is available for viewing (link in citation), Shirdel began filming in 1966 but had to stop due to an "immediate" ban by the Ministry of Culture under the Shah (see also Mahlouji 2013-4, n.p.). Completing the film in 1980 after the Revolution, as the prologue to the film explains, he used photos by the famous mid-century documentary photographer, Kaveh Golestan, to make up for a lack of footage. Complexly, the documentary both assumes the perspective of a bourgeois, liberal subject sympathetic to the plight of the women and committed to helping their cause through education and disrupts any comfortable idea of charitability or an easy fix. This is achieved visually—by juxtaposing images of the crowded classroom of the Qaleh school, which serves adult learning and the children of the neighborhood, with

photographs and footage of crowded living quarters, homelessness, and the women's unsmiling faces—and orally, by narrating the film with interviews in which a range of women offer a range of perspectives that accept or resist the state-sponsored narrative of progress. To our present purposes, the film gets at the complexities of feminist and women's rights activism and conceptions of cross-class sisterhood at this time, not least of all given a push-pull relationship with the state.

In commissioning the film, the WOI clearly attempts a teleology of progress through education, but most of the women tell another story. Toward the middle of the film, one woman tells of being cheated out of her inheritance by family and brought to the Qaleh to then say that her thoughts are too crowded to be able to "read or write even a single line" (my translation). She thanks the principle and teachers but states that, given her sorrow and the financial pressures on her, she simply cannot study. Just as forcefully, the last narrative is a sort of success story, the testimonial of Roshan, a woman who left the Qaleh to sell oranges and somehow gets by on this peddling alone. While the choice to place this interview at the end threatens to bend the narrative arch of the film into one of hope, a final series of shots set to a melancholic ode turning on the figure of Layla, the paradigmatic female beloved in the Persian poetic tradition, diverts any such promise. Moreover Roshan herself refuses such an easy assumption of her story into the modernization narrative espoused by the state and the liberal subject alike. When asked by a male interviewer represented only aurally (presumably Shirdel) whether she has obtained literacy (*savād*), Roshan says she chose not to pursue her studies. "What use do I have for literacy (*savād*)?" she repeats what she told her teacher, thereby posing the same question to the interviewer. "If you're telling the truth [i.e., want to do something for me], give me a job that will save me from these streets as I have been saved from this area [of town]." Rejecting literacy

outright, Roshan pushes against the sanitation of her story and insists on the harsh reality of her poverty, which cannot be alleviated by education alone. As she astutely points out, the streets to which she takes as a peddler are as much in the public eye and thus far from feminine respectability as class-based coerced sex labor. The state and the WOI have failed to "save" her, or those like her. About a decade later, in 1975-6, one will note, 40,000 women had "completed" (in Sanasarian's words) literacy classes offered by the WOI (Sansarian 87-8). But if improving women's quality of life is the goal, learning how to read alone will not do the trick: much deeper social reforms would have to take place for an education to be worth anything to lower-class women like Roshan or her unnamed counterpart—that is, for it to translate to a better job and improved social status; in short, to a better life.

Literacy was at the crux of women's rights discourse and activism in modern Iran. Above Najmabadi (1993) has drawn out links between literacy and unveiling in an article that history of this discourse to the 19th-century, while in the previous chapter, I have treated the ways literacy continued to operate as essential to class mobility in a 1990's Iranian context, a feature that goes hand in hand with its historic association with masculinity. Historically in Iran, the ability to read was a privilege of masculinity or elite femininity (the latter as evidenced by such famous turn-of-the-century texts as Bibi Khanum Astarabadi's 1894 tract, *Vices of Men*, and princess Taj al-Saltaneh's famous 1914 memoir).[58] And in Iran as elsewhere, women's literacy operated as a key part of nineteenth and twentieth-century modernization projects; indeed the Shah's White Revolution explicitly cited increased women's literacy as a goal (Mottahedeh 37). Though

[58] For a bilingual edition of the former see Astarabadi, Bibi Khanum. *Ma'ayib al-rijal (Vices of Men)*. 1894. Ed. Afsaneh Najmabadi. Chicago, Midland Press, 1992. The latter has been translated into English as Vanzan, Anna and Amin Neshati. *Taj al-Saltana Crowning Anguish: Memoirs of a Persian Princess From the Harem to Modernity*. Washington, D.C.: Mage Publishers, 2003.

arguably a less nuanced treatment of the issue, Farzaneh Milani's 1992 book, *Veils and Words*,[59] prefigures Najmabadi's claim about the link between literacy and unveiling by a year. Milani's thesis—namely, that women's writing in Iran emerged historically alongside unveiling and itself represents a sort of unveiling—may no longer be in vogue in such blunt iteration, in part because such a unilateral reading of unveiling effaces modern histories of veiling as raced and classed (and thus readings such as those made available above via Najmabadi's work) but also more insidiously, I would argue, because Western academic writing has been invested in erasing the figures of the unveiled and secular Muslim woman as a misguided liberal reaction to the Gulf Wars and the post-9/11 War on Terror. And yet as unfashionable as it may be, the import of Milani's argument is to point to the way a certain class identity has been integral to authorship as auteurship in modern Iran, perhaps even more so for women than for men because of the extra hurdles to literacy and publication faced by the former.

Soon after the narrator lays tentative claim to Munir's "friendship," her anxiety around the possibility of offending Munir on account of the latter's illiteracy only highlights the ways sisterhood falls short. At some point in the police proceedings the narrator advocates on behalf of the many men, plus Munir, that the chief has arrested for purchasing stolen goods and needlessly kept in custody, suggesting that they be let go. The chief agrees if they write statements promising to appear if summoned. Neither Munir nor her companion can read or write, and the narrator ends up with the whole pile of documents on stolen goods dropped in her lap, as if to punish her for meddling (Amirshahi 68-70). Like the women in the documentary, Munir is unabashed about her illiteracy: "Tahirih looked straight into my eyes and said, "But I'm illiterate" (Amirshahi 69, my translation). The narrator is embarrassed and anxious not to offend:

[59] Milani, Farzaneh. *Veils and Words: The Emerging Voices of Iranian Women Writers*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1992.

"I was afraid that if I suggested I could write [it] for her, it would be just that blow-to-the-head I shouldn't deliver" (ibid.). The narrator recognizes her power over Munir—but it is a power Munir does not recognize; the latter is blithe, unapologetic. In this context, the ability to read a text also signifies as the ability to "read," and speak with, other worlds, as defined by national and class boundaries; that is, it constitutes and ability to read other, and Other, women—i.e., transnational (read: Western) and compatriot "sisters," respectively. Which is to say, literacy represents a worldliness and cosmopolitanism for which Munir has no use.

Rejecting the respectability the narrator assumes she will want, Munir embraces her illiteracy and thus her marginality—a queer position if there ever was one. Though the narrator's rebellion of holding the feminine phallus remains ambivalently tied to the terms of patriarchy, and thus to violent masculinity, Munir's rebellion flamboyantly flaunts the feminized position of illiteracy. With nothing to lose, already shunned as disreputable, she turns a lack of respectability into an anti-respectability politics, a positivist resignification of feminine lack. The Other Woman exposes the promise of sisterhood for a falsehood. For feminine respectability such as the narrator's, constructed in opposition to and thus dependent on the figure of the lower-class Other, cannot make space for those others by definition. What is needed is not sisterhood but a more expansive idea of selfhood.

As the interrogative title of this section, "Sisters?," suggests, the "sisterhood" between the narrator and minor is an impossible fiction that is at once invoked and interrupted. The narrator oscillates between desiring and rejecting intimacy with Munir, whose given name "Ṭāhirih" (that is, "Purity," or better, "Chastity") figures as an ironic jab, one the narrator often makes by insisting on using it. The Other Woman is imagined to fulfill a wish for—no less than—friendship:

> Ṭāhirih known as Munīr surname ‘Izattī father’s name Mohammad Ali birth certificate number 570 issued in Tehran purchaser of a fur coat at the price of 1000 rial from Mohammad Mohammadzadeh first-degree seller of stolen goods and coworker to Reza Isa in the second degree—had lifted her gaze from my necklace and was looking at me myself. In the depth of her eyes, she was estranging herself from me; perhaps she even was afraid of me. So I looked at her and smiled. The expression in her eyes changed; there was no longer estrangement in it; first there was surprise and then even friendship. (Amirshahi 62, my translation)

Here “friendship” (*dūstī*) between women is elaborated erotically (more on that below), as in chapter one on Goli Taraghi’s fiction, but these homoerotics do not amount to a willed partnership or dually significant friendship-love as I have theorized “*dūstī*/dusti” there. Both stories describe worlds delimited by the perspectives of their first-person narrators; and yet still, the erotic women’s relationality exhibited here is even more one-sided, a vector more so than a two-way line of connection. In the quote above “friendship” is not, strictly speaking, offered by Munir: it is instead *interpreted* by the narrator *into* Munir’s gaze. This act of reading is tenuous: are the two women in fact speaking the same language? The text seems to admit an attendant possibility of the narrator’s misinterpretation, and the claim to friendship thus has the opposite effect of drawing the reader’s eye to its possible speciousness.

Indeed as invested as the narrator seems in claiming the stranger (*gharībih*) Munir as a friend and thus moving past any sense of “estrangement” (*gharībī*) that may exist between the two women due to their distinct social positions, the narrator’s anxieties at the station turn not only on strange Munir is to her but also on how similar. By way of example, the narrator is taken aback when she “discovers” that Munir too is a mother: “I wanted to ask Ṭāhirih-known-as-Munīr, but she has kids? And how many?” (Amirshahi 63, my translation). The interrogative structure shakily attempts to cordon off the narrator, whose role as mother is essential to her subjectivity as described above, from the subjectivity of the lower-class woman, while

simultaneously courting such a comparison. Motherhood serves as an opportunity for mirroring and the basis for a shared womanhood upon which claims to sisterhood might be then premised. Such mirroring is the thread the narrator wants to follow but also a threat, a line inquiry she needs to let drop lest she begin to see herself in Munir. Which she does. The scene continues, and we never get answers to the questions posed; Munir remains a mystery.

Indeed, motherhood or no, the two women's social positions could hardly be more distinct socially and structurally, a contrast highlighted by the setting of the police station. The lack of punctuation in the identificatory clause above, which I have imported from the Persian along with the em dash, renders the entire contents of the file as a single identifier to be read in one breath, constructing the person of "Munir" in patriarchal terms defined by the state. Ambivalently, this might be read as the narrator's participating in the dehumanization imposed by the machinations of the state, or it might be read satirically—indeed sarcastically—as a critique of that dehumanization. This textual tic (or gimmick) gets at a fundamental question of modern subjectivity: if "Munir" comes into being through this moment of Althuserian interpellation—literally, in an encounter with the police—then is there a Munir outside of that state apparatus? How can she be known?

In her time at the station, the narrator consistently tries to put distance between herself and the police. When the station chief tries to ally with the narrator along the lines of respectability, for example, wryly referring to the man accompanying Munir (presumably a lover or pimp) as "her personal friend," she refuses the association: "I didn't like the station chief's intimacy with me, and I was afraid that it would again serve to estrange Ṭāhirih-known-as-Munīr from me" (Amirshahi 63, my translation). Yet just a few lines later the narrator uses the phrase "her personal friend" to refer to the man (Amirshahi 64), adopting the Chief's language and thus

reclaiming respectability for herself. More broadly, as my elaboration of the fraught feminine phallus has attempted to capture, the elite woman's empowerment in this story is often derived from masculine power—and masculinist institutions such as the police—even as it is undercut by the absence of male patriarchs, which would be needed to legitimate that power. Correspondingly sisterhood is inscribed in the same structures of power defined by a masculinist vision of the world—and is thus far from liberatory. As her vexed identifications with the chief and Other Woman show, the elite woman citizen subject on the eve of the Iranian Revolution (or perhaps the dusk shading into that eve, about a decade prior) participates in a twisted politics aimed at collective and individual women's liberation—the two of which are often at odds—that remains embedded in webs of state and masculine power and violence. Deciphering "Munir"—and the history of the unnamed and largely undocumented women and lives to which her character gestures—through the narrator's, and thus the state's, representation of her means that her truth, and their truths, remains beyond reach.

A reading of the former and current Qaleh women's "own" texts as I have attempted with respect the documentary does not do away with such limitations in perspective (indeed, with such epistemological problems). Any considerations of Shirdel's editorial hand aside, the women themselves were taped with full knowledge of their audience, and they use the vocabulary of the women's rights discourse and the WOI to tell their stories, even if only to subvert that narrative and language. The repeated thanks offered by the women, for example, all of whom remain unnamed, with the exception of Roshan—though perhaps on their own choosing and for their privacy—is a required form of humility, an affect punishingly imposed on the lower-class subject as object (of charity). The stories the women present speak the state's language, though often to interrupt it. Here I do not wish to fetishize an "authentic" voice but rather to point to the

impossibility of locating one. This may be as liberatory as it is damning. In the short 1982 article, "The Subject of Power," written in response to critics, Foucault writes of power as a continuous negotiation such that resistance must be consistently quelled through specific acts in discrete moments—which is, in turn, to say that resistance is made possible by the very conditions of disempowerment. The reading offered above, reading the "surface" of the women's (spoken) text and the visual-scape of the Qaleh to read against the grain of a possible narrative of progress, supports such an analysis of power: in its foiled attempt to tell these women what's good for them, the film enables the women's resistance in the moment of their subjugation, namely, to the masculine eye of the camera, to the male filmmaker and photographer, to the elite women's organization, to the nation-state. That is, the rebellious subject deploys the force of subjugation against itself, and thus, subjectivity is achieved through mechanisms of subjugation (indeed the Althuserian moment of interpellation operates by the same logic).

The upper-class first-person narrator in the work at hand is as much a product of her time, a document of certain twentieth-century feminism's claims to cross-class and transnational sisterhood, as she is a reproducer of its claims and ideology. And yet, as the women in the filmic documentary elucidate, the narrator's sympathies for the illiterate Munir will not produce any material change for her. Indeed the failures of affect and its ultimate revolutionary uselessness might be the lesson on which this story settles. After all, the "friendship" the narrator claims is far from friendly. To the contrary, the women's relationality in the station pitches marked, violent hierarchies of class and of respectability. Moreover Munir will "leave" the station to go home to the violence of coerced sex labor realized in the space of the Qaleh. There is too the justified violence of class rebellion: at the end of the block quote, Munir's lingering gaze on the narrator's choker necklace and thus neck suggests choking, hinting at a threat of class revolt that

might also be read as a desire for justice. This rebellion represents just one glint of a broader anti-respectability politics that Munir exercises against the narrator as I will elaborate in the next section, a politics that echoes that of the real women whose voices are captured, even if perhaps caged, in footage from 1966. "What use do I have for literacy?" Roshan challenges, and no one can answer.

While recognizing the force of this critique, I argue that a definitively recuperative reading remains unavailable, and unethical, threatening to erase the violence these women experienced. Imagining Munir's—and these real "Munirs"—likely fate beyond the text is bleak. By the mid-seventies, when Kaveh Golestan took the photographs used in the final documentary, the Qaleh was a walled-off ghetto of about 150 houses, with some active as brothels and others serving as home to women who had retired from sex labor (Mahlouji and Knoppers, n.p.)—though of course, the documentary seems to suggest that the right to retire was rendered a privilege and not universally enjoyed. On the other side of the Qaleh wall, city dwellers could find cheap places to drink and cabarets (Mahlouji 216). If Munir does not manage to move, she may, like many others, die in the fire that raged there in the earliest days of the Revolution, on January 29, 1979, reported at the time as a casualty of popular crowds (ibid.), perhaps protesters.[60] Or she may survive. She may become, like the woman above, a fruit peddler whose days are laced with the scent of citrus along with the smoky exhaust of the cars that crowd the capital's streets. She may carve a life for herself that exceeds the bounds of the little space she was allotted, by fathers and sisters and brothers alike. But we cannot say.

[60] Note that Shirdel dedicates the film "To those innocent lives who burned in the fire" (*Bih ma'ṣūmīyat-hayi kih dar ātash sūkhtand*), translated by the subtitles without explicit mention of the fire as, "To those who perished in their innocence."

Race?

As the metaphor of mirroring suggests, there is also something deeply narcissistic about the narrator's desire for Munir. For the upper-class woman enabled and yet hemmed in by regimes of gender, power, and respectability, all of which the narrator both deploys to her advantage and struggles against, the "threat" Munir poses is in fact an opportunity, a chance to step outside the limited cadre in which she finds herself, and outside of the limited cadre that *is* herself. In short, so-called "prostitution" offers the fantasy of an escape from respectability.

The article of theft thus comes into view: "a fur coat (*pāltū-yi pūst*) at the price of 1000 rial," a skin (*pūst*) in all senses of the word. Via a dual significance that carries in English translation, in which "*pūst*" denotes human as well as animal skin (whether leather or fur), Munir's purchase of the coat represents a threat that she will dress herself in the narrator's skin in more ways than one. It is worth pausing momentarily on the issue of translation. Although for the sake of this academic work I render the phrase "*pāltū-yi pūst*" according to its common connotation of a "fur coat," in a popular translation I might choose "kidskin coat," relying on another expensive form of animal hide in order to keep the burdened word "skin" intact; the mutlivalences of "pūst" would thus carry but queerly—in this case, a slight mistranslation serves as the better translation.

Nevertheless, whether iterated as "fur" or "kidskin," the stolen coat offers Munir a means by which to cross-dress across the boundary of class and into gender, inasmuch feminine gendering is termed a privilege in modernity.[61] To don the valuable fur coat is thus to cross-dress into modern femininity. Whereas above the lower-class man threatened the phallically endowed

[61] Consider, for example, Sarah Haley's elaboration of "gender ideology" in the early twentieth-century Georgian carceral state, where white womanhood acted as "the racially specific definition of womanhood" at large: Haley, Sarah. *No Mercy Here: Gender, Punishment, and the Making of Jim Crow Modernity*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016. See page 5.

upper-class woman with rape-as-castration and castration-as-rape, here the lower-class woman poses a different sort of danger to the elite woman: she threatens to wear her. And in some way, the elite woman wants to be worn, a gesture to sisterhood that also serves as a release from the strictures of her own social positioning. One sees a similar dynamic at play in the narrator's attempts to ally and identify with disempowered men like Mohammad. Such attempts serve ambivalently as self-critique and as the fantasy of an escape from the privilege; they are a form of desirable "nakedness," an unveiling that does away with respectability while resting on its assumption.

At the station, Munir protests that she would not have bought the coat if she had known it was stolen (Amirshahi 63). When the station chief intervenes and threatens to again "estrange" Munir from the narrator (as quoted above), the latter states: "I wanted to ensure [Munir] that I believed her. I said, 'You must have nicer things than this—it's nothing very important'" (Amirshahi 64, my translation). The narrator immediately regrets it, seemingly conscious of their class difference so that the statement rings to her "own ears" as "a ridiculous politesse" (ibid.). *Ta'āruf*, a word I have translated as "politesse," might be more fully understood as the expression and reification of hierarchy and distance in culturally inscribed idioms of speech and manner. Expressed by a worker to boss, a student to teacher, or a child to parent, *ta'āruf* shows deference to authority, while among peers it maintains boundaries. In some sense, the narrator's invocation of *ta'āruf* suggests that she and Munir are peers. But there is also a patronizing hint to the exchange: Munir is thought too unsophisticated to interpret the undertones of *ta'āruf*, too prone to taking it at face value.

In fact, though, it is the narrator who is ultimately outdone by the smooth play of *ta'āruf* sliding into shade. Munir "blushes and laughs," flashing "pearl[y]" teeth (Amirshahi 64, my

translation). She ensures her that that is of course not the case, responding, “Not at all—nothing better than yours” (ibid.). Preceded by a coquettish laugh and a demonstration of her beauty, the sentence conveys confidence. It might, moreover, itself be read as a form of *ta‘āruf*, a politesse that is not to be taken literally. Beaten at her own game, the narrator is left squirming in her own skin: “My body was writhing, and I wanted this business to wrap up sooner, and to go” (ibid.). Munir proves quite capable of wearing the narrator’s skin in more ways than one: she dons the narrator’s sophistication with as much ease as slipping on the narrator’s fur/skin coat.

This flirtatious exchange exhibits an erotic charge that lays not in the women’s coupling but in the collapse of the markers of distinction that set them apart—indeed, in the collapse of distinct selfhood. The narrator’s seeming disinterest in recovering the article of theft at the station and taking back her skin/“skin” complements her consistent preoccupation with maintaining Munir’s “friendship.” This courting of Munir figures the theft/black market sale into a lending of the body synecdochized by its thinnest, most superficial—indeed, garment-like—organ, the skin. This stealing/buying/borrowing is a violence and, ambivalently, intimacy the narrator at once desires from the Other Woman and eschews, a violence that thrills her, where “thrill” touches at both pleasure and fear. In wanting to remain uncloaked, or naked, the narrator wants to shed her mutually constituted feminine respectability and class position as written on, represented by, and achieved through the skin. Inasmuch as it enacts an unveiling in all senses of the term as elaborated here, the desire to shed the skin is a promiscuous sexual fantasy that seeks absolution in annihilation. The desire to be evacuated of respectability is the desire to be “penetrated” by the disrespectability the so-called “prostitute” is made to iconize.

Women’s homoerotics in this story are made available through the same machinations and figures of patriarchal power that varyingly hold both the upper-class and lower-class woman

down. In the 1987 essay in response to the AIDS crisis, “Is the Rectum a Grave?,” one of queer theory’s foundational texts, Leo Bersani argues that sex is inherently violent, making strange bedfellows of feminist activism by the likes of Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin (which Bersani interprets as arguing not just against pornography but also against heterosexual sex as such, given the power differential between men and women as the genders are defined) and leftist scholarship by Foucault and Gayle Rubin (most famous for, in the broadest strokes, the capitalist critique, “The Traffic of Women” [1975], and the critique of social valuations of sexualities and desires, “Thinking Sex” [1984][62]). Presenting sex as the fulfillment of a sort of Freudian death drive, Bersani answers his titular question in the positive then embraces the necessarily fleeting “death” of the subject in sex; this ephemeral ecstasy is not redemptive or political but pleasurable, “represent[ing],” in the essay’s final words, “*jouissance* as a mode of ascesis” (Bersani 30).

Though Bersani theorizes an explicitly male homosexuality—and notably, an implicitly white one, as critics have noted—the violent erotics he describes are surprisingly resonant. Pursuing a Foucauldian reading of sex as a site of relational power that pits “mastery and subordination” against one another, Bersani “argue[s] that a gravely dysfunctional aspect of what is, after all, the healthy pleasure we take in the operation of a coordinated and strong physical organism is the temptation to deny the perhaps equally strong appeal of powerlessness, of the loss of control” (24). In the short story at hand, the narrator’s toggling between desires for

[62] “The Traffic in Women: Notes on the ‘Political Economy’ of Sex.” *Deviations: A Gayle Rubin Reader*, by GAYLE S. RUBIN, Duke University Press, Durham; London, 2011, pp. 33–65. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv11smmmj.5. Accessed 7 July 2020. And “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality.” *Deviations: A Gayle Rubin Reader*, by GAYLE S. RUBIN, Duke University Press, Durham; London, 2011, pp. 137–181. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv11smmmj.9. Accessed 7 July 2020.

buttressing her power and for relinquishing that power is striking. “Phallocentrism,” Bersani continues,

> is exactly that: not primarily the denial of power to women (although it has obviously also led to that, everywhere and at all times), but above all *the denial of the* value *of powerlessness in both men and women*. I don’t mean the value of gentleness, or nonaggressiveness, or even of passivity, but rather of *a more radical disintegration and humiliation of the self*. For there is finally, beyond the fantasies of bodily power and subordination that I have just discussed, a transgressing of that very polarity which, as Georges Bataille has proposed, may be the profound sense of both certain mystical experiences and of human sexuality. (24, emphasis added)

The narrator, as elaborated above, wields the power of the phallus over the lower-class man (i.e., Reza), thereby denying the “value of powerlessness” as Bersani suggests, while pivoting to assert “the value […] of a more radical disintegration and humiliation of the self” in confronting the lower-class woman (i.e., Munir). In short she seems caught in contradictory systems of valuation—but contradictory schema are common features of ideologies of power. In opposition to Bersani’s wholesale celebration of the feminized position of subordination and loss, the text at hand works toward this desire while struggling to fight against it. This is less a matter of the narrator having her cake and eating it too as it is indicative of the very phenomenon Bersani cites, that is, a broadscale undervaluation of the feminine and overvaluation of the masculine in phallocentric patriarchy. Though such patriarchal phallocentrism—which must be distinguished from cultures that embrace the lesbian phallus per Butler’s elaboration—might be understood as not only masculine but also as masculinist, the feminine and feminist cannot be so neatly aligned: instead, the narrator’s feminism eschews its own femininity as much as it embraces it.

What is at stake for Bersani and for the narrator is subjectivity itself: this is the release promised by sex, and by an erotic shedding of the skin, which I thus define as a sex act. Seeing the Other Woman dressed in her skin promises to absolve the narrator of class guilt and, more

momentously, of the very disciplinary apparatus that has structured her entire subjectivity. But then whom would she be confronting in this homoerotic mirror, self or other? The intimacy of blurring the line between self and other is precisely what the narrator desires and fears. For the narrator shedding the coat/skin enacts a fantasy of disembodying the self. This fantasy takes the necessary estrangement of embodiment, that sense of not being at home in one's own skin, and pushes it to the extreme: it works through the problem by embracing it. By requiring another body on which to project that burden, however, this "solution" is only imbricated within a vast and objectionable web of power and violence. As Bersani cynically warns, "Sexuality, at least in the mode in which it is constituted, may be a tautology for masochism" (24). While I stop short of defining all sexualities this way, as Bersani seems tempted to do at this middle point in the essay despite his more rooted positioning in its framing, the narrator's particular desires settle precisely on such a wish for self-abandonment and even annihilation. If sexuality might be defined as the organization and expression of desire for an other, then the narrator's sexuality expresses a violent desire for the Other as a destructive escape from the self, and encodes a desire for existing otherwise as a desire for the Other. The fantasy of shedding the skin is also a fantasy of swapping skins.

And yet let us pause to attend to the delicate relationship between fantasy and the real. To fantasize is not always, as is sometimes assumed, to *want* something; often it is more accurately to want something one does *not* want to have, to play at wanting while being reassured by the knowledge that said-want need not, indeed almost assuredly *will* not, materialize. Which is to say, the power of fantasy can draw precisely from its impossibility, and from the distance maintained from the object of desire. The twinned fantasies of shedding and swapping skins are just that, fantasies.

Skin has served as a consistent line of inquiry in Anne Anelin Cheng's scholarship in the past decade, from her celebrated analysis of the oeuvre of modernist performer and persona Josephine Baker[63] to the more recent, and more controversial, work, *Ornamentalism* (2018). Presently it is not Cheng's reading of "yellow" womanhood but her more fundamental understanding of the garment as a skin crucial to embodied[64] selfhood—and especially feminine and feminized selfhoods—that I am interested in engaging. Using and analyzing law professor Kenji Yoshino's 2006 memoir, *Covering: The Hidden Assault on Our Civil Rights*,[65] in the first chapter of *Ornamentalism*, Cheng considers American civil law's protection of "so-called natural and immutable traits (such as blood, chromosomes, and skin color)" alongside its corresponding disregard for "'superficial' characteristics" like ornament and style broadly defined (42). "The ideal of a naked or unornamented self," she warns, "seductive as it may be, cannot be the solution to the problem of racism, oppression, or discrimination, for that ideal denies how the (racialized) 'self' is always already an effect of the ornament worn" (Cheng 43). In Cheng's reading, in short, there is no such thing as "mere" ornament. Incidentally, this devaluation of the superficial is common to popular Orientalist misapprehensions of veiling that (mis)understand hijab as "only" cloth, though to the contrary, as I have shown in a modern Iranian context, hijab is often elaborated as essential to the self, a way of being somebody.

Cheng then goes on to further trouble the idea of an authentic self that precedes ornamentation:

> This understanding goes straight to the heart of the complex reality of our everyday sense of our own embodiment. Clothing and ornaments can offer the performance,

[63] Cheng, Anne Anelin. 2011. *Second Skin: Josephine Baker and the Modern Surface.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.
[64] The modifier is not superfluous: one will keep in mind that spiritual and religious practices manage to imagine an unembodied selfhood in concepts like the soul.
[65] Yoshino, Kenji. 2007. *Covering: The Hidden Assault on Our Civil Rights.* 2006. New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks.

> the *habitus*, through which we acquire our sense of selfhood. The separation of essence from performance, assumed in the contemporary formulation of our civil rights, elides the insight that our experiences of our own racial, sexual, and ontic identities arise most acutely precisely at the intersection of *being* and the *doing* that supposedly decorates it. (Cheng 43, emphasis in original)

Borrowing from Bourdieu's idea of the *habitus*, she offers an understanding of clothing and ornament as ingrained habits that define how a subject interprets the world and acts within it. Though at first it may seem that the debates I have outlined above pit an understanding of the veil as superficial covering, or garment (i.e., the Islamic feminist position), against an idea of the veil as an affective, intellectual, and behavioral disciplinary system (i.e., the secular feminist position), putting this corpus in dialogue with Cheng's elaborations on embodiment suggests that both sides invest in an idea of veiling as a skin that structures and mediates the subject's relationship to the outside world, whether such a skin manifests or is kept invisible. Whether physically worn or internally assumed, hijab is in this historical context, to riff on Cheng's words, an "intersection[al]" "doing" and "being" that gives rise to a particular subject position, the modern respectable woman. Indeed the purely ornamental veil was oppositely derided as hypocritical by secular and religious feminists alike. These observations breathe new life into the cliché of the "emperor's new clothes:" far from being ashamed or embarrassed by nakedness, the secular empress shows off her unveiling as a cloak.

When Cheng offers a reading of what she identifies as the salient coming out moment in the memoir, "a rather Lacanian mirror scene with sartorial roots" (44) in which Yoshino buys a gold brocade vest in the presence of a friend who "knows" that he is gay despite his being "closeted,"[66] she refigures "coming out" as a form of covering rather than nakedness:

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[66] The common terms are problematic, but I stay with them as they are common to Yoshino and Cheng's vocabulary. C. Riley Snorton's work in *Nobody Is Supposed to Know: Black Sexuality on the Down Low* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2014) helps us recognizes the pressure on

> We cannot fail to note that this scene of coming out is taking place in a literal closet (that is, the dressing room) and that this scene of discovery is facilitated by covers and ornaments. What enables the narrator to come out to himself is not nakedness, literally or otherwise, but the agential work of a piece of clothing, a highly decorated and racialized one at that. (Cheng 44)

To come "out" *in the closet*, as Cheng puts it, interrogates more than the identity paradigm that defines the Euro-American—and increasingly global, as in globalized/Americanized—sexuality scape. Understanding clothing as skin worries our understandings of personhood and subject formation to suggest that the superficial cannot be separated from the body and self. Sartorial performance read as habitus is a subject-making activity as much as a subject-affirming one. In the case of modern secular hijab, when the veil's "agential work" is complete, the object itself is rendered superfluous. One might similarly read the work of the gold brocade as initiating a comfort with gay sexuality via what is read as one of its primary markers, feminized flamboyance, that goes beyond the moment of adornment, accomplishing work that is more than "skin deep." Once the subject is "out," the brocade has accomplished its work and is no longer needed.

This ultimate turn—a turning-in on itself—becomes clear in Yoshino's play on the transitive verb, "becoming." Cheng writes: "The legal imaginary teaches us that what allows the subject to emerge from the closet is not liberating nakedness, but instead social ornamentation. And that ornament is never 'just' a costume. As Yoshino tell us, 'it did become me, and… *I could become it*' (emphasis added)" (44-5). Though I will not belabor the point, it is interesting to note this peculiar turn of tongue also exists in Persian, so that the shopkeeper's compliment to a young Yoshino, "It becomes you" (Yoshino qtd. in Cheng 2018, 44), might be neatly translated

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racialized bodies to "come out" as part of scopic regimes of power, so that "coming out" operates as a form of surveillance. Furthermore, if one understands the self as crafted, there may be not be a hidden self to recover; Cheng's own arguments ultimately settle on this logic.

as, "*Bihit mīyād*," where the verb "*mīyād*" is a third-person conjugation of "*āmadan*," "to come" (as in English, the gestured garment is the subject of the verb, not "you"). The parallel tropes of seeing and wearing in the Persian text burden the skin with a further signification also hinted at in Yoshino. There the flamboyant brocade serves to transform the closeted narrator, transporting him over the border to outness in two ways: firstly it surfaces his "gayness," offering sexuality as a (defining) text that must be read; and it furthermore changes the way he himself reads that gayness and the world—indeed, the text we receive as a memoir constitutes just such a reflexive reading of the self. As interfaces with the world, the garment and the text each serve as a lens by which the self looks out in addition to serving as a screen that enables others to look on and in, granting access to the subject. The skin structures how one sees, and how one is seen.

Similarly we might read each the narrator's fur coat and Munir's chador as coverings that helps realize these two women's distinct classed subjectivities. These skins indicate and instantiate ways of being. The fur/"skin" (*pūst*) coat figures as a metonym for the narrator's social status and class position, and thus as a symbol of feminine respectability. Inasmuch as it expresses the latter, it is a sort of veil, realized here as a physical garment, but one that ostentatiously adorns the female body rather than cloaking its beauty. Indeed, as a status symbol, the expensive fur coat is an anti-veil, a marker of immodesty rather than modesty; it continues to deliver on the modernist pledge of an unveiled—as in, bare-headed—woman.

Valued for its "authenticity" as genuine hide, the coat ironically puts into question the possibility for an authentic self, inviting a Marxist understanding of subjecthood located in class struggle. In a period of shifting economic and class formations, trembles that would produce proper fault lines in the wake of the Revolution, Munir's possession of the coat/"skin"/skin coat represents the subaltern power, even if fleeting and incomplete, to *become* the narrator, that is, to

level the class barriers between the women. This identity theft as ontological resignification thus reveals the sham of upper-class femininity, which is rendered mutable and transferable.

And yet I must stress: ultimately this transfer of class and gender remains incomplete. The state as represented by the police intervenes, and the narrator is given the opportunity to recuperate her skin. The hypocrisy of Munir's chador similarly serves to reassure the narrator that even if Munir *were* to dress herself in the narrator's skin, shedding her "fake" veil to don the fur coat, Munir would *not* become the woman that the narrator is. Despite their flirtations, the failed chador is there to reassure the narrator that Munir cannot consistently comport herself—i.e., dress herself—as the narrator does. The story seems to remain stubbornly shifting, but in fact one perceives a logic to it all: the skin offers an opportunity for upheaval, an opportunity to learn how to *act* like, and thus *become*, somebody else by *looking like* somebody else—but with the caveat that the superficial cannot in and of itself complete this work, though it remains essential to it. As epistemology *and* ontology, but not one without the other, the skin/veil can only function properly given the right education. Hence the narratorial necessity to demonstrate how *un*educated Munir is: illiterate, she will remain in her place.

Unlike Yoshino's gold brocade, the skins at stake here are already vestiges of other bodies and selves. What we witness is an uncanny form of embodiment in which donning another's skin can teach the self. In the narrator's fantasy of a fungible skin, an object that might be traded for another, the elite "white" female subject flirts with shedding her privilege in order to become her "essential" self. That is to say, the fantasy of wearing another skin—and in particular, a skin unveiled from respectability—helps the white self realize itself. Conversely, the flirtation with giving the coat away—that is, the fantasy of lending the skin—is an exercise in power: it is a domestic striptease, safe from danger.

Alongside the coat-cum-skin, the story's pages are littered with the trope of Munir's more literal skin, which I define here as all superficial characteristics of the body, not just the epiderma. To be clear, I am not promoting an understanding of race that reduces it to skin-as-epidermis but am rather attempting to critically mine the ways this story varyingly invests the skin with otherness and uses an idea of shared skin color—i.e., whiteness—as the basis for nationalist political projects such as that of women's rights. In introducing a yet-unnamed Munir, the narrator observes admiringly: "Her face was ovular and pleasingly sculpted and she had a pretty moonlight color[…]" (Amirshahi 61, my translation; also above). Later, after the joust of *ta'āruf* explicated above, the narrator similarly waxes admiringly, "Her teeth were like pearls, and when she smiled her smooth skin blossomed" (Amirshahi 64, my translation). Munir is figured as a mix of classical and modern archetypes of beauty: in the former case, the valuation of white skin, and in the latter, an "ovular" and "pleasingly sculpted" face that replaces the Persianate preference for a round face in favor of a visage the likes of a mid-century star such as Kaharine Hepburn (American branding is relevant; recall the reference to Gilette). Indeed, what survives of the beloved's moonlike face à la classical poetry and miniatures is its hue alone, a "pretty moonlight color" (*rang-i mahtābī*) that, alongside Munir's "pearl[-like]" teeth and "blossom[ing]" skin, serves to fetishize Munir's whiteness. Yet this is a fetishization that does not rely on exoticization and thus on difference, but on idealization and likeness. If the "white" in so-called "white trash" endows a form of passable but not desirable whiteness onto lower-class bodies, then this is a case of "white trash" in translation that uses that body as the springboard for white aestheticization.

Consider as visual counterpoint to Munir's idealized whiteness the depiction of another lower-class Other in the story, a man whose "abundant white hair and burnt black face" is

described as "look[ing] like a photographic negative" (Amirshahi 67, my translation). There the male worker's tanned face, burnt from being too long in the sun, is depicted as black, erasing a history of enslaved Africans in Iran[67]—read in that context as "actual" black bodies—while paradoxically preserving the lower-class Other's whiteness. The metaphor of the photograph invokes the "true" image surfaced by a "black" negative, thereby reinscribing the "black face" as a white face.

In contrast Munir's lower-class status is read onto the skin via fetishized exaggeration: that her beauty is remarkable to the narrator exhibits the sort of problematic "surprise" evinced in the "revelation" that Munir is a mother. Sisterhood in this context relies on white skin as a bridge between the two women, the basis on which their alliance might be pitched. But white skin is figured as a necessary and not sufficient condition of whiteness. As the sign of failed veiling and disrespectability, Munir cannot possess a "true" whiteness like the narrator's. In short, sisterhood offers a form of difference that relies on similarity, thus reifying difference in the name of similarity.

As my reading via Cheng has aimed to show, the fur coat as veil and anti-veil symbolizes the "skin" of elite white femininity, where that skin is not a superficial sign but an essential apparatus by which the self understands itself, knows the world, and is known to the world. To don the fur coat and thus unveil—in the modern, and thus here, Westernized, sense—is to assume respectability. Counterbalancing the narrator's fantasy of surrendering the coat to

[67] Recent interventions into Iranian studies draw attention to this elided history, including Reza Zia-Ebrahimi's *The Emergence of Iranian Nationalism: Race and the Politics of Dislocation* (Columbia University Press, 2016) and Parisa Vaziri's recent and forthcoming work. The 2019 essay, "Pneumatics of Blackness," is particularly relevant, as Vaziri there pursues an analogous thesis that re-historicizes Southern Iranian zar ceremonial culture in relation to the African slave trade; see Vaziri, Parisa. "Pneumatics of Blackness: Nāṣir Taqvā'ī's Bād-i Jin and Modernity's Anthropological Drive." Hamid Rezaei Yazdi and Arshavez Mozafari, eds. *Persian Literature and Modernity*. London: Routledge, pp. 213-242.

escape the disciplinary regimes of respectability, Munir's illegitimate ownership of the fur coat offers a brief, if ultimately unconvincing and corrected, impersonation of respectability *because* of whiteness. Fetishized and aestheticized white skin then lends force to the threat of Munir's coopting the narrator's skin more completely: if Munir is already so beautiful dressed ridiculously in a hypocritical half-fallen chador, then what sort of paragon woman might she become when assuming the skin of upper-class femininity? What sorts of social upheavals, in other words, are imminent, if the feminists succeed in their own endeavors, and modernization goals like female literacy become widespread?

Perhaps yet inchoate here, this fear manifests in full form after the Revolution, and after the protesting women cite above lost their battle, in the 1980's, when veiling is doubly invested as cloth *and* comportment, and never one without the other, by the Islamic Republican state; thus the skin of modern feminine respectability is sundered from the body of the unveiled, "Westoxified"[68] upper-class woman represented by the story's narrator and instead adhered to the body of the pious bourgeois woman citizen who upholds Iranian-Islamic values. For now, yet a decade prior to the Revolution, Munir's fetishized white skin reflects a version of the narrator's self she would like to see: the Other is a sort of warped mirror through which the actual and ideal selves might be collapsed. We confront not an example of othering the Other, or of what Cheng has in *Second Skin* poetically called "Modernism's dream of a second skin" (1), but rather a case of selving the other and othering the self. Arguably the drama of the story lies not in the struggle between self and other but the struggle between self and self. The narrator's ambivalent relationship to her garments and possessions, her willingness to shed these skins, asks how one can embody one's own body. But moreover: does one *want* to?

[68] The reference is to Jalal Al-e Ahmad's famous thesis on *gharbzadigī* (translated as "Westoxification" or "Occidentosis") in the eponymous 1962 book.

If "coming out" is a way for the sexual self to appear naked in the public eye, willingly cloaked in its deviant desires, then this is a sort of coming out story: the unveiled white feminist bears her desire to live otherwise, to live queerly, not only outside of male-inscribed protection but also of respectability itself. And yet, stuck in the dominant logics of patriarchy and othering, narrator is ultimately unable to imagine a subjectivity that does not use the Other to prop itself up. Unwilling to embrace marginality—its queerness and its costs—the narrator clings to respectability and the fur coat, and her coming out does little to change the narrator or the world around her. The modern desire for another skin—and for another's skin—masks and reveals the desire for her own. But a fantasy, the perfect skin remains an impossibility. Embodiment continues to beguile. We are, it seems, fated to remain as estranged from our own skins and selves as we are from each other's, and from each other.

Tripping on Queerness

> "Aa… Ammi…" I whimpered courageously. No one paid any heed. The quilt crept into my brain and began to grow larger. I stretched my leg nervously to the other side of the bed to grope for the switch and turned it on. The elephant somersaulted inside the quilt which deflated immediately. During the somersault the corner of the quilt rose by almost a foot…
>
> Good God! I gasped and plunged into my bed.
>
> - Ismat Chughtai, "The Quilt" (1941), trans. by M. Asaduddin

> In 1941, three months before my marriage, I wrote a story called *Lihaf* (The Quilt). In 1944, I was charged with obscenity by the [colonial] Lahore government. A summons arrived: 'George the Sixth versus Ismat Chugtai [sic].' I had a good laugh at the idea that the kin had read my story. So we went to Lahore to fight the case.
>
> […]
>
> The obscenity law prohibited the use of four letter words. *Lihaf* does not contain any such words. In those days the word "lesbianism" was not in use. I did not know exactly what it was. The story is a child's description of something which she cannot fully understand. I knew no more at that time than the child knew. My lawyer argued that the story could be understood only by those who already had some knowledge. I won the case.
>
> - Chughtai interviewed in *Manushi* (1983), qtd. in Gopinath, 132 and 151

Introduction: The Feminist Art of Elision

Whether the twentieth-century Indian Muslim writer Ismat Chughtai (1911-1991) is more celebrated for her depiction of consummated women's homoerotics or for her beguiling the colonial courts is debatable. Chughtai has been memorialized in the postcolonial feminist imaginary as a warrior wielding the double blade of anticolonial and antipatriarchal critique. Above the famous last lines of the 1941 short story, "*Lihāf*" (The Quilt), originally written in Urdu and quoted from a 1999 English translation by M. Asaduddin that appeared in the feminist magazine *Manushi*, appear alongside an equally oft-quoted excerpt from an interview in which Chughtai comments on her court case. "The Quilt" has been described as a "candid discussion of

taboo subjects such as lesbianism"[69] and attributed with a "frankness" for which "Chughtai was charged with obscenity, targeted in the press, and besieged by a letter campaign."[70] But at first read, the story hardly seems to contain a "candid" or "frank" depiction of sex or sexuality, as the top epigraph indicates. Instead, sex and sexuality are described here through a series of elisions that pose both as questions the reader is forced to engage, in turn interrogating her own assumptions. As others have also elucidated,[71] such celebrations (or charges) of an unveiled promiscuity elaborate especially complex politics of visibility in reference to Muslim women's homoerotics. How do we read silence, and the willful silence of elision? Considering the difficulty of ever "truly" knowing what lies unsaid, what type of knowledge production does elision stage?

Gopinath reads Chughtai's self-professed, and almost assuredly exaggerated, naiveté in her description of her successful legal strategy as a *political* strategy of willful ignorance: "Chughtai's repeated insistence on 'not knowing' must be read as a strategy of disarticulation that functions squarely within the logic of categorization, visibility, and enumeration" (Gopinath 151). But I would add: the feminist subject represented not so much by Chughtai herself but rather constructed through the logic of the strategy—both legal and political—resists colonial censorship precisely by appealing to its ideas of feminine respectability. The strategy thus concurs with the colonial logic—a proper woman does not know of 'these things' (i.e., practices

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[69] Batra, Kanika. "the home, the veil and the world: reading Ismat Chughtai towards a 'progressive' history of the Indian women's movement." *Feminist Review* 95 (2010): 27-44. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.com/stable/40928108. See 28.

[70] Lambert-Hurley, Siobhan. "To Write of the Conjugal Act: Intimacy and Sexuality in Muslim Women's Autobiographical Writing in South Asia." *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 23.2 (May 2014): pp. 155-181. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.com/stable/24616488. See 167.

[71] See Lambert-Hurley (above) as well as Geeta Patel's elaboration of ideas of "modern, faux-secular Hindu[ism]" (131) in diaspora and the "potentially secular family" in India (132), as contrasted to the "seemingly traditional Muslim zenana" (141) and domestic sphere represented by Chughtai: Patel, Geeta. "Homely Housewives Run Amok: Lesbians in Marital Fixes." *Public Culture* 16.1 (2004): 131-157. *Project Muse*.

of women's homoerotics, women's sexual pleasure at the hands of other women, etc.), much less speak or write of them—and yet by using that logic to evade the court's punishment, this repetition constitutes a form of mockery. In short, the strategy satirizes the idea of respectability it in some sense also reasserts. That is, the censorship implicit in the ellipses—if the story is what everyone says it is about—cannot be separated from the censorship threatened by the court. And yet, the ellipses themselves serve to make visible what they render invisible; like the quilt itself, they both veil and unveil sex between women. The repression and expression of the sex act are not at odds but mediated through one another.

In the contemporary Iranian novel I take as my subject in this current chapter, Mahsa Mohebali's *Nigarān nabāsh* (*Don't Worry*, 2008), my own interest lies not only in the ambivalent articulation of women's homoerotics via a textual elision in an equally complex case of eluded state- and social censorship, but also in the feminist subject's attendant dance with the terms of gendered respectability. Celebrated for its unapologetic treatment of provocative themes like drug use and for its realistic portrayal of the mindset and crass vocabulary of contemporary urban youth subcultures, *Don't Worry* has enjoyed a great deal of commercial and literary success in Iran. Foremost among its accolades is the prestigious Golshiri Prize, on a par with a Pulitzer. When first published the novel enjoyed eleven or more print runs with Nashr-i Cheshmeh, a major Iranian press that has only grown in the past decade, and it is currently in print with the small press, Nimaj Publication.[72]

In my experience presenting the text as a translator, the fact that the novel passed through state censors is sometimes as surprising to Iranians living in Iran as it is to Iranian diasporic and

[72] Typos from the Nashre Cheshme version have been removed in the Nimaj version: Mohebali, Mahsa. *Nigarān nabāsh* [Don't Worry]. Tehran, Nimaj Publications, 2016-7. Because there are no other discrepancies, my page numbers refer to the 2012 copy by Nashre Cheshme I first marked up as cited in the Works Cited page.

Western audiences. *Don't Worry* follows Shadi, a rich, disillusioned junkie who crossdresses as a man to evade mandatory hijab, in the course of a single day as she roams through a crumbling Tehran in search of her next fix. Organized into chapters that each end with another tremor, it imagines an apocalyptic series of earthquakes that are destroying the city.[73] The suggestion, however, is not that the Armageddon-like scene is drastically different than the everyday, but rather that the city's dark underbelly of betrayal and violence at both interpersonal and state levels has simply surfaced. Published in 2008, just a year before the protests of 2009 in the wake of the contested election of Mahmood Ahmadinejad to a second term, the novel was retroactively read as eerily prescient.

Below I interweave my analysis of the queer politics of the original Persian, defining queerness in relation to the elite urban Iranian contemporary scene that the novel constructs, and my practical strategies for translating such localized queerness into American English (I am currently finishing a translation of *Nigarān nabāsh* into English, which is due to come out with Feminist Press in 2021 under the title *In Case of Emergency*). I thus attempt a transnational reading practice wherein translation aims to convey cultural and political specificity while creating a conversation across contexts. Elaborating a feminist subject who works through and against power in complicated ways, I start with theorizing "floating feminism," a drug-using anti-political politics that protests secular and religious respectability alike (as treated in section one), and critiques both femininity (section two) and hypermasculinity (section three). I understand "man-wearing" (*mardpūshī*)—a risky form of contemporary Iranian civil disobedience practiced by the protagonist, which deploys masculine crossdressing in order to elude the feminine visibility attempted by compulsory public hijab—as a form of veiling in

[73] See also Rahmani, Mariam. "Translator's Note." *Don't Worry* by Mahsa Mohebali, trans. Rahmani. New York: Feminist Press, forthcoming.

masculinity (section three). Ultimately the desiring feminist subject offers a queer politics of protest that cannot be untangled from gendered power: queer forms of opposite gender play violently distance themselves from transness and thus reiterate a normative gendered body beneath it all, while female sexuality serves to mediate homoerotic and heteroerotic attachments (section four).

High on ~~Life~~: Towards A Floating Feminism

In the conclusion to *Sexual Politics in Modern Iran* (2009), Janet Afary writes that in 2005—that is, three years prior to *Don't Worry*'s first publication in Tehran, as Mohebali was busy writing (Yousefi 2014)—narcotics sales in Iran were estimated at $10 billion, and 2.8% of the population between ages 15 and 64 used illegal drugs, so that Iran had the highest opiate use in the world if calculated per capita (365). Afary cites Iranians' popular belief in a conspiracy by the state to "deliberately addic[t] youth in order to divert their anger, frustration, and energy away from the shortcomings of the society" (365). In a literalization of the famous Marxist phrase that deems religion "the opium of the masses" (*das Opium des Volkes*), this contemporary conspiracy accuses a theocratic government of using not religion but opium as the opium of the masses. Writing in 2014, Roxanne Varzi conveys as much alarm about the contemporary moment, while briefly historicizing opium use in Iran: "Opium, which has been a major part of Iranian society since the Safavid dynasty, has given way to other opiates, like heroin, of which Iran is now the largest consumer of in the world" (96). Opium thus figures as a tradition gone awry: in contrast to Iranian days of yore in which opium was used recreationally and moderately, it seems, the contemporary moment is guilty of excess. Varzi cites a range of 3 to 7 million of "addicts"—whether specifically opiate addicts or other drug addicts is unclear, though the former

is syntactically implied—pointing to inconsistent statistics provided by domestic and international sources, and namely, the Islamic Republic Ministry of Health, *The New York Times*, and the United Nations (96).[74] The more commonly reported figure attesting that 2.8% of Iranian 15 to 64 year-olds are opiate users (cited above by Afary) is an oft-repeated statistic in both academic and journalistic writing that can be traced to the United Nations *Office on Drugs and Crimes*' (UNODC) 2008 "World Drug Report" available online.[75] It may also be that the impact of such drug use is gendered. In a footnote, Varzi cites the striking disparity that "while women in Iran may use drugs less frequently than men, they are more likely to die as a result" (Varzi 108, see f.n. 1).[76]

Discrepancies notwithstanding, both Afary and Varzi are indicative of the alarmism that colors the discourse on drug use in contemporary Iran. This discourse seemingly agrees upon one conclusion: when it comes to drug use, Iran is at the top of the world. This negative achievement is brought up time after time in order to show just how "sad" or "messed up"—to put it colloquially—contemporary Iranian society really is.

As the texts above intimate, international public health understands drug addiction as a disease, or at least, a problem that needs to be solved, an assessment that is echoed in Iran today after years criminalizing drug use.[77] This shift in perspective from criminalization to medicalization occurred largely due to the efforts of Arash and Kamiar Alaei,[78] two doctors and

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[74] I will note that given a population of about 72 million in 2008, these numbers represent 4.2 to 9.7% of the total population, not just the population between 15 and 64.
[75] "World Drug Report 2008." United Nations *Office of Drugs and Crime*, 2008, https://www.unodc.org/documents/wdr/WDR_2008/WDR_2008_eng_web.pdf. See 55.
[76] Note that she provides the main UNODC website URL as her only citation; I could not corroborate the claim based on the 2008 report, though she may be referring to another page or document.
[77] In the 1990's, the Alaei brothers write, "the response by law enforcement [to addiction] was to deter drug use harshly through imprisonment" (Alaei 24) See Works Cited for full citation.
[78] It would be remiss not to note that the brothers were imprisoned for their related work on HIV/AIDS in 2009; Kamran Alaei was released in November 2010 and Arash Alaei was released in August 2011. See Moszynski, Peter. "Health workers protest at unfair trial in Iran of HIV doctors." *British Medical Journal* 338 (13 January 2009):

brothers who pioneered programs in needle exchange, opioid substitution therapy, and injector support groups in Iran by setting up free clinics that let patients choose among these options for themselves from the 1990's into the twenty-first century (Alaei 24). Yet even such progressive treatment as the menu-style "harm reduction" techniques championed by the brothers, described by themselves in a short 2013 missive as the "restaurant approach" (Alaei 24) and, by all evidence, a treatment approach that honors the patient's right to choose—indeed, the title of the article is "Drug Users Need More Choices"—shares this with other less humanist approaches to widespread drug use: a commitment to reducing drug use in individual patients and populations, if not getting the patient drug-free (where a drug-free population is of course unrealistic). Indeed the collective wisdom that drug use is bad is so obvious as to seem redundant.

At present I do not wish to contest the validity of this claim from a scientific or psychological perspective, but I would nevertheless like to suggest that the medicalization of addiction occludes the political thrust of casual and heavy drug use in various local and global contexts—in my experience, in the U.S. as in Iran. Indeed, against this backdrop of a public health crisis (read: public in crisis), the insouciance of Mohebali's *Don't Worry* appears in stark relief. In opposition to any such "respectable" ideas about addiction, whether held by the state or its critics, drug use is treated casually and unapologetically in *Don't Worry*. Almost everyone seems to be on drugs: the protagonist, Shadi; her brother, Arash; her friends; and more distant acquaintances and strangers, including characters of her mother's generation (but not her mother, a detail whose significance I will clarify below). I argue that Shadi and her ilk refuse accepted

b109. Doi: https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.b109; and Bhattacharjee, Yudhijit. "Iran's Alaei Brothers to Continue AIDS Work After Release From Prison." *Science* 334 (28 October 2011): 444. Doi: 10.1126/science.334.6055.444. The high-profile status of their case in popular, U.S.-led global humanitarian discourse is further evidenced by an Amnesty International press release: "Victory! Release of Iranian HIV/AIDS Specialist." N.a., n.d. *Amnesty International* 2020, https://www.amnestyusa.org/victory-release-of-iranian-hivaids-specialist/. Accessed 29 July 2020.

notions of what constitutes well-being and a life worth living. Drugs are not escape but protest, the application of a "fuck-it" attitude whose crassness mirrors Shadi's and the text's curse-ridden vocabulary. The title itself suggests this sarcastic laissez faire attitude in the face of a world that is crumbling: "don't worry" (*nigarān nabāsh*). Structurally, drugs propel the plot forward, pushing Shadi out of her posh and dysfunctional family home at the end of chapter 2 and serving as the reason for each of her subsequent moves throughout the city: they are the breath that animates the story, and for its characters, they are a way of life.

For Shadi, withdrawal is an everyday issue like any other. In the first two chapters when Shadi is still at home, her complaints about withdrawal are intertwined with other more banal, and more universalized, quotidian embodied experiences of pain such as hunger or caffeine addiction (in this case, to tea). When Arash alludes to Shadi's withdrawal with the rhetorical question, "You're not in good shape, huh?" (*ru form nīstī, hā?*)—or as I have translated it, trying to give Arash a more distinctive and coherent voice in spoken English that is as idiosyncratic as his slang-ridden voice in Persian: "You're really not feeling too hot, huh?"—Shadi orders him to go look in the fridge for tea cookies (*shīrīnī*) (Mohebali 2012, 24; my translation). The juxtaposed lines interpret withdrawal as a sort of hunger, both in banality and legitimacy: Shadi has not changed the subject but simply answered the question.

Yet her main predicament of course remains the issue of obtaining and maintaining a high. These stakes are introduced candidly and early:[79]

> I open the bottle. Only six left. As in a day and a half. What if Siamak doesn't have any shit left? What if Rahim's gone missing in this mess? Don't go there, you fool. Thou shalt not forget Newton's First Law: Think not when coming down cause you're thinking out of your ass. And the Second Law's entirely insignificant—

[79] Note that in the Persian edition, the story starts on page 6, so that this passages appears only a few pages into chapter 1.

> when you're high, everything works out in the end. (Mohebali 2012, 9; my translation)

Newton's laws serve as a motif throughout the novel, with Shadi presenting a different version or phrasing each time, sometimes in ways that reference the actual Laws of physics (as in chapters 2 and 6) and other times in ways that either cite or confuse her own rules about not thinking when not high (above and in chapter 8) or not being too far from one's lighter (chapters 5 and 7). Translations and mistranslations thus pile on top of each other within the text, with the original text only available to readers either extra-textually (as in the actual Laws of Physics) or not at all (as in Shadi's personal rulebook). In a Borgesian idea of translation that blurs "original" and "translation," "source" and "target," the original thus recedes, while the (mis)translated text—the two are interchangeable—also stubbornly short-circuits claims to accuracy or authenticity.

Shadi's approach to the Laws reflects her broader rejection of norms of social behavior, a rejection that constitutes a practiced politics of refusal to which drug use serves as lynchpin. In conversation with Jack Halberstam's braided theorizations of failure and "shadow feminisms," I would like to theorize what I call Shadi's "floating feminism," a feminist politics that refuses terms of feminine respectability and embraces impermanence and the present as realized in the fading high of being on drugs. Like shadow feminisms—or perhaps, a particular shadow feminism—floating feminism embraces both negativity and antisociality and refuses womanhood as defined by the feminists received knowledge, that is, by her mother(s) and mainstream society.

In the introduction to *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011), shadow feminisms are defined against "the more acceptable forms of feminism that are oriented to positivity, reform, and accommodation rather than negativity, rejection, and transformation" (Halberstam 4). These dynamic anti-feminisms "take the form of shady, murky modes of undoing, unbecoming, and

violating" (Halberstam 4). Floating feminism realizes undoing in drug use. As a term it borrows from Anglophone slang that describes both being high on opiates and wandering when high[80]—both activities in which Shadi engages—as "floating." "Floating" furthermore echoes a Persian descriptor for smoking opium cited in *Don't Worry*: when Shadi imagines a friend reminiscing about the "good old days" back when they could get high off of only three hits, being high is described as "*tū havā būdan*," or literally, "being in the air" (Mohebali 2012, 43). Finally, as a word that circulates in more mainstream American English slang to denote slacking at school without bearing the consequences—as in, "floating through a class," or receiving a passing grade by doing as little work as possible—"floating" captures Shadi's balancing act as a failure who does not fail. In terms of respectability, that is, Shadi is a failure: she is neither a productive member of capitalist society nor a married woman. But Shadi is neither destitute nor does she die, two fates (or more totalizing failures) that would be more likely were she an impoverished addict rather than a rich junkie.

In short, the "art" of Shadi's failure is afforded by her privilege. Financially and materially she is kept afloat by her family wealth and the patriarchal structures that guarantee her continued access to that wealth. An unmarried daughter such as Shadi remains her parents' and brothers' responsibility. She thus contrasts her own position with that of her younger brother (who in this scene has just shot a glass sideboard with a hunting rifle in order to wheedle some cash out of their mother or older brother): "For me, for example, money's for the finding. There's always a couple thousand [toman] somewhere, in Baba's pockets, or the pocket of Maman's coat, or your pants pocket, or Arash's pants pocket… But Arash fights for it"

[80] As to the latter, one post on Urban Dictionary defines "floating" as "Wandering around, esp. while high," and provides the following example: "*We jacked up on heroin and floated around the club.*" ("floating." *Urban Dictionary*, post by Radiks, 8 December 2002, https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=FLOATING. Accessed 30 July 2020.

(Mohebali 2012, 35; my translation). The floating feminist thus appeals to femininity when it serves her, turning the yoke of patriarchal femininity into a hoop, an exit. But for the same reason her escape—from the family, not to mention the patriarchy she contests—is incomplete. Indeed, a couple thousand tomans will hardly buy you a sandwich (or to put it in international terms: in 2008, the value of the toman ranged from nine to ten thousand tomans to the dollar).

And yet to recognize the floating feminist's privilege is not to obscure her pain. Halberstam theorizes failure "as a way of being in the world" while also asserting "that failure is also unbeing, and that these modes of unbeing and unbecoming propose a different relation to knowledge" (23). As if to literalize "unbecoming," Shadi and her peers' heavy drug use and attempted suicides by overdose exercise the death drive as bodily destruction: drug use is at once a way of being in the world, and a way of quite literally undoing that being. The deterioration of the body that necessarily results from uninhibited drug use, including impact on the brain and a lack of energy or motivation in times of withdrawal—this latter form of suffering being the state Shadi occupies for most of the book—thus constitutes an embodied practice of self-destruction that exists on a continuum with suicide. In *Don't Worry* depression figures as a reasonable response to, and critique of, a sick world. Shadi repeatedly makes reference to a recent episode she euphemistically describes as being "found up a tree" (the first instance is on Mohebali 2012, 8), while her friend Ashkan has tried killing himself so many times she's lost track (Mohebali 2012, 15). More peripheral characters seem more casually depressed. For example, an acquaintance I have dubbed "Downer Ali"—in Persian, "*Alī-yi dip*"—has a name that speaks for itself: "*dip*" is a colloquial abbreviation of the transliterated English word, "depressed."

I read drug use as a purposeful failure that enables a critical feminist subject who rejects the forms of respectable adulthood and citizenry espoused by both dominant secular Iranian

culture and the religious state. Shadi's epistemology (or "relation to knowledge") is a jaded approach to the world that has no faith in change: Shadi is an anarchist more so than a revolutionary, a point that the novel only makes too clear. The floating feminist practices an anti-futurity that refuses to value the promise of tomorrow over the pleasure, and pains, of today. She questions whether tomorrow will ever come, a pessimism realized here through the figure of the earthquake, at once a metaphor and Iranian reality. She moreover, to put it simply, asks whether tomorrow is even worth waiting for.

In the novel this anti-futurity is foregrounded formally in a reliance on the present tense and the repeated use of the adverbs "today" (*imrūz*) and "now" (*ḥālā*). Ideologically it surfaces in Shadi's deep-seated cynicism, or what I call an "anti-political politics," where the first "political" surfaces as the realm of both state policy and power and the contestation of that power in the form of revolutionary action.[81] *Don't Worry* features a range of diverse antiestablishment youth cultures that are using the void created by the earthquake to take control of the city, from bodybuilding musclemen to flamboyant "*finchīs*," or literally, "finches," which I translate as "birds" to create resonances with American queer cultures. Indeed the Birds are explicitly said to include "gays," which I have translated as such to capture the irreverence of the Persian nominalization "*ayvāhā*" (Mohebali 2012, 73; my translation), a foreshortening of the more old-fashioned and offensive term, "*ayvākhwāhar*." ("*Ay vā!*" is an exclamatory akin to "oh my god," or better, "omg," while "*khwāhar*" means "sister;" the mocking composite inscribes gayness as femininity and effeminacy.) But Shadi herself denies the possible success of such revolutionary

[81] I am here in conversation with recent conceptions of the "anti-political" such as that of the "Undercommons" that take "political" to mean entering, and thus legitimizing to some extent, mainstream discourse. This refusal to, so to speak, enter the arena is arguably how such conceptualizations of various anti-politics depart from dissensus as politics as defined by Jacques Rancière. See Harney, Stefano and Fred Moten. *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*. Brooklyn, NY: Minor Compositions, 2013.

activity. Later in the same chapter, she wakes up in a sort of revolutionary headquarters set up in Sadaf Mall. Here and in other encounters with the revolutionaries, she keeps hearing a phrase first presented by Shadi's brother, Arash, in chapter 2: "the city's in our hands" (*shahr tū dast-i māst*) (first on Mohebali 2012, 20). Watching the convened coalition of groups, come and go, she criticizes the refrain in exasperation: "'This city is ours'—what precisely do they mean by that? I'd really like to know" (Mohebali 2012, 79; my translation).

Though some Iranian readers were wont to read the novel as prefiguring the 2009 protests against Mahmood Ahmadinejad's contested second term of presidency, Mohebali herself has only stressed the disillusioned note on which the text lands. It is precisely this trenchant cynicism, rather than any idea of hopeful revolution, that is engaged by interviewer Hamed Yousefi in a 2014 segment on BBC Persian (a channel available via satellite in middle class Iranian homes) now published on YouTube. Before turning the question over to Mohebali, Yousefi tries to attribute the novel's dark outlook to the fact that "the events of 2009" had not yet occurred (the comment, intriguingly, suggests that the ultimately quashed protests were more reason for hope than despair). Citing the same phrase that appears in the book, Mohebali herself then insists that "there is nothing behind this idea [that the city is in our hands]" (Yousefi 2014, see minutes 1:00 to 2:40). Distancing the novel from the events of 2009 by stating that she had started writing in 2003 or 2004, she provides an unexpected origin story, attributing the idea for the plot to a walk through Tehran with her father during the celebrations that followed a 1997 soccer match against Australia that qualified Iran for the 1998 World Cup, despite ending in a draw.[82] Mohebali speaks of witnessing a crowd tip a bus on Valiasr Street and people dancing in the streets (the latter is unusual as it flouts post-Revolutionary rules of propriety)—and indeed, a

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[82] Bromberger, Christian. "A Third Half for Iranian Football." *Le Monde* diplomatique (April 1998), https://mondediplo.com/1998/04/04iran.

tipping minibus makes its way into the novel in chapter 8, and the gay *finchīs*/Birds dance in the street at the beginning of chapter 6. I cite these resonances not to pursue a biographical reading of the novel but rather to read the novel's biography. That is, *Don't Worry*'s origin story is testament to the deep cynicism of the sorts of anti-political politics in which floating feminism participates. This narrative interprets a moment of collective exuberance as the negative image of collective violence: in light it sees only shadow. The assertion that "there is nothing" in the idea of change precludes hope. Yet there is also no room for despair: as she delivers the line Mohebali's affect is flat and uncompromising. Like Halberstam's shadow feminisms, floating feminism is unforgiving.

Floating Alone: F* Your Mother, F*** Your Friends**

The shadow feminist project as Halberstam defines it enacts an anti-genealogical turn that severs assumed links between mothers and daughters in order to conceive of womanhood anew. Shadow feminist texts "actively and passively lose the mother, abuse the mother, love, hate, and destroy the mother, and in the process they produce a theoretical and imaginative space that is 'not woman' or that can be occupied only by unbecoming women" (Halberstam 125). Shadi's almost palpable derision for her mother manifests this intellectual project, as if in response to Saidiya Hartman's famous call to "lose your mother," an injunction that serves as one of Halberstam's main points of entry into shadow feminisms.[83] Indeed Shadi's rejection of her mother is so foundational to her story, and to her subjectivity as a character, that it serves as the novel's opening lines: "She's *click-clicking* right over my head. I can't move. If she finds out I'm awake, she won't leave" (Mohebali 2012, 7; my translation). She spends much of the first two

[83] Hartman's *Lose Your Mother* (2008) is quoted in the epigraph and treated in the introduction to the chapter, "Shadow Feminisms" (Halberstam 123-4).

chapters at home ridiculing her mother's gendered hysterics, including the latter's automatized clicking of a digital prayer counter and her "opera[tic]" (*uprā*) crying and screaming (first on Mohebali 2012, 10).

Hardly the image of refinement or respectability, Shadi's mother is instead the caricature of a rich housewife: melodramatic, materialist, and adulterous. In Shadi's words, she is "that girl from the provinces who escaped the arrests in the eighties by hiding out in the Professor's house, then pushed out three kids for the kind beloved Professor only to forgot about that whole guerrilla game;" in her upper-class mother-in-law's (i.e., Shadi's grandmother's) more concise estimation, she is a "shameless village girl" (*dukhtarih-yi dihātī*) (both Mohebali 2012, 27; my translation). On a typical day, she can be found "at the salon, or lunching with her friends, or in the boutiques on [posh] Jordan Street" (Mohebali 2012, 30; my translation)—all, notably, activities that produce and reproduce femininity via various forms of consumption, whether capitalist or otherwise.[84] In contrast to her mother's feminine beauty practices, Shadi has "short spiky hair" (Mohebali 2012, 16) and roams the city with a backpack, not a purse. She refuses to be the feminine woman that her mother has taught her to be.

Shadi's grandmother, on the other hand, signifies in Shadi's childhood as the paragon of an urbane, elite feminine respectability at which Shadi cannot help but fail.[85] In a salient flashback Shadi and her older brother are trotted out by her grandmother and father to play the violin for their evening guests, a sign of the family's Western intellectualism and upper class respectability: the two children "have prepared a Paganini duet," as her father eloquently puts it

[84] That is, "lunching" does not in this context necessarily imply a restaurant; "*mihmūnī*" are long luncheons usually hosted at home.
[85] In the novel's present day, notably, the grandmother shockingly gives up this respectability to join the armed revolution. She is sighted in camo in chapter 6. The humor and political thrust of this plot twist nevertheless lies in its contrast to her position as a member of the secular elite, and especially, as a respectable woman.

(Mohebali 2012, 20; my translation). Shadi's brother plays the piano well, but she plays her violin so poorly that she pees her pants (ibid). The scene opens with the maid's inability to pull up the young Shadi's tights because the former has "mistaken the back for the front" (Mohebali 2012, 19). The trappings of femininity don't fit; on Shadi they seem "backwards." This sequence of events foregrounds the significance of feminine respectability as signified by the tights, a form of prescribed covering in the U.S. as much as in Iran, to education and knowledge production: Shadi must be properly and sufficiently girly in order to fulfill the role of cultured child musician.

In the rhythm of this scene, Shadi's failure to play the violin—and the role of proper girl—is accelerated by her mother's failure to act like a respectable wife. The children's playing is twice interrupted by their mother's laughing as she presumably cheats, an elision that, notably, subversively reveals female sexuality by absenting it from the text in dynamics similar to Chughtai's "The Quilt." Though Shadi's mother's adultery is not named, it is hardly ambiguous: "The kitchen door is ajar and Maman's skirt suit shows through the gap. There's a hand around her waist" (Mohebali 2012, 20). This flagrant rejection of social norms constitutes a queer failure in itself. That is, as banal—indeed, as prescribed—as cheating in a "straight" marriage may seem, that a wife and mother not even bother to be secretive about it gestures to a more flamboyant failure in respectability. Shadi's mother is, as modern Persian puts it, in her "husband's home." Scholarly language fails to capture the nuances: to openly cheat in your husband's home "takes balls." The act both reaffirms the patriarchal idea of a female sexuality

that is perceived to be overly active and in need of policing,[86] and, as the application of this idiom suggests, makes the masculine gesture of publicizing the subject's desire and sexual practice.

All this takes place in the disciplining modern feminine attire of a skirt suit, a detail whose ironic humor touches at the act's subversion, but also reveals its ultimate reliance on the terms of feminine respectability it seems to flaunt: Shadi's mother flirts with anti-respectability while remaining shrouded in the cloak of elite secular respectability, the Western suit. She fails to practice respectability in her behavior and demeanor, but she grasps at it nevertheless. The globalized product of the suit stresses the way her "brand" of feminism is just that, a feminism mired in materialism, not unlike the more explicitly branded and corporatized feminisms that are current in the U.S. today, and to which *Don't Worry* in translation speaks.

Shadi's mother's and grandmother's consumerist feminisms[87] thus both describe womanhood in terms of femininity. Rejecting both models of womanhood, Shadi grows up only to "fail" at adulthood as miserably as she failed at the violin, and girlhood. Femininity aside, she refuses the primary marker of both male and female adulthood, marriage. But she also fails at countercultural adulthood: that is, she fails to turn her social critique into productive action.

As aforementioned, Shadi refuses to join the revolutionary fervor, opting instead to literally take a seat on and watch from a fountain sculpture off of Shariati Street (chapter 3) before visiting two different friends' houses where she might find drugs (chapters 4-5 and 7). This anti-political politics might be read in relation to what Halberstam calls "a radical form of masochistic passivity" (131), building on Leo Bersani's conceptualization of an anti-relational

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[86] This is a nod to Fatima Mernissi's famous claim that Islamic society is in many ways organized around controlling women's sexuality, as elaborated in *Beyond the Veil* (1975). See Mernissi, Fatima. *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society*. 1975. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987.

[87] Their status as feminisms is unclear, but inasmuch as they work against patriarchal structures to center matriarchy and female desire, I use the term here.

masochism and “self-shattering masochistic jouissance” (Bersani qtd. in Halberstam 131). The solitude of tripping, which Shadi consistently describes via the metaphor of “a little creature” (*jānivar-i kūchakī*) that crawls up her spine and swims in her stomach and skull (first on Mohebali 2012, 10), instantiates a masochistic jouissance that is at once antisocial and self-shattering; indeed, drugs are meant to take one “out of one’s mind,” as the idiom goes. And yet there is an important distinction between the sort of masochistic passivity that is a part of floating feminist practice and that which defines shadow feminist practice. Whereas Halberstam suggests that such passivity “not only offers up a critique of the organizing logic of agency and subjectivity itself, but that also opts out of certain systems built around a dialectic between colonizer and colonized” (131), floating feminism has no choice but to acknowledge its implication in the systems of power it attempts to evade, including wealth (as elaborated above) and binary gender (elaborated below).

Indeed the consistent mistranslations of Newton’s Laws cited above wage a double critique against both the strictures of respectability idealized by Shadi’s Westernized, upper-crust paternal line and the opposite moralism of Islamic Republican governance outside their doors. The controversial inclusion of a “fourth” Newtonian Law—some refer to the law of gravitation as a fourth law while others claim that only the first three are axiomatic[88]—puts into question the axiomatic status of the whole set, casting a shadow of skepticism on the very idea of a predictable and calculated world. Arguably this scientific target serves as a deep social critique at the national and global levels, one the Persian text is better off making obliquely, given that the Ministry of Culture approves all texts in Iran before publication. Retranslated and mistranslated, the laws (and Laws) by which Shadi lives her life are dynamic and—sometimes, quite literally—

[88] As to the latter, see Newburgh, Ronald. “Why isn't the law of gravitation called Newton's fourth law?” *Physics Education* 36.3 (2001): n.p, doi: https://doi.org/10.1088/0031-9120/36/3/304.

fill-in-the-blank. In chapter 5 Shadi presents an incomplete list of the Laws; trying to find a lighter as she sits down beside her friend Ashkan, who has passed out after purposefully overdosing on opium in a suicide attempt, she states: "Dammit, my lighter's missing. Newton's Second Law: keep your lighter within a half-meter radius at all times. Then there's the Third, and the Fourth…" (Mohebali 2012, 62; my translation). The original Persian contains two sets of ellipses (i.e., "The Third Law:… The Fourth Law:…").[89] Regardless of the precise quantity, the ellipses fill the text with willful silence even as they seem born of laziness or boredom, a tension that is tactical and integral to floating feminism's stealth success. The Laws are themselves then another sort of ellipses: they say what they mean to say by leaving it unsaid.

The anti-political politics of Shadi's floating feminism echo and respond to the shaky ground on which she stands, physically and otherwise. Her embrace of addiction and her refusal to abide by public veiling laws by crossdressing must both be read against the dominant metaphor of the earthquake as a literalization of societal instability. If, as Halberstam suggests, "positive thinking is a North American affliction, 'a mass delusion' that emerges out of a combination of American exceptionalism and a desire to believe that success happens to good people and failure is just a consequence of a bad attitude rather than structural conditions" (3), then Shadi's cynicism (in theory and practice) might be alternately thought of us a product of, and response to, the inadequate conditions of life in the Global South, and in particular, of a heavily sanctioned post-Revolutionary Iran. Shadi's "bad attitude" must be read as both "a consequence" and critique of "structural conditions" in Iran and the Global South, however sheltered she may be from the immediate impacts of those inequalities due to personal wealth. Indeed, the novel's cultural critique takes into account the economic and political limitations that

[89] As a rule, I have tried to minimize ellipses for the sake of translating style: in English they read as amateur, and Mohebali's text was in fact celebrated by the Iranian literary community.

circumscribe life in Iran, whether due to domestic or international pressures, and likely due to both.

Tehran is situated on a fault line, so that the threat of a catastrophic earthquake is, as the colloquialism goes, very real. Any Iranian reader of *Don't Worry* will be reminded of the damaging earthquakes that the southeastern city of Bam in 2003, a reference Shadi's mother makes explicit (Mohebali 2012, 8). The *Encyclopedia Iranica* entry on the Bam disaster depicts a series of events that seemed to have served as Mohebali's blueprint, including foreshocks 14.5 and 7.5 hours before the main shock, which occurred before dawn. The article offers the following summary: "The earthquake, occurring at the early hours of the morning in winter when most people were in bed, resulted in the highest casualty rate and the most profound social impact in the recorded post-1900 history of devastating urban earthquakes in Iran[…], in spite of its moderate magnitude".[90] Dramatizing these events, Mohebali opens the novel in medias res: foreshocks have happened during the night, and continued shocks and aftershocks happen throughout the day. Echoing a common critique, *Encyclopedia Iranica* continues: "[The earthquake] also illustrated the terrible humanitarian and economic consequences of poor natural disaster planning and preparation for such extreme geological events in the wider context of recent catastrophic earthquakes that have devastated different parts of the country[…]."[91] For many inside and outside Iran, the disproportionate impact of the Bam earthquake only highlighted a lack of national infrastructure.

In *Don't Worry* Shadi's expressed critique is more often aimed at her fellow compatriots and inhabitants of Tehran than at the government, as if to claim that materialist culture is as

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[90] "Bam Earthquake." *Encylcopedia Iranica*, online edition, New York, 20 July 2009, https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/bam-earthquake-2003.
[91] "Bam Earthquake" (above).

culpable for perceived social ills as a lack of infrastructure. Both in public and private space, the novel stresses the affective and behavioral antisociality of Tehran society. Even though in the wake of the main shock "nothing's broken, not even a tea glass," in the words of Arash, Shadi's brother (Mohebali 2012, 24; my translation), panic pervades inside and out. Traffic jams and long lines at the ATM (chapter 3) eventually lead to looting and street fights and vigilante policing (chapter 8). This antisociality is linked to a modern materialism that exceeds Shadi's mother's feminized consumerism. In the relatively wealthy neighborhoods of northern Tehran that circumscribe most of Shadi's adventures (i.e., the areas around Tajrish Square and Darakeh Square, and finally the posh Zafariniyeh, where many embassies are located), a lack of resources does not seem to be the issue. Of this the rolodex of foreign cars Shadi mentions—cars that are doubly or triply expensive in Iran due to high import tariffs, not to mention the issue of a weak currency—is evidence enough: Benz, BMW, Toyota Prado, Nissan Patrol, Citroën Xantia, and the list goes on.

Shadi is herself as antisocial as the society she criticizes, an antisociality both enacted and required by her addiction. Floating feminism is like shadow feminisms "[an] antisocial feminism that refuses conventional modes of femininity by refusing to remake, rebuild, or reproduce and that dedicates itself completely and ferociously to the destruction of self and other" (Halberstam 138). This antithetical posture is totalizing: there is little to be gained here—but when one considers the floating feminist's claim that there is little to be gained elsewhere, or anywhere, that may not matter. Likely as shocking in English as it is in Persian, Shadi's initial response to her friend Ashkan's texted suicide note is mockery:

> No! Not today, Ashkan. How many times have I heard you say goodbye? How many times have you thrown back forty valiums, and thrown everyone else into a damn tizzy? You can't stand what anymore, exactly? Why don't you wait for this fucking earthquake to serve you. Tell me, why is it forty every time? Just for once,

> try a hundred, two hundred, maybe more. Man up. (Mohebali 2012, 15; my translation)

The last injunction to "take courage" (*jur'at dāshtih bash*), which I have translated as "man up" to counterbalance the Shadi's diminutive way of referring to her brothers and male friends by the moniker, "boy," makes light of Ashkan's suicide and calls his bluff, suggesting that the repeated suicide attempts are calls for attention. When Shadi does finally leave home—notably, a full chapter and a half later—she takes her time wandering Shariati Street and watching the unfolding chaos (the subject of chapter 3) before finally arriving at Ashkan's apartment (in chapter 4). After inducing Ashkan to vomit because it would be impossible to get him to a hospital to pump his stomach, she fishes through the vomit for the leftover opium (Mohebali 2012, 56-7). Which is to say, even Shadi's caretaking is caught in a web of self-serving behavior.

Shadi's admission of her own mixed motives causes her to suspect her friends of the same. Borne of self-knowledge her cynicism breeds distrust, which then further threatens any possible social bonds. As the day is coming to a close in the final chapter (chapter 9), she wonders whether her best friend, Sara, was hiding more "stuff" (*jins*)[92] than she revealed in a homoerotic scene in which the two smoke opium together. Confiding her doubts in Ashkan's dog, she exclaims, "You don't get it! Addiction isn't about making friends" (Mohebali 2012, 127; my translation). By far her most loyal companion throughout the day, Crassus, the dog, gestures to a non-anthropocentric sociality—and yet the dog's dependence on human care (for food, for example, as shown in the same chapter) puts his agency into question and raises issues of consent that prevent me from elaborating this as on a par with interhuman sociality.[93] Soon

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[92] Note that I have also sometimes translated Shadi's euphemistic use of "*jins*" (stuff) for drugs as "shit," invoking a more colloquial way of referring to drugs in English.

[93] On humans' relationships to domesticated animals, see the following forthcoming work by Jack Halberstam: *Wild Things: the disorder of desire*, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2020.

after, Shadi witnesses a man in a Toyota Prado run straight into a tree. She goes to check it out—but only to search his car for any drugs he may have on him. She finds nothing (ibid., 128-31).

Shadi's—that is, the floating feminist's—solitude pushed to the brink of isolation poses a fundamental question: can there be feminism without solidarity? Thinking across lines of difference such as class, race, and cisgender—or in this case, naturalized *jins* and *jinsīyat*, where those terms might be defined as the imbrication of sex and gender, or what I render "sex-gender"[94]—has arguably been the challenge to which modern and contemporary feminisms have been forced to rise. More fundamentally, thinking across the boundary of self and other, even when the two mirror each other in the aforementioned terms, is what recasts a woman's individual dissatisfaction as a collective cause, refiguring personal pain as a politics—that is, as feminism. What I have called the floating feminist's "anti-political politics" is a politics inasmuch as it stakes a critical interpretation of the world, and furthermore, puts that theory into practice, even if to exit the arena of revolutionary politics (i.e., the more explicitly "political"). But siloed as the floating feminist is, is she a feminist at all?

Lingering in the ruins of the Prado, one can postulate an answer. Turning her criticism of Sara and other "spineless friends" (*rafīq-i nāmard*) against herself (ibid., 131; my translation), Shadi addresses her interior monologue to the man, who has fallen still after a seizure:

> Skinhead's sleeping so sound you'd think he's on a beach in the Canary Islands getting some sun, waiting for the girlfriend to get back from her massage. Well lucky you. Except I do wish I'd found that damn stash. Maybe you're actually as fucking sober as I am? Maybe you also woke up this morning, realized four of your spineless so-called friends had cleaned you out. Found that so un-fucking-believable you got behind the wheel and now you've been running around the city all day trying track down your dealers who have all melted straight into the ground.
>
> Or maybe you're the one who copped your friends' shit and you were shooting up all day before you got behind the wheel to come down here and run

[94] Note that Najmabadi (2014) prefers "sex/gender;" I choose the hyphen to highlight their imbrications.

into a tree to split your bald head open and spill your red red blood on the street and start shaking and foaming at the mouth. (Mohebali 2012, 132; my translation)

That Shadi is so certain that the man is a drug user is indicative not only of the circles she runs in but also of the logic of her relentless critique: a politics of refusal is figured as the only reasonable response to a world as sick as this; anyone with any sense, she figures, must be chasing a high. To this effect, the familiar second person (*tu*) implicates the reader in addition to creating a sense of intimacy between Shadi and the man from whom she is trying to steal. "*Tu*" urges "you" to assume the position of junkie and critic. Then alternately defining the "you" as the person who screwed everyone over and the one who got screwed, the passage stresses the interchangeability of the moralized positions of good and bad friend: "Maybe you also woke up this morning, realized four of your spineless so-called friends had cleaned you out […] *Or* maybe you're the one who copped your friends' shit and you were shooting up all day before you got behind the wheel[…]" (emphasis added). The hypothetical "maybe's" (*shāyad*), a narrative signature employed throughout, highlight such relativism and suggest a dynamic ethics that focuses not on guilt but on compassion.

Via the third figure of "Skinhead," Shadi implicates herself in her critique of her friends, and her friends in her critique of herself. The less emotionally fraught figure of the stranger enables this moment of self-reflection and serves to mediate her links to her friends, shedding light on the network of interdependence that ties them together as addicts and depressives. This antisociality conceives of a community of depressive addicts who cannot take comfort in one another but nevertheless suffer withdrawal and revel in the high alone, together. Indeed opiate use is necessarily a social antisociality in most of the world, given its illegalization: the black market requires maintaining contacts in order to maintain a high. In other words, you must have a few friends, or faux friends, to float.

In Shadi's case, her brother, Arash saves the day, another subversive application of the modern family structure: when she runs into him at the end of the novel, he presses a bottle of "little white pills" into her palm, and the novel ends with her taking them alone, in the relative privacy of the public slopes of the river bank (Mohebali 2012, 145-7)—she has to go down to go up. Resonating with this upside-down logic, Shadi's address to Skinhead, which also acts as an address to herself, detaches moral behavior from character to instead map right and wrong onto subject positions that are defined structurally, according to the embodied and immediate needs of withdrawal: maybe you were screwed, or maybe you got screwed. The mirroring Shadi perceives between herself and others addicts couples her cynicism with compassion. That is, in final form, the antisociality of the floating feminist is undergirded by empathy. A tenuous form of solidarity surfaces, and the floating "feminist" is a feminist after all.

Veiled in Masculinity: Crossdressing as Critique

Shadi's gender play is crucial to her politics. In public Shadi dons a wool skullcap instead of a scarf and an "overcoat" (transliterated into Persian, the term refers more specifically to a field jacket) in lieu of the required manteau (women's shirtdress that is knee-length or longer), thus evading post-Revolutionary hijab law by crossdressing as a man. So successful is this refusal of femininity—or to borrow from Halberstam, this "undoing" of womanhood—that she consistently passes. The floating feminist thus confounds the state's masculinist eye by assuming masculinity. She uses the stuff of binary gender to float between its terms.

Toward the novel's end, when the government has regained control of the city, Shadi tries to join a gender-segregated queue for food in front of a public aid tent. Joining the women's line, she is told by another woman to join the men's: "The men's line is over there" (*saf-i āqāhā*

ūn varih), the woman curtly states (Mohebali 2012, 136). Soon after, when soliciting a cup of tea from a group of old men, Shadi is left to worry about not passing due to her voice. Confronting the old man's "suspicious look," she responds (in literal translation), "Damn this screechy voice, which always gives a person away" (*la'nat bih īn ṣidā-yi jīgh jīghī kih hamīshih ādam rā law mīdahad*), or more colloquially, "This fucking screechy voice always gives a person away" (Mohebali 2012, 138; my translation).[95] In Persian and in English, Shadi's foul mouth breaks the rules of feminine respectability. At this moment in the text, her more literal voice threatens to undermine the masculinity of her stylistic voice. But in the end she passes: "Of course *bābā jān*, come, come," the old man replies, using the familiar term of endearment, "*bābā jān*." Deploying mirroring as a way of conveying affection, "*bābā jān*" (literally, "dad[,] dear") can be used for male or female children. Though currently torn between the translations "child" and "son," I will probably choose the latter: it clarifies the fact that Shadi has passed and signals her admittance to the circle of old men smoking and drinking tea in the park, a space that is culturally coded as a men's space that would be unavailable to any respectable woman.

According to the author, Shadi's masculinity reflects not an identity politics but a feminist politics of "*mardpūshī*," or "man-wearing," that is, crossdressing as a man in protest against compulsory hijab (Mohebali "Skype Conversation"). I will stress that this is a contemporary feminist practice in Iran, not simply a fictional device of Mohebali's making. The Persian "*mardpūsh*," a neologism that literally translates as "man-wearer" resonates with the

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[95] As a translator I favor the latter, arguing that it is in fact the more accurate translation: censorship aside, in the context of Iranian literary norms, Shadi's cursing reads as shockingly vulgar, and an English translation should convey a similar effect. One might also see this as an instantiation of Susan's Bernofsky's advice that one occasionally needs to "turn up the volume" in order to translate style, as I explain in my forthcoming translator's note (Feminist Press, exp. 2021): in fashioning a believable voice for Shadi in English I have occasionally allowed her to be crasser than her original censors permitted—according to conversations I had with Mohebali in Tehran (Mohebali, "In Person Meeting")—specifically, allowing the use of "fuck" in translation. Bernofsky, Susan. "Translation and the Art of Revision." In *Translation: Translators on Their Work and What It Means*, eds. Susan Bernofsky and Esther Allen, Columbia University Press, 2013, pp. 223-233. See 230-31.

term “crossdresser” in that both refer to the subject’s act of clothing herself (i.e., wearing or dressing). But the Persian is gendered: the crossing can only happen in one direction. “Man” is here abstracted and objectified as a garment that can be worn or discarded. Moreover the term, “man-wearer” points to the woman doing the wearing: that is, “man” serves as a sort of paralepsis that conjures woman by denying (or rather, claiming to deny) her.

The subject position of man-wearer[96] as postulated by Shadi’s character undermines one of the foundational premises of binary gender, the idea that a person only gets to choose one. It furthermore delinks private and public gender: the gender a man-wearer expresses in domestic spaces (i.e., woman) is not the gender she is perceived to have on the streets (man). I say “perceived to have” because a man-wearer is a crossdresser and does not make some more essential claim to “man” or manliness. Unlike in conceptualizations of transness—and here I gesture to a range of literature, from Najmabadi’s ethnographic description of “transsexuality” in Iran in *Professing Selves* (2014) to Jack Halberstam’s recent theorization of a more stubbornly indeterminate “trans*” subjectivity in an eponymous monograph[97]—assuming masculinity is for the man-wearer temporary and contextual. And unlike ideas of nonbinary gender, the temporary and contextualize does not unseat an idea of a singularly gendered essential self. Indeed, reading the practice of man-wearing as momentarily reconstituting the man-wearer *as a man* would only make this form of civil disobedience illegible. Instead man-wearing is a form of gender play as embodied political protest rather than as a foundational process of subject formation. “Play” need not privilege the performative over the pragmatic: to the contrary, man-wearing expediently uses

[96] I wish to naturalize this word in English and will render it hereinafter without foreignizing quotation marks or italics.
[97] In a departure from work that considers transness as a crossing, Halberstam employs the asterisk as a sign that “modifies the meaning of transitivity by refusing to situate transition in relation to a destination, a final form, a specific shape, or an established configuration of desire and identity;” see Halberstam, Jack. *Trans*: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability*. Oakland, University of California Press, 2018, p. 4.

crossdressing to serve particular political ends (i.e., evading veiling laws). The queerness of this particular form of gender play lies in its irreverent joy in the face of very real danger, namely, at the risk of violent run-ins with strangers or the state. Though in some way Shadi's man-wearing might be seen to represent a more explicitly political turn in the otherwise anti-political politics of floating feminism, I will also note that given how uncommon the practice is, man-wearing is a rather solitary and isolating form of collective action. Indeed, no other female characters in the book are described as Shadi is.

If one recalls Najmabadi's contention that *jinsīyat* (sex-gender, which she renders as "sex/gender") is an untranslatable that operates in the contemporary Iranian context as "a single concept" that keeps "sexual/gender identification, desire, and practices… linguistically and culturally [bound]" (2014 7-8), then the man-wearer challenges the very idea of *jinsīyat* by multiplying the way one individual can both identify or be identified. Above, when Shadi gets in line for food, she chooses the women's line—perhaps by default—before being pushed out of it; but soon after, she consciously tries to identify as a boy with respect to the old men. Rendering gender dynamic, the man-wearer not only denaturalizes the idea of sex that is inherent to *jinsīyat* but also interrogates gender embodiment. What makes "man," it seems to ask, in body? What are the trappings of masculinity? If Shadi's appearance offers an answer, then it is a conservative one: short hair, baggy clothes, no frills.

The force of the man-wearer's feminist politics lies in her subversion of the post-Revolutionary rules of public space by which a woman is expected to be made visible via some form of veil, however bright or loose or inadequate. The man-wearer thus renders herself invisible. She is a woman hiding in plain sight. The nominalized suffix "*pūsh*" (wearer), as derived from "*pūshīdan*" (to wear), is also related to "*pūshish*," or "covering," another term for

hijab. Given that the *mardpūsh* remains a woman, if an invisible one, her passing as a man counterintuitively constitutes masculinity *as* veiling. The man-wearer cloaks herself in masculinity. In post-Revolutionary Iran, as I will soon elaborate with reference to work by Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi (2002), mandatory public veiling must be read as precisely that which enables coed space: assuming the veil, the logic goes, allows women to maintain their respectability while sharing space with men. The man-wearer's veil of masculinity allows her to traverse public space in ways unavailable to women, embodying that space through a masculine skin, and moreover, allows her to access parts of public space that are not coed but gendered masculine, such as a circle of old men in the park.

In contrast to my elaboration of secular unveiling in the previous chapter, which I describe as a veil that is incorporated into the body and thus becomes a skin that functions as a disciplining apparatus, here the veil of "man"/manliness is worn and shed within the course of a single outing. Indeed, it takes Shadi no more than a few moments to dress before leaving the house: "I put my jacket on and pull my black wool hat down over my eyebrows. I throw my backpack over my shoulder" (Mohebali 2012, 36). And after a few (morbidly funny) last goodbyes to her childhood room, Shadi sets out: "Oh how I wanted to get crushed under your bricks and beams, but you see they won't let that be. Plus I need to get my hands on some shit [*jins*]. God knows, maybe I'll be back… Okay, yallah [*yā ʻAlī*]" (ibid.). The cap and coat thus appear near the end of the same chapter that opened with a memory of tights that "won't" fit, tights that emblematize feminine respectability. Viewed against the tights, these markers of masculinity are figured as anti-femme, as is Shadi's assumption of them. Donning the markers of masculinity, Shadi closes the loop of failed femininity opened in her childhood. The cap and coat are the way out of the pain of feminine embodiment—but the "out" represents distance more so

than a true exit. This movement is stressed by the final word in the quoted passage above: "yallah," or per the original, "*yā ʻAlī*."[98] In the original and in translation, the command not only spurs on Shadi and the plot, but also indicates the ease of the man-wearer's embodiment of man. Masculinity is for the man-wearer a second skin[99]—but a second skin that remains foreign to the self, rather than one that expresses or actualizes an essential self.

This distance from both femininity and masculinity is what enables the man-wearer's double critique. What I have described as an anti-femme stance does not amount to a celebration of masculinity. As a response to, and protest against, mandatory hijab, the man-wearer merely takes *refuge* in masculinity. Just as the refugee understands that there is really no "good" place, only less bad ones, the man-wearer critiques both sides of the gender binary.

To that effect when corner store owner Aqa Gholam ties up several teens or young men called "Pineapple Heads" (due to their haircuts) and threatens them with a machete—most likely, Shadi figures, for "catcalling some girl" (*matalak guftan*)—the scene is depicted as a public performance of hypermasculinity. In Persian Shadi uses the phrase "*ma'rikiyyih Aqa Gholam*" (Mohebali 2012, 115), where the word "*ma'rikih*" signifies a battlefield or theater of war,[100] or more colloquially, something "awesome." To capture the performativity of this double-edged sort of "theater," I have used the idiom "putting on a show" in my translation. This event takes place in chapter 8, as the day winds down but before state authorities have regained control.

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[98] Rather than rendering an untranslatable, I have opted to rend this friendly self-reflexive command into Arabic because the word "yallah" has been more internationalized, whereas the Persian Shia equivalent (which invokes the first Imam, Ali, rather than God, "Allah") is less familiar even to a cosmopolitan reader; that is, given that the untranslated English that peppers the original is lost in English translation, I have broadened the text's multilingualism when the opportunity arises (indeed, "*yā ʻAlī*" could just as accurately be translated as "vamanos").
[99] The reference is of course to Jay Prosser's *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1998).
[100] "*ma'rikih.*" *Amid [Omid] Version 2.0*, compiled by Farzad Rashvand 2018, n.p., iPad application. Accessed 22 July 2020; "*ma'rikih*" *Moin Version 5.0*, compiled by Farzad Rashvand 2018, n.p., iPad application. Accessed 22 July 2020.

Shadi's sarcasm cuts through both Aqa Gholam's performative masculinity and the state that enables it:

> Today's a good day for playing the hero. I feel bad for those boys. No sign of the police, or of Special Forces. They've probably got their hands tied somewhere else. But if it takes them any longer, this lunatic might actually make Pineapple chuck chop.
>
> Everybody's just standing there quietly watching. Cowards. The boys' eyes dart back and forth like sacrificial lambs'. Aqa Gholam sears the air with his machete and curses and half his face goes crooked, on repeat. If he didn't have that ridiculous tic, he would've landed a wife by now and made a man of himself so he could stop fretting about everyone else's chastity. (Mohebali 2012, 115; my translation)

Though Shadi's logic disturbingly relies on state-sanctioned violence to stamp out civilian violence, the call for police also reads as a social and political critique that exposes the failures of the state. Shadi's sympathy for the "boys" betrays her generational loyalties and wont to champion the underdog; at this moment Aqa Gholam wields more power, though he is no more than a corner-store owner (*baqqālī*). Shadi's sympathy, moreover, suggests a partial identification with the boys—even as it contains a critique of what I have hitherto called the "hypermasculinity" of Aqa Gholam show, or more specifically, his *ghayrat*, a historicized and culturally specific form of male jealousy.

In an article published in 2002 that reiterates many of the claims made in the more well-known work, *Refashioning Iran: Orientalism, Occidentalism, and Historiography* (2001), Tavakoli-Targhi elucidates *ghayrat* in terms of the ideas of public space and community that are assumed in the scene above, all of which turn on the modern Iranian concept of *vaṭan*, or homeland. During the Constitutional Revolution (1905-09), the national "imagined community" (to use Benedict Anderson's phrase) came to signify a family of brothers and sisters through a gendered resignification of homeland (*vaṭan*) as motherland (*vaṭan*) (Tavakoli-Targhi, 218). This conceptualization of "male and female citizens as national brothers and sisters" helped redefine

the borders between public (*birūn;* literally, outside) and private (*andarūn*; inside) in order to describe coed public space:

> The hybridization of male and female spaces-which was facilitated with the coming of the Persian printing press, the conjoining of authorial voices of men and women, and the formation of a women-inclusive public sphere-made possible the formation of an imagined national sphere that sanctioned the mixing of 'national sisters and brothers.' (Tavakoli-Targhi, 218).

Stressing yet again the essential role women's literacy played in Iranian modernization and the fashioning of Iranian modernity, this account gestures to similar ideas of respectability-as-(un)veiling that I elaborated in chapter 2 and gesture to above. That is, an imagined community of national brothers and sisters enables women to enter the public sphere and the world of letters—indeed, to enter the public sphere *as* the world of letters, and vice-versa—without compromising their feminine respectability. Conceptualizing of women as sisters, furthermore, acts as another sort of veil, but one assumed by men. Thinking—and crucially, looking—at women as sisters renders the female stranger desexualized. The gaze itself is thus disciplined. Like women's secular unveiling,[101] a movement that predates the pre-Revolutionary period I focused on in the last chapter—indeed, Princess Taj al-Saltaneh famously unveiled and wrote about it in her 1914 memoirs[102]—the masculine veil instituted by the modern concept of *vaṭan*-as-family functions as a disciplinary apparatus incorporated into the mind of the modern citizen subject. But in its masculine iteration, veiling does not surface as a physical skin; it is embodied only affectively and behaviorally.

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[101] One must note that non-secular unveiling has nineteenth-century roots, as attributed most famously to Babi poet Ṭāhirih Qurrat al-'Ayn controversial and public unveiling.

[102] Al-Saltaneh, Taj. *Khatterat-e Taj al-Saltaneh*. 1914. Nashr-e Tarikh-e Iran, n.d; Vanzan, Anna and Amin Neshati, trans. *Taj al-Saltana Crowning Anguish: Memoirs of a Persian Princess From the Harem to Modernity*. Washington, D.C., Mage Publishers, 2003. See especially 286-292 of the English, in a chapter titled "Liberating Women."

The male modern citizen subject was responsible not only for veiling his own gaze but also for upkeeping the veil of respectability that is required for secular unveiling to function. *Ghayrat* organizes such "upkeep" by disciplining those who have failed to discipline themselves, as in Aqa Gholam's punishment of the boys for catcalling. Masculinity as defined by *ghayrat* is thus at the center of veiling and public as co-constituted formations. Tavakoli-Targhi elucidates the concept's modern roots:

> *Ghayrat* was another highly contested familial concept nationalized during the Constitutional Revolution. Traditionally linked to manliness, *ghayrat* can be rendered as zealotry, propriety, and jealousy—or, more accurately, as a condensation of all three terms. The evocation of this emotive concept assumed an immediate threat to familial honor and integrity. Individuals were expected to demonstrate outer zeal for the protection of familial honor. Similarly, at a time when the honor of the motherland was compromised, her national children were expected to take necessary actions to restore her honor and integrity. Lack of such initiatives was viewed as a sign of unmanliness. (Tavakoli-Targhi, 228-9)

Though Tavakoli-Targhi stresses the ways national issues (i.e., those in which "the honor of the motherland [is] compromised") are affectively embodied via *ghayrat* to elicit a personalized response (such as supporting a tobacco boycott, or going to war, etc.), reading this passage alongside *Don't Worry* elucidates the ways *ghayrat* constructs society more generally, and urban space especially, as a space where both personal and national honor are consistently at stake.

For Aqa Gholam, the "girls" (*dukhtarhā*) whom the Pineapple Heads catcall signify as sisters he feels compelled to protect. The girls' "honor and integrity" are compromised by the Pineapple Heads' suggestive remarks (*matalak*); indeed, the dual significance of "*dukhtarhā*" as "girls" and "virgins" only highlights the fact that what is ultimately at stake is the girls' "chastity" (*nāmūs*), as Shadi makes explicit when casting the display as Aqa Gholam's "fretting about everyone else's chastity" above (above). Traversing the routes Tavakoli-Targhi describes in opposite direction, whereby an affront to "the honor of the motherland" constitutes an affront

to "her national children," here this rather "ordinary" harassment serves as an affront to the nation, for it compromises the sanctity of the coed public sphere. Indeed, given the ways hijab is figured as a protector against sexual harassment in post-Revolutionary Iranian state discourse,[103] the catcalling describes a failure in female and male veiling; it suggests improper veiling on the part of the girls and the boys' failure to veil their gaze.

The invocation of chastity, moreover, suggests a contemporary iteration of *ghayrat* that is not only familial but also sexual: the logic of siblinghood is thus overlaid with that of heterosexual marriage. In the snide remark I have quoted again in abbreviated form above, Shadi satirizes the hypermasculinity constructed by *ghayrat* by questioning Aqa Gholam's masculinity: "If he didn't have that ridiculous tic, he would've landed a wife by now and made a man of himself (*ādam shudih būd*) so he could stop fretting about everyone else's chastity" (above). Casting the girls as surrogate wives as well as national sisters, Aqa Gholam's vigilantism conceives of a national "family" composed of husbands and wives, brothers and sisters, and fathers and daughters, where the pairings are crisscrossed and overlapping. Indeed marriage, as discussed with reference to Najmabadi in the previous chapter, serves as a rite of passage in modern and contemporary Iranian culture (Najmabadi 2014, 7), as in much of the world.

Shadi's remark above employs the same Persian idiom that I describe in chapter 1 (in the context of Taraghi's "The Little Friend") as having civilizing and moralistic undertones: in "*ādam shudan*"—literally, "to become human"—humanism comes burdened with ideas of respectability. Furthermore, as a reference to the religious figure, Adam, "*ādam*" genders the human, like the use of "man" as a universalized subject in English. In trying to convey the

[103] See, for example, the billboards and posters collected in the following *Buzzfeed* article, though the translations should not be entirely trusted: Copyranter. "Iranian Posters Warn Against Sexual Harassment." *Buzzfeed*, 24 April 2013, https://www.buzzfeed.com/copyranter/iranian-hijab-propaganda-billboards.

gendering of this particular form of humanism and civility—that is, in trying to culturally translate *ghayrat*—I have in my translation rendered the phrase "*ādam shudan*" as applied to Aqa Gholam as "making a man of himself" (note that in translating Taraghi, I alternatively rendered it as "to become somebody"). Relatedly, one might consider the idea of "hypermasculinity" as an incomplete translation of *ghayrat* that enables, rather than effaces, the specificity of the latter for the Anglophone reader: the former serves as a peg that then allows the contemporary reader of *Don't Worry* in English to attend to the specific formation of masculinity made available, and critiqued, by this text in Persian.

In contending that Aqa Gholam wouldn't be as concerned with "other peoples' women" if only he had his own—as the patriarchal formulation goes—Shadi alleges that Aqa Gholam acts out of personal frustration, rather than out of any moral or national sense of justice. The sarcastic deployment of "*ādam shudan*" makes a mockery of the very project of masculinity as defined by the "protection" (read: possession) of women and their "chastity." Via satire, Shadi denaturalizes the very concepts of chastity and respectability, and masculinity and femininity, that she invokes. She also makes a mockery of marriage, which in her contrarian estimation serves less as an entryway into respectability and full citizenship as it does as a possible vent for Aqa Gholam's excess energy and implied sexual frustration. The floating feminist thus reads the covalent projects of national siblinghood and heterosexuality as a sham, a mask for personal interests of the crudest, most (allegdely) anti-respectable sort. As the butt of the joke, respectability politics look like a joke. The "girls," incidentally, are a casualty in this strident social critique: they are better left to catcalling. Or perhaps the suggestion is that the girls themselves did not mind the attention. Either way, the man-wearer's heart goes out to the "boys" (*pisarhā*).

We Belong Together: (Girly Boys + (Boyish Girls) + Girly Girls)

Boys figure in this text both as Shadi's desexualized peers—that is, as "the boys," a group to which she plays at belonging—and as objects of her desire. Shadi's desires are directed at male and female characters, constructing a narrative "I" who exists in complicated relation to heterosexual national citizenship, both realizing that subjectivity and blurring its clean delimitations. Waking up in the Sadaf Mall revolutionary headquarters after being bludgeoned by the authorities, Shadi decides to continue making her way uptown to her friend Sara's place. Someone offers her a ride on his motorcycle:

> "Where are you trying to go? I'll give you ride."
> I smile.
> "In this deadlock? The car won't make it a centimeter."
> "Girl, who said anything about a car?"
> The line's delivered by a pretty ponytail leaning against a gorgeous green Komex motorcycle. Now this one's something else. I'll go to the end of the world with this one. (Mohebali 2012, 79-80; my translation)

Shadi's attraction to Ponytail, a male character, is at least in part due to his gender-bending exceptionalism: as she says, "this one's something else." Later this mix of masculinity and femininity is intertwined with Ponytail's mix of high and low, namely, his "last-stop accent that clashes with his clean look" (below), where the adjective "last-stop" (*tahkhaṭṭī*) suggests that he lives on the outskirts of Tehran; indeed, the juxtaposition of roughness and tidiness there might itself be read as a braiding of masculinity and femininity whereby gender and class are read through one another. As a feminine male, Ponytail reflects an inverse image of Shadi as a masculine female, just as his veiled lower-class status inversely matches her veiled upper-class status. In short, he complements her.

In translation I have tried to bring out Ponytail's combination of masculinity—expressed most clearly by his cool ride—and femininity, as indicated above by his long hair. Indeed, Ponytail's long, evidently unveiled, hair serves both as an indicator of his femininity and as the key to understanding his male gender (Persian does not have gendered pronouns): given the public setting, an unveiled woman such as a man-wearer would almost assuredly choose a more masculine haircut to ease her passing—namely, something like Shadi's buzzcut. I have then chosen to translate the adjective "*khushgil*," which can varyingly mean "pretty," "attractive," or "handsome," as the more feminine but not necessarily female choice of the three. "Pretty" has the added benefit of translating the music of the line: the consonance of "pretty ponytail" remaps the consonance contained in "*mūdumasbī*" (ponytail) and "*mīgūyad*" (says; here, "delivers") onto two different words in the same clause without sounding forced. This technique of remapping the poetry of the prose, I argue, is itself a sort of queer translation: because a one-to-one transfer of form is often impossible, the translator must recreate a sense of poetry where it "makes sense" (i.e., sonically, and significantly) in the target language.

Shadi's attraction to Ponytail flirts with gender norms while remaining loyal to heterosexual essentialism. Above Ponytail's use of "girl" (*dukhtar*) as a term of endearment establishes a level of intimacy between the two. In colloquial Persian today, this term is traded between the genders, but in my own anecdotal experience, a generation ago (i.e., my mother's generation) it operated perhaps more similarly to the way "girl" functions in Black vernacular English: that is, it inscribed a linguistic women's space. In contemporary American culture, "girl" has now been adopted or appropriated by other subcultures that celebrate or trade on femininity (i.e., young women, gay culture, etc.). In the text at hand I will limit myself to a more bounded reading of this term that pays attention to its placement in the scene. "Girl" here appears

as the first of a series of intimate and flirtatious interactions and thus as the invitation to an erotic encounter—most immediately, the implicit invitation to mount the motorcycle, a sexualized act in and of itself and a transgression of the rules of post-Revolutionary coed public space, whereby a man and woman who are strangers must not physically come into contact with one another. Above the term also prefigures Shadi's explicit (in narrative) confession of her desire. "Girl" braids the couple's heterosexual complementarity as boy and girl with the homoerotics of a sisterhood achieved through Ponytail's "something else," that is, his feminine gender play. This is as true in the original as it is in translation, regardless of the usual coed use of the term: the homoerotics depend on Ponytail's gender-bending appearance and mannerism, even if absented in contemporary use of the term. When Ponytail calls Shadi "girl," he is thus at once a "girl" calling another girl and a boy catcalling a girl, where catcalling is to render a woman visible as an object of desire. The coupling of the masculine female and the feminine male constitutes a gender-queer rendering of a not-queer sexuality: heteroerotics are ushered in via homoerotics. That is, heteroerotics work through homoerotics in order to be made visible.

The heterosexuality of the scene also serves as the mechanism by which gender play is contrasted with transgenderism so as to demean and police the latter:

> "So are you some transvestite or something?"
> Look who's talking.
> "At your service," I say. "Think of me as your big sister."
> "Well then what's with the hat?"
> "Just for the hell of it."
> "It can't just be for the hell of it?"
> He's got this way of clucking in a last-stop accent that clashes with his clean look, and that smirk creeping on his lips isn't going anywhere. (Mohebali 2012, 80; my translation)

In a common colloquial construction used to vaguely gesture to something, Ponytail couples one word with a nonsense rhyme: the slang term "*tiransfir*," a transliteration of "transfer," is coupled

with "*miransfir*" and pluralized via the suffix "*[h]ā*" to render "*tiransfir miransfirā*." I have translated the offensive phrase as "some transvestite or something" to convey Ponytail's derisive flippancy. I chose not to increase the blow by translating "*tiransfir*" as "trannie." Though trading in levels of bigotry is surely a dangerous game, I argue that entirely erasing the anti-trans politics of Ponytail's comment would only constitute another sort of violence: such problematic characters as Ponytail must be confronted in translation as in the original.

The exchange between Shadi and Ponytail invests in an idea of the essential self that echoes dominant—and in some sense, confirming—contemporary Iranian conceptualizations of transgenderism vis-à-vis Islamic fiqh, yet insists on erecting the trans person as Other, despite the shared basis of an essential self on which both the trans and non-trans subject are pitched. Per what Najmabadi calls "trans-friendly Islamic jurisprudential arguments" (2014, 194), transsexuality realigns a trans person's body and soul, an idea that Najambadi treats extensively via explication of her conversations with Hujjat al-Islam Karimi-nia in Qum (see especially 178 and 182). This misalignment is then the mistake that sex-disambiguation surgery, which is officially sanctioned in Iran, seeks to correct: "Such medical technologies are welcomed as technologies of transforming doubt and unknowability into certainty" (Najmabadi 2014, 178). "Doubt" in this case is produced by the un-disambiguated body, not the trans-person's gender as perceived by the self and those around him/her/them. That is, the soul's truth cannot ultimately be occluded, even by the wrong body. Ponytail's teasing "doubt" about Shadi's "girl[ness]" (or femaleness) after he has just called her "girl" *performs* misrecognition in order to reaffirm a lack of gender ambiguity. The flirtatious antagonism between the two eroticizes the space created between the transgender Other and the self whose born *jins* (sex-gender) matches his/her/their

true *jins* as located in the soul or self-perception. That space allows articulation of gender play without compromising this particular form of cisgender status, *jins* that is in proper alignment.

And yet Shadi's response—which must ultimately be read as a willful silence—contains the seed of a critique of gender essentialism, a critique that cannot be wholly celebrated given its invocation to serve an anti-trans politics. Shadi refuses the teleology Ponytail seeks: "Just for the hell of it" (*hamīn ṭawrī alakī*) she says, employing a Persian idiom that turns on the word "*alakī*," or "fake." The text thus evades the threatened exposure of Shadi's man-wearing politics while also paraliptically citing it—by claiming nothing really is going on, the text indicates that something may be. Here Shadi invokes of a discourse of authenticity only to work against it, embracing the fake rather than valuing the real. Indeed, the man-wearer daily assumes an incomplete and costumed (i.e., "fake") masculinity over her "real" femininity, as if to draw attention to the constructed nature of gender. But inasmuch as Shadi's comment also implicitly contrasts her own "fake" gender play with "real" transgenderism or transsexuality (where both terms and the ideologies they suggest are operative in contemporary Iran), it further secures the man-wearer's default femaleness at the expense of the trans subject: transness—that is, a permanent bodily crossing that signifies not a transfer between genders but rather realizes the truth of the soul's sex-gender, so that the person does not cross where the body does—is coded as undesirable, while the comparatively "fake" and impermanent gender play is celebrated. Between the two characters, the text provides models of FtM and MtF play that trade on the transgenderism they deny and deride.

At the same time, their crisscrossed vectors of femininity produce a twisted, faux female homoerotics that functions to at once surface and occlude heterosexuality. Shadi's first response to the "accusation" of transsexuality is a rhetorical question without the question mark, "Who's

talking to whom" (*kī bih kī mīguyad*), which I have then translated as "Look who's talking." Drawing attention to Ponytail's own—evidently un-self-conscious—gender play, Shadi lets the reader in on the laugh, staging a moment of intimacy between narrator and reader that is energized by the erotic tension in the text. The response she vocalizes within the narrative sarcastically deploys a formal politesse—notably, one that genders the speaker male, used only sarcastically or jokingly by women speakers—which I have translated as "at your service" (*man mukhliṣ-i shuma*) then renders the relationship between the two as siblinghood, at once brother and sister, as if to hide Shadi's interest by raising the specter of incest, and brother and brother, thus simultaneously imbuing the text with a hint of male homoeroticism. Though I have rendered the Persian as "*Think of me as* your big sister" to make the proposition sound more natural in English, the original posits this relationship via a contracted linking verb, "*I'm* your older sister" (*man ābjī tūnam*), lending weight to the brother-sister formulation. But, in a further twist, given Ponytail's femininity, the duo also signifies as two sisters. In short, where the scene lands it to render heterosexual courtship in terms of women's homoerotics. In this case a flirtation with the incest taboo only renders the exchange more transgressive, that is, sexier: this form of faux sisterhood capitalizes on the erotics of *dūstī*, or erotic female friendship and love as I have elaborated it earlier in this study (in chapter 1). As in Goli Taraghi's "The Little Friend," the scene at hand makes clear the ways, in Gopinath's words, "discourses of women's sexuality are mobilized in the service of imperial, national, and communal projects" (132). In *Don't Worry* two gender players deploy faux and bona fide female sexualities to clarify and amplify their heterosexual flirtation.

In contrast to "girl," which helps tensions between the two blossom at the beginning of the ride, the address "boy" (*pisar*) forecloses any further intimacy as the chapter comes to a

close. When they arrive uptown, Ponytail continues to come onto Shadi by drawing out their goodbye. Shadi reaffirms her attraction to him but ultimately grows impatient. Speaking to herself, she first muses, “I know he’s pretty. [And] today’s a good day for loving,” before asserting the opposite: “Boy, today’s no day for loving!” (Mohebali 2012, 88; my translation). Shadi’s tone is chastising and almost motherly, deflating the erotic tension that has built up throughout the course of the ride and the chapter. That is to say, her exasperation desexualizes “sisterly,” reinscribing it within the familial and arresting its associations with female homoerotic sisterhood. Indeed Shadi uses “boy” elsewhere to refer to uneroticized figures in the text, namely, her brothers; her old friend, Ashkan; and Ashkan’s dog, Crassus. Given that it appears in the context of Shadi’s insistence on fending the “boy” off, the term cannot be read as positing a faux male homoeroticism between them, or really much eroticism at all. For in the face of an actualized heterosexuality, Shadi quite literally walks away: “Today’s no day for loving.” In other words, the ambivalently gendered and sexualized subject posited here as an “I” simply doesn’t have time for that.

A seemingly more straightforward form of women’s homoeroticism surfaces in the following chapter, in Shadi’s relationship to her childhood friend, Sara. Shadi goes to Sara’s looking for her boyfriend Siamak, who is also one of Shadi’s dealers. But Siamak has already taken off—for good, Shadi knows, though Sara is seemingly in denial (Mohebali 2012, 94-5). Shadi sarcastically dismisses her friend’s concern:

> “In that case he’ll turn up in no time. He can’t survive more than a couple hours without you.”
>
> She gives me a look. As if to say, ‘You mean it’s just another habit?’ Or, “Shadi, *et tu?*’
>
> Seriously, me too? I’m your childhood friend, I’m your friend from grade school, I’m… why can’t I say it to you? Say what? What *can* I tell you, you ass? (Mohebali 2012, 94; my translation)

Like the figure of the quilt (*lihāf*) elaborated in the introduction, this ellipsis occupies the text with a silence that resists visibility. Gopinath writes that "[f]emale homoerotic pleasure within Chughtai's text quite simply exceeds the enclosed space beneath the quilt, just as it does the structures of visibility and visuality that the text references" (151). Here a similar dynamic exists whereby the ellipsis refuses to define Shadi's relationship to Sara. Identitarian terms such as "lesbian" (a term also used by some in Iran, in transliterated from the English) constitute "structures of visibility" that are arguably as forceful (or sticky) as the web of colonial law that tried to trap Chughtai's text. The ellipsis in *Don't Worry* resists not only the loan word "lesbian" or the Persianate "*hamjinsbāz*" (same-sex player) but also, more fundamentally, any singular way of describing this self's relationship to a beloved other. As the subsequent interactions between the two women demonstrate, Shadi is a friend to Sara but also an admirer and surrogate beloved. The women play with the roles of lover-beloved and friends. This play is made possible by their failure to fulfill either, or both. Translating the accusation "*tu chirā*" (why you?) as an abbreviated version of "*et tu, Brutus?*," I have used this moment as another opportunity for compensating for the multilingualism and high culture that is lost in translating Shadi's repeated use of untranslated English elsewhere in the text into—alas—English; like the Latin at hand, Shadi's English is a sign of her upper-class education. The Latin phrase highlights Shadi's betrayal: unable or unwilling to take Sara's heterosexual romantic relationship seriously, Shadi fails in her prescribed role of supportive female friend. This queer failure opens up possibilities for defining their relationship otherwise.

Prefigured by Ponytail's flirtations with femininity, *dūstī* surfaces here between the two women as an untranslatable whose embodied experience exceeds language. *Dūstī* as I have defined it is a form of female friendship and erotic love that does not concern itself with

distinguishing between the two. The ellipsis neither hides nor reveals but remains stubbornly indeterminate. What Gopinath has in the context of Chughtai called the narrator's "failure to disclose" is here similarly "merely incidental; *there is no secret that can possibly be revealed, spoken, or withheld* given the continuous eruptions of multiple desires that permeate the text" (Gopinath 151, my emphasis). Shadi's and Sara's desires are complex and evolving throughout the course of the passage, and not teleologically organized: the high that eventually brings them together also allows them to drift apart, thus constituting a cynical conception of consummation if any.

In the U.S. or other Western contexts, notably, the English translation surfaces queerness precisely in the failure of the term "lesbianism:" from an identitarian perspective, the untranslatability and dynamism contained in the ellipsis is what is difficult to grasp. Moreover, in any Western, and especially, European context, the ellipsis then enacts an added layer of friction by frustrating the Orientalist fantasy of the lesbian harem. Considering the erotic exchange between Sara and Shadi takes place in a posh house that is teasingly likened to a defunct harem—Shadi calls the house Sara has inherited the Kolah Farangi Emirate, one of Nasiruddin Shah's former harem complexes, and consistently describes her grandmother as the 19th-century Shah's "harem favorite" (*sūgulī*) (Mohebali 2012, 96)—this is a pretty good joke. Even if inadvertently, the postcolonial text thus resists its depoliticization via Global South-to-North translation. But then non-Western Anglophone contexts such as India or Nigeria (to name only two) might receive the English translation differently, enabling Global South-South readings that posit still more elaborations of queerness—and perhaps, threatening other mistranslations.

In the original Persephone context, female homoerotics are key to signaling heterosexuality and conversely the specter of heterosexuality is key to signaling female

homoerotic desire. Given Shadi's attraction to Ponytail cannot be disentangled from his femininity, femininity surfaces as the constant in Shadi's desires, whether located in male or female subjects, and female homoeroticism serves as the grounds on which both heteroerotics and female friendship is staged. On the other hand, masculinity and conspicuously absented heterosexuality are crucial to signaling the homoerotic tension between the two women, as in the iteration of *dūstī* I previous elaborated in Taraghi's "The Little Friend."

Aside from Shadi's masculine appearance as a man-wearer, masculinity manifests in this text in a form of female *ghayrat*. Above Shadi's sarcasm sets up Siamak as a rival for Sara's love. After alleging that "[h]e can't survive more than a couple hours without you," Shadi more explicitly puts Siamak's manhood into question when Sara reiterates her worry: "He's a grown man," Shadi responds, "can't he take care of himself? *He* should be worried about *you*, leaving you here all alone" (Mohebali 2012, 95; my translation). By suggesting that Siamak is not doing enough to protect Sara, Shadi expresses a form of *ghayrat*, that cocktail of "zealotry, propriety, and jealousy" described by Tavakoli-Targhi above (228-9). Her comment reinscribes Sara as a woman who needs protection, someone who should not have been "le[ft…] here all alone."

Soon after Shadi further questions Siamak's lack of *ghayrat*, and thus, his "manliness" (Tavakoli-Targhi, 228-9). Shifting the betrayal from herself to Siamak, she suggests that while the latter has left Sara to suffer her fate, he himself is basking in luxury: "The Siamak I know is definitely over at one of his thousands of aunties' or girl cousins', reclining under a warm quilt by a coal korsi in a tribal tent, sucking on an opium pacifier" (Mohebali 2012, 96; my translation). In specifying Siamak's paternal aunts and female cousins in addition to

anachronistic objects like a "*kursī*" (a kind of stove heater) and "tribal tent,"[104] Shadi couples her emasculation of Siamak with a critique of masculinity writ large. She points out the gendered labor that underpins a culture of patriarchy and produces one of its paradoxes, namely, that men are babies, an accusation the "opium pacifier" (*pistūnak-i vāfūr*) emphasizes. (The double entendre in Persian is subtler than the joke in translation: "*pistūnak*" is commonly used for the tip of an opium pipe and for a child's pacifier.) Ultimately, it seems, Shadi get caught in her own web of binary gender play: she sets herself up as the more manly man as she criticizes masculine culture. But Sara calls a spade a spade, stating simply, "You're jealous" (ibid., 96; my translation); and Shadi can only concur, "Yeah, I am" (ibid.; my translation). The erotic tension between the women is made clear.

The absent Siamak—or "real" male lover—thus serves as a mechanism for rendering the two women's homoeroticism visible. That is, the figure of the male beloved draws attention to the figure of the female friend-lover, or "*dūst*." Silently addressing Sara, Shadi refers to Sara and Siamak's bedroom as "you and your beloved's temple" (Mohebali 2012, 96; my translation). With Siamak gone, Shadi is free to topple the idol of the male beloved (*ma'shūq*) and take his place: "Now that Siamak's gone, I can lay my head on your lap and let loose on the ratty carpeting" (ibid.). A ghosted—and "ghosting," to borrow from contemporary American slang—male operates as the mediating term through which women's homoerotics not only passes but crystallizes into physical touch and embodied pleasure. In "The Quilt," the character of Begum Jān resorts to female same-sex practice in the face of the thwarted heterosexuality produced by

[104] In Persian the "tribe" is regionally specified to a tribe from the Kerman and Balochistan regions, the "*īlātī*" (Mohebali 2012, 96); I have offered the more generalized "tribal" in translation as a stealth gloss for the unfamiliar reader.

her husband's same-sex attraction.[105] Analogously in *Don't Worry*, failed heterosexuality is what enables actualized female pleasure. And yet the fact that it is not Shadi's own failure is significant: hetero-coupling signifies as a cultural norm but not necessarily as one of Shadi's own thwarted desires. Recall that in the case of Ponytail, she was the one to cut their time short.

Indeed Shadi's heterosexuality is assumed but far from determined. Consider the following exchange with Sara about why she's single:

> Her fingers crawl through my spiky hair.
> "Why don't you fall in love?"
> "I tried, didn't work out."
> She frowns.
> "Tried how?"
> "I sent twenty-two loveydovey texts to all the boys I know in the span of a single day."
> "And, well?"
> "Well!"
> "The result?"
> "Two fuck-off's, three forget-about-it's, three no-response, and three phone numbers for a therapist." (Mohebali 2012, 101; my translation)

In a dynamic that is all too familiar, talk of men in this scene brings two heterosexual (or "heterosexual") women together. But surprisingly the conversation serves as an excuse for embodied female erotic pleasure, as manifested by the intimate gesture of Sara's "fingers crawl[ing] through [Shadi's] spiky hair," rather than as the site of a frustrated homoeroticism. Shadi's halfhearted response casts her assumed heterosexuality into question: as Sara's questions make clear, Shadi doesn't seem to have "tried" all that hard to "fall in love" with any "boys" (*pisarhā*). This is not to say that she is homosexual or bisexual, etc., but rather to highlight the

[105] As Indrani Mitra writes, "The Begum turns to Rabbo in response to a frustrated heterosexuality, whereas male homosexuality is presented as its own end in the text" (316)—though I will note that it may be a mistranslation to read "homosexuality" per se into the text. See Mitra, Indrani. "'There is no sin in our love': Homoerotic Desire in the Stories of Two Muslim Women Writers." *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 29.2 (2010): 311-329. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.com/stable/41337281. See 316.

difficulty of ascribing Shadi with any particular sexuality: the text refuses to identify her, resisting the (Persian or Anglophone) reader's surveying eye.

What can be said is that her love for Sara dances on the page, not least of all in the form of a vulgar vocabulary that eschews "girl" (*dukhtar*) in favor of much less respectable terms. Above I cite Shadi's vulgar vernacular as an instantiation of an anti-respectability politics that rejects feminine docility. More specifically, in Shadi's friendship with Sara curse words such as "*kis̱āfat* " (literally, "filth") and "*'avażī*" (a nominalized form of "wrong") or lighter put-downs like "*āshghāl-i man*" (literally, "my trash," which Sara uses to refer to Shadi) serve as ironic terms of endearment that create warmth and intimacy. This is also true of Shadi's relationship to her younger brother, Arash, but the fact that the first two slurs are often feminized and sexualized in Persian—much like "bitch" in English—means that they inscribe a particularly fraught sort of intimacy when used among women. Throughout the novel I often translate both "*kis̱āfat* " and "*'avażī*" as "bitch" in order to take advantage of that term's analogous circulation in various American vernaculars today, put to use by a range of feminine subjects like straight women, gay men, and those who identify as queer to resist the terms of a society that both punishes women for not being feminine enough punishes femininity (i.e., femme-ness).[106] But such reclaimed terms are also traded negatively among women. In the chapter at hand, Shadi refers to Sara's female housemate as "*īn 'avażī*," or "this bitch" (Mohebali 2012, 102; my translation), thereby reinscribing the devaluation of femininity the reclaimed usage of the term resists.

Complexly in Sara's usage the term "*kis̱āfat*" deflects Shadi's "jealousy" and admiring gaze while sustaining intimacy. Sara calls Shadi "*kis̱āfat*" twice, once with a smile (Mohebali

[106] It may be worth noting that I employ other translations when the particular valences of "bitch" in contemporary slang would be misleading. In trying to recreate Arash's voice in dialogue, for example, I have leaned more heavily on "dirty" as a translation for "*kis̱āfat*:" Arash is depicted as neither feminine nor effeminate, so that "bitch" seemed to "queer" his character, giving him more "queer capital" than he deserves.

2012, 94) and another time in playful response to Shadi's glee about Siamak being gone: "Bitch! Like I've never lit a pipe for you?" (Mohebali 2012, 96; my translation). The response stresses the ambivalences inherent to *dūstī*: the exclamatory "Bitch!" (*kisāfat!*) de-eroticizes their relations while the subsequent sentence figures Shadi as Sara's beloved—here, the one for whom Sara lights the opium pipe—without renouncing Siamak. For Sara, the female homoeroticism of their relationship need not compete with her heterosexual relationship, or for that matter, with her heterosexuality. The lack of definition in *dūstī* enables the two women's competing interpretations of the relationship: each places a different stress on friendship or love. For Shadi, this may be as frustrating as it is freeing.

Such imbrications between homoerotics with heterosexuality, I argue, exceed vocabularies of Iranian gender and sexuality as elaborated hitherto: there is no clean delineation of *jinsīyat*, or concurrence between sex-gender and sexuality, to be found here. Instead sexuality seems to operate quite independently of sex-gender for some subjects and not for others. Female sexuality is available for deployment by variously gendered couplings while heterosexuality can serve only to make female homoerotics visible. It is, moreover, as if the male beloved were in this late contemporary moment (2008) again taken for granted in Persian literature—but heterosexualized, and more so to be memorialized than actualized. Given natural disaster and pending societal collapse, the absent heterosexual male beloved proves himself weak and self-serving. Truth be told, the female *dūst* is not ultimately much better: when Sara falls asleep from the high, Shadi leaves, just like Siamak. But for now, in this brief pause in the daylong journey the novel recounts, she is present. And between the jabs and the cursing, she actively cares for Sara, soothing and protecting her when the tremors start.

Certified Sexuality, Translatable Womanhood, and Transnational Sisterhood

> I didn't think I would work on this story as a film. I remember that when Juliette was in Tehran, was my guest in Tehran, one day I told her this story, a true story, which actually doesn't at all resemble the story we see in the film. Then when the story was over, she thought it seemed really suitable as [the subject of] a film. Until then I had never thought that it had the capacity of… ah, being adapted into a film. I wrote the script more for Juliette, and based on Juliette.
>
> - Abbas Kiarostami in *Let's See Copia Conforme* speaking in Persian; my translation

> First when I came to Iran, one night he told me the story of this woman in Italy and this writer. He said it was *his* story that happened to him. And it took him about 45 minutes telling, in perfect English… ah, ah, about details, about the story [sic]. So what Abbas is saying about how things came about, or you know, that he wrote for me, or [that] he already lived this, or he invented it, or [that] it came out of our imagination or our presence together—it's very hard to say, because everything's true, and everything is invented of course.
>
> - Juliette Binoche in English

Introduction: Origin Stories

The conceit for Abbas Kiarostami's *Copie Conforme* (Certified Copy, 2010) is deceivingly simple: a man and woman pretend to be husband and wife. But as will soon become clear, trusting any given version of the story becomes increasingly difficult as the film goes on: were the two pretending to be strangers in the first part or are they pretending to be married in the second? As others have also noted,[107] both stories represent an elaborate erotic game. A third explanation that interprets the film as the seamless coining of two shorts with the same actors is at least as unsatisfactory: James refers to his nine o'clock train in each part I and part II, suggesting that if the two parts are meant to be viewed as incongruous, then they represent

[107] Abbott 114 (full citation in Works Cited).

competing versions of the same story that coexist in the surrealist[108] world of the film. Yet even here the film remains mired in questions of fact versus fiction, and thus in issues of performance: is life as we know it no more than a series of—undoubtedly mediocre—performances?

It then seems fitting that a documentary about the making of *Certified Copy*—a work ostensibly meant to let viewers peek "behind the screen" of this beguiling film—only conjures another smoke screen, layering still more questions of authenticity onto those in which we find ourselves entangled. In the excerpted interviews from *Let's See Copia Conforme* transcribed above, Kiarostami and Juliette Binoche, the star of *Certified Copy*, present conflicting origin stories for the feature film. Kiarostami claims Binoche as muse; Binoche suggests Kiarostami's sole authorship, whether of fact or fiction. "He said it was *his* story that happened to him," she states, where the stress on "his" almost turns the assertion into an interrogative. Was the seed for the film in fact "his story"? The real recedes even further if one considers Kiarostami's claim that the original "true story […] doesn't *at all* resemble (*hīch shabāhatī nādarih*) the story we see in the film" (my emphasis). Semblance (*shabāhat*) and verisimilitude are entangled in ways that further obscure fact and fiction. Was his story history, or was it another fiction? But as Binoche points out, these questions may be impossible to answer, for "everything's true, and everything is invented of course." "Of course," indeed—the real cannot be taken for granted.

Upon its 2010 release *Certified Copy* may have seemed to be Kiarostami's most conventional film yet,[109] especially given the featuring of an international start such as Juliette

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[108] As critic Ben Kenigsberg writes in the New York Times, Kiarostami's use of Jean-Claude Carrière to play the old French husband in the piazza in the statue scene described below is a nod to the famous surrealist filmmaker Luis Buñuel; Carrière worked with Buñuel as a screenwriter. (Kenigsberg, Ben. "What Makes Kiarostami a Modern Master? Start Here." *The New York Times*, 6 August 2020, p. C10, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/06/movies/abbas-kiarostami-iran.html.

[109] As film critic Jonathan Rosenbaum wrote in November 2010, "It's almost as if he has set out to imitate and emulate the conventions of commercial narrative cinema while steadily undermining and deconstructing them in various ways." See Rosenbaum, Jonathan. "Watching Kiarostami Films At Home." *Jonathan Rosenbaum.net*, 25

Binoche. But in fact, as the observations above make clear, the work is representative of the director's tendency to play on the genres of documentary and feature film—a play that is then, I argue, utilized to push at the idea of gender performance taken quite literally.

Indeed classifying *Certified Copy* has proven just as difficult for popular reviewers, academics, and writers of commercial copy alike. Perhaps the only dedicated scholarly analysis of the film to have been published turns on asking whether *Certified Copy* is a comedy of remarriage according to foundational film theorist Stanley Cavell's definition of the Hollywood genre,[110] while a popular American streaming service lists the film under "Romance." "Juliette Binoche," the film's short description reads, "stars in this enchanting romantic drama about two strangers who fall in love on one luxurious day in gorgeous Tuscany."[111] If anything, however, *Certified Copy* is about falling *out* of love.

This anti-romance features as lead characters Elle (played by Juliette Binoche), a French female antique seller and single mother who is living in Tuscany, caught between her own pursuits and a preteen son, and James Miller (played by baritone and amateur actor William Shimell), a British author who is in Italy for a book talk. The film thus opens with a conventional lecture theorizing the relationship between copies and originals that arguably rehashes the famous Benjaminian thesis on aura,[112] from which Elle is pulled away by her impatient and hungry son (a plot device that has the added benefit of sparing us the entirety of the talk). The next day the two meet in Elle's lair of an antique shop, and when James demands fresh air, they

November 2010, https://www.jonathanrosenbaum.net/2010/11/watching-kiarostami-films-at-home/. This essay is also reprinted in Saeed-Vafa and Rosenbaum 2018 (see Works Cited).

[110] Abbott 2016 (see Works Cited).

[111] "Certified Copy." *Hulu*, https://www.hulu.com/movie/certified-copy-75d6b1ca-bd3d-4586-98f1-9312bc0a914b. Accessed 2 June 2019.

[112] In the little of the talk we do witness, author James Miller asserts that "that the copy itself has worth in that it leads us to the original and in this way certifies its value" (00:06:23). Note that throughout I have cited film quotes according to the minute marker at the end of the pertinent scene.

take a drive that figures intellectual debate as sexual banter. A more senior café proprietress mistakes them for a married couple, marking a turning point in the film. Elle and James then act like an estranged married couple for the remainder of the film as they explore picturesque Lucignano, carrying their "performance" out so artfully that one begins to wonder whether this or the film's first part represents their "true story."

Yet here too there is a snag: Elle starts crying and refers to a time when she "wasn't well" *before* James takes the call and the proprietress mistakes him for Elle's husband, as if the two did share a past. Thus though the scene at the café is treated by the characters as a narrative turn, there is no singular moment or clean seam between the two parts. All that can be said for certain is that nothing is certain. A mise en abyme of "actors acting," where that refers both to the profession and to individual agency, complicates and threatens to unravel the narrative—and perhaps to life as we know it.

Writing about the director in 1998, Laura Mulvey ventures that "one could almost say that Kiarostami's cinema is 'about' curiosity, directly engaging the spectator's desire to know, decipher and understand" (25). Identifying an "uncertainty principle" in Kiarostami's films, Mulvey describes *A Taste of Cherry* (1997), the film that established the director's international reputation, in terms that are equally applicable to *Certified Copy* (2010), the first of only a few late-career[113] Kiarostami films that are set outside of Iran and not in Persian (namely, the film employs English, French, and Italian). *A Taste of Cherry* opens with the protagonist Mr. Badei trying to hire a day laborer for a yet unknown task, which it turns out, is to bury him the next day

[113] Kiarostami died in Paris in 2016 due to complications after surgery. He had not been informed of the severity of his cancer, so that the death was especially untimely. See Dehghan, Saeed Kamali. "Abbas Kiarostami death sparks debate on patient's right to be informed in Iran." *The Guardian*, 14 July 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/film/2016/jul/14/abbas-kiarostami-film-maker-death-sparks-debate-patient-right-be-informed-iran.

after he commits suicide. But even after this reveal, Mulvey explains, "the spectator is still not secure, not sure of the status of the events taking place on the screen, and is forced to search for clues that might bring some kind of certainty" (Mulvey 25). The riddle of *Certified Copy*, which philosopher Mathew Abbott has aptly referred to as the film's "interpretative crisis," is arguably even more impossible to solve. As Abbott writes of the two salient interpretations—namely, that the pair is a married couple who acts like strangers in part I, or rather a couple of strangers who act like they're married in part II—"[t]here is significant evidence to support the former reading[…] Yet there is at least as much evidence for the second[…]" (114). Characteristically Kiarostami's oeuvre and Iranian New Wave cinema in general, *Certified Copy* thus poses an epistemological inquiry into the limits of knowledge and knowability via a meditation on cinema, and on representation more generally.

My aim in the current chapter is to mine the ways the film's play with ideas of performance and representation conceptualize gender and sexuality, and in particular, female subjectivity as achieved through modern companionate marriage and thus institutionalized heterosexuality. At the most basic level of naming—or lack thereof—*Certified Copy* invites a reading of the female protagonist "Elle" as a more generalized "modern woman:" "Elle," a pun on the French pronoun *elle*/she, is not named once in the film; the name only appears in the credits. But Elle/"she" is more "Iranian" than it would first seem based on Binoche's embodiment of the role. I argue that despite an ostensible European setting, this film does not represent a break from Kiarostami's engagement with an Iranian mise en scene: to the contrary it sustains a directorial turn to post-Revolutionary gender politics initiated in *Dah* (Ten, 2002) and *Shirin* (2008). Via a comparative reading of what I loosely label Kiarostami's "women's trilogy" and an engagement with the well-known 1998 documentary *Divorce, Iranian Style* by Kim

Longinotto and Ziba Mir-Hosseini, I draw out the resonances between the vision of womanhood offered in *Certified Copy* and debates on the so-called woman question in the Khatami period in Iran (1997-2005).

In section one, “Women’s Space and Multilingualism: A Good Man Is Hard to Find,” I briefly lay the groundwork for these arguments by analyzing multilingualism in this film, arguing that Italian operates as a third space in relation to French and English that enables a women’s space in which womanhood is defined in relation to wifehood, and also critiqued as such. I toggle to *Ten* and *Divorce, Iranian Style* in section two, “Translating Iranian Feminisms, or A Good Man is Easier to Find the Second Time Around,” arguing that *Certified Copy* uses a transnational European setting to translate post-Revolutionary Reformist debates on the so-called “woman question” and thus to universalize a brand of post-Revolutionary Iranian feminist critique that cannot definitively be categorized as “secular” or “Islamic”—and indeed, by drawing on the commonalities between the two, belies that very distinction. In section three, “Playing at Being Sisters: The Story of Vexed Transnational Sisterhood” I read *Certified Copy* against its predecessor, *Shirin*, in which Binoche also appears, to explore the ways the idea of performance helps deconstruct an essentialized womanhood that is also reiterated. As the only actress of a mostly female cast of 111[114] who is not Iranian, Binoche, I claim, serves to lend an Iranian milieu to transnational feminist critique in *Shirin*; in *Certified Copy* on the other hand, Elle both reestablishes such lines of transnational sisterhood and is frustrated in her attempts to do so.

With the benefit of the previous chapters as a grounding that allows me to, so to speak, start from queerness, I thus turn more explicitly to an examination of heterosexuality—and

[114] This number is provided by Saeed-Vafa (Saeed-Vafa and Rosenbaum 134).

perhaps even, a gesture to global bourgeois "straightness." I read this non-Persian-language and seemingly "non-Iranian" film as furthering a project of modernization via heteronormativization that I have tracked throughout the study. Indeed this project remains remarkably consistent through the pre- and post-Revolutionary periods, though iterated distinctly at various moments and sometimes even through conflicting ideologies—which is to say, the so-called rupture of the Revolution may not quite be one.

Marriage both assumes and reifies binary gender, not despite but because of the increasingly global institutionalization of gay marriage in contexts not limited to "the West."[115] *Certified Copy* approaches this issue from, so to speak, the center of the center, interrogating gender norms in the context of respectable heterosexual coupling and marriage. Indeed on the surface queerness seems conspicuously absent in this 2010 film: there is little of the anti-respectability politics that varyingly animated both Mahshid Amirshahi's 1970 short story and Mahsa Mohebali's 2008 novel, or of the gender play that defined both Mohebali's *Don't Worry* and Goli Taraghi's 1991-2 short story. And yet for Elle respectability is a costume that does and does not fit, and the film more broadly conceives of normative gender and heterosexuality themselves as performance, if not quite play. As the epigraphs demonstrate, for Kiarostami, questioning representation serves as a springboard for questioning reality itself, both on and off screen. In at least three of his later works, I suggest, constructing and deconstructing "woman" as a coherent category was a crucial part of that larger story.

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[115] As many have pointed out, the sanctification of gayness (to be distinguished from queerness) buttresses family norms at the heart of binary gender (See, for starters, chapter four of Jack Halberstam's *Gaga Feminism: Sex, Gender and the End of Normal* [Boston: Beacon Press, 2012]). Legalized gay marriage is not on the docket in organized activism in Iran but the transnationalism of these debates and, moreover, increasingly widespread local and national discourses about forms of queerness and LGBTQ politics—including "gayness" (transliterated as such)—loosely held under the umbrella of *digarbāshī* (literally, "otherness"), means that such debates are not entirely absent from conversation either.

Women's Space and Multilingualism: A Good Man Is Hard to Find

Certified Copy starts with a simple tableau: a long take of a table with two mics, two empty chairs, and two clean water glasses awaiting its interlocutors (see figure 1). As if a joke about coupledom, everything is organized in twos. Education forms the backdrop of the film, at first quite literally in the form of a walled-up fireplace complete with Latin inscription that dates the lecture hall to 1636-7. When the action starts, it makes a more obvious joke: author James Miller is late to his own lecture. Viewers listen along with the intradiegetic audience, drawing us in in a way that flirts with breaking the fourth wall, another directorial signature. True to the simultaneously playful and philosophical tenor that characterizes Kiarostami's oeuvre, in Miller's middling intellectualism—the lecture hall is far from full—we find multiple claims that the film will treat as hypotheses and test throughout. In art, we are thus told, "there are no fixed points of reference, there are no immutable truths to fall back on" (4:25). The contention that there are no absolute truths has become such a clichéd truism that one wonders whether to take it seriously—the paradox being, of course, that if one does, one falls to contradiction.

This interest in truth is complicated by the film's foregrounded multilingualism and attendant issues of translation. In the first several minutes French credits are followed by a shot of a book jacket that translates the film title into Italian—that is, the book is eponymous with the film—as Latin lingers in the background, and soon the talk takes place in English. In part I Elle and James converse in English, with Elle acting as translator and tour guide, but in part II a single conversation is often shared (or rather, split) between James and Elle with each speaking his or her native tongue. English thus exists in tense relationship with French as an (or "the") eclipsed lingua franca in the transnationalism of a pre-Brexit European Union.

Indeed within the more limited cadre of this intra-European heterosexual coupling, multilingualism serves as much to divide as it does to unite. When the two sit down to order a glass of wine in part II, James tries to complain in French about the wine being "corky" by erroneously using the word "*bouché*" (blocked) rather than "*bouchonné*" (corky); Elle corrects him with a laugh. As soon as he switches to English, the situation escalates into a fight, as if to suggest that they had lost all common ground, or desire for it. James sarcastically remarks on Elle's expectation that he defer to her, the French one, in matters of food and wine. The commonplace critique suggests anxieties around a common European identity and Britain's place in relation to the Continent, a debate not settled but aggravated by Brexit six years after the film's 2010 release. A biographical reading of Binoche's and Shimell's possible levels of fluency would be insufficient. Instead the tense code switching between male and female leads here exceeds a prefiguration of a pending political conflict to suggest something more fundamental about the gendered politics of global languages: in the scheme of imperial languages, the inferior position of yesterday's lingua franca is coded as generically feminine—that is, hers/Elle's—while today's is masculinized.

In fact the duo is first "mistaken"—or revealed to be—a married couple in the context of a conversation that trades on the metaphor of "speaking one's language" as a shorthand for romantic compatibility. In this crucial scene that puts into effect the film's narrative turn, or perhaps poses the question of one, James exists to take a call and thereby leaves Elle free to talk to the proprietress in Italian (see figure 2), reproduced below in a transcription of the English subtitles that I have revised for accuracy:[116]

> PROPRIETRESS: His coffee's going cold.
> ELLE: That's how he is.

[116] This transcription represents an edited version of the English subtitles.

P: He's a good husband though.
E: Sorry?
P: He's a good husband though.
E: And how do you know?
P: I can tell.
[Pause.]
P: Where do you come from Signora?
E: Me? I'm from France.
P: Where did you learn Italian?
E: I've lived in Italy for five years.
P: Where?
E: First in Florence, now in Arezzo.
P: And how come you speak English together?
[Pause.]
E: *He*'s English.
P: And he doesn't speak your language?
E: No, no.
P: Nor Italian?
E: No.
P: He only speaks his own language.
E: Yes yes.
P: But you can speak his. Good for you.
E: Yes. He's not into [interested in] languages. Really he's not into [interested in] anything. Except himself and his job.
P: Oh but that's good. A man must love his job.
E: And what about us women?
P: It keeps them busy. And we live our lives.
E: I didn't get married to live alone. I'd like to live my life with my husband.
[Pause.]
E: Is a good husband too much to ask for?

Triangulating English and French, Italian serves as a third space that allows for the women's intimacy. The corner of the café bounded by Elle's table and the bar behind which the woman stands is thus set apart both from the exterior courtyard in which James paces while taking his call and the larger, coed public café. A linguistic women's space thus arises as protected from both James, the "husband" in question, who seemingly does not know Italian with any level of

fluency in part I,[117] and—simply by effect of being out of earshot—two old Italian men who sit across the room. The figure of the third—i.e., the third tongue, the third space—thus offers an opportunity for homosocialization that is then available for feminization by virtue of being inscribed by an (even) lesser, more squarely displaced imperial tongue.

Monolingualism, and the inflexibility it suggests, is figured in this exchange as a male prerogative. When the proprietress asks why the couple speaks English together, Elle responds after a pause, "*He*'s English," emphasizing the pronoun "he" (*lui*). Not unlike Binoche's emphasis on "*his* story" in the documentary, *Let's See Copia Conforme*, the stress serves to interrogate the assertion, in this case questioning its common sense and pointing out the patriarchal logic therein: why must they defer to his language and not hers? The proprietress draws out this gendered double standard: "He only speaks his own language[…] But you can speak his. Good for you." Multilingualism is thus figured as a skill but also as a reinscription of the wife's secondary status and relative lack of power. Elle then links monolingualism with a masculinized narcissism: "He's not into [interested in] languages. [Really h]e's not into [interested in] anything. Except himself and his job." The feminine space sustained between the two women by Italian offers an opportunity for a critique of normative heterosexuality and masculinity as institutionalized by modern marriage.

Significantly this critique stops short of questioning the institution of heterosexuality itself. The proprietress suggests that a "busy" husband is a good thing, enabling "us" women to "live our lives," offering one—arguably, vaguely premodern—model of heterosexuality institutionalized by marriage, while Elle insists on the modern ideal of companionate marriage: "I didn't get married to live alone. I'd like to live my life with my husband." Considering that the

[117] Though James offers some prepared remarks in Italian thanking his hosts at the beginning of the talk, he repeatedly asks Elle to translate dialogue in Italian in part I, suggesting that his Italian is weak at best.

conversation between the women does not stop there (indeed I return to it below), the comment does not interrupt but rather further secures the intimacy between the two women. The women's space-as-third space both requires and helps reproduce the heterosexual coupling it triangulates. As indicated by the logic that produced the mistake in the first place, whereby any man and woman alone must be a romantic couple, heterosexual marriage is assumed to be the only possible way of organizing a woman's life. "Is a good husband too much to ask for?" Elle ruefully asks, driving home that "a good husband" is the only thing "woman" as conceptualized here—i.e., white, educated, upper middle-class, and in the singular—*can* ask for.

Refiguring Elle's single motherhood in terms of marriage—albeit an estranged one that seems on the brink of collapse—serves as a correction of her independence as a do-it-all woman hitherto, at once a mother, entrepreneur, and intellectual. Elle wears long sleeves and pants to the talk but a silk dress on the day trip, as if the eroticization of her relationship to James required a more "traditional" femininity.

The narrative turn then recasts the desirability of an attractive middle-aged woman within familiar terms of feminine respectability, turning an erotic date between two strangers into a forced outing between a bickering husband and wife. If acting like a bickering husband and wife *is* an erotic date between strangers, then the situation only further highlights the centrality of feminine respectability to realizing this form of womanhood: immediately taking on the role the café proprietress has assigned her, Elle is all too ready to see herself as the unsatisfied wife. Assuming respectability—rather than relinquishing it, as in most fantasies, not to mention as in the case of Amrishahi's protagonist in chapter two—carries an erotic charge.

On the other hand, if part I represents the acting and part II the "real" story, then the respectability of marriage nevertheless serves as the soil in which the foreplay of acting like

strangers is made to flourish. Indeed as I will soon explicate, Elle eroticizes her body in part II via tropes of feminine beauty (i.e., red lipstick, exposed cleavage) and sexual availability (i.e., reclining on a bed). Either way, the feminine homosocialization at the café thus makes heteroerotics possible, while marriage figures as the site of a frustrated but conspicuous heteroeroticism—that is, as the only respectable site for hetero-sex and practiced heterosexuality.

Translating Iranian Feminisms, or A Good Man is Easier to Find the Second Time Around

A film more often acknowledged by audiences inside and outside Iran as one that concerns itself with so-called "women's issues," Kiarostami's *Ten* (2002) is composed of ten takes that follow a central protagonist in her car as she drives her son, her sister, and various other passengers including an old woman on her way to a shrine, a sex worker,[118] and (twice) a young woman leaving the shrine, around Tehran. Most of the conversations explicitly revolve around the status of women in contemporary Iran, where in the protagonist's estimation women "don't have the right to live" (*haqq-i ḥayāt*), a phrase that might equally be translated as "the right to exist."

Taking up the criticism often levied against Kiarostami inside and outside Iran that his work ignores female interiority, Blake Atwood considers *Ten* a turning point in the director's career that moves beyond "includ[ing] the representation of women" to engaging a critical Islamic Reformist discourse on women's rights (118). Locating the Iranian Reform movement in the presidency of Mohammad Khatami (1997 - 2005), Atwood cites Khatami's shift away from "the previously held notion that men, and their government in particular, must guard women," a

[118] Unlike in chapter two, I read the discourse here as more akin to contemporary conceptualization of "sex work." The woman is unapologetic and criticizes marriage as a type of "wholesale" (*'umd furūshī*) sex work as opposed to the "retail" (*farīd furūshī*) in which she is involved.

view that evidently solicited an official endorsement from popular feminist magazine *Zanān* (Women) during his presidential campaign (118-19). Instead Khatami suggested that the government should protect, in his own words, women's "rights and capabilities" (Khatami's qtd. in Atwood 118). This popular Reformist idea reiterates an Islamic feminist position that society should take advantage of women's special capacity to nurture, so that if women work outside the home, it should be in moderation: that is, women play an "imperative role in the home, in the family structure, and within private spaces" (Atwood 119).

While Atwood too sympathetically describes the position as "an explicit paradox" that moves Khatami to "wonder whether [women's] special place in the home would marginalize them in society" (119), I will note that naturalizing feminine domesticity functions (in Iran and elsewhere) as a *mechanism* for marginalizing women in a "society" thus described as a men's space that must be reworked to become coed[119]—which is to say, marginalization is the goal not the problem. Much of post-Revolutionary Iranian cinema has conventionally favored exterior spaces, in part in the name of realism given that women do not veil before family (or men who are *mahram*[120]) according to Islamic hijab but female characters would have to be depicted as veiled at home according to post-Revolutionary law (discussed further below). The entirety of *Ten*, for example, takes place in a car. By exploring the limitations placed on women and

[119] Lest this be perceived as a singularly "Islamic" dynamic, one is reminded of Rey Chow's account of the incest taboo, whose genealogy she traces from Freud's 1913 book *Totem and Taboo* through the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss, Marcel Mauss, Gayle Rubin in her chapter, "The Politics of Admittance: Female Sexual Agency, Miscegenation, and the Formation of Community in Frantz Fanon" (originally 1998); Chow writes: "We must note that in this metacommunity building, this solidarity forming through interpretation, women are never being erased but always given a specific, corollary place: *while not exactly admitted, neither are they exactly refused admission*" (Chow 63).

[120] Also defined in chapter two, a *mahram* is as a male relative such as a husband, father, or brother in front of whom a woman is not obliged to cover. Note that in this context the stranger (i.e., non-family member) is defined according to marriageability and the incest taboo: those men who are *mahram* to a woman are those whom she cannot marry (i.e., engage in a sexual relationship). Thus hijab itself is figured in part as a system of organizing society by structuring the bounds of the family, which in turn relies on regulating sex and sexuality.

womanhood as staged in the public sphere, works like *Ten* reveal the contours and limits of the essentialized form of womanhood to which even a Reformist interpretation of post-Revolutionary logic adheres; in short, they reveal the politics behind the "paradox."

Atwood locates *Ten*'s critical engagement with Reformist politics primarily in the film's critique of the modesty laws that regulate cinema in Iran: "Kiarostami's *10* responds to this heightened discourse about women. It critiques the status of women during Khatami's presidency, and more specifically it challenges the policies that regulated the representation of women onscreen" (119). These "policies" are codified by the Ministry of Culture in the form of *aḥkām-i nigāh*, or "Rules of Looking,"[121] instituted in 1982-3 that govern sexuality in cinema by policing dress, veiling, and interactions between the genders, ensuring their proper modesty. Analyzing a scene in take #2 in which a woman unveils to reveal a shaved head, Atwood describes viewers as voyeurs who "watch as Kiarostami and the actress unexpectedly and unapologetically violate the law" (120). The film "underscores the covalence of open discourse about women's rights on the one hand and the contradictions of the laws of modesty that determine the very shape of women onscreen on the other" (Atwood 119).

In my reading, this scene and the film more broadly in fact stage an immanent critique of modesty and the Rules of Looking by adhering to them, not by breaking them. The woman's unveiling must be viewed as a rejection of femininity that momentarily reinscribes her outside the bounds of womanhood as defined by sexual desirability. In this scene a woman whom we have already seen in take #5, where she appears in a loose hijab that mirrors the protagonist's

[121] Both Atwood and Negar Mottahedeh alternatively translate "*aḥkām-i nigāh*" as "the commandments for looking." Though the word *aḥkām* is indeed also used in Persian to refer to the "Ten Commandments" (as the phrase "commandments for looking invokes in English), *aḥkām* is more common in contemporary Persian than "commandments" and regularly used in the singular (*hukm*) to refer to a judge's "ruling," and thus to modern law. Translating it as "Commandments" thus strikes me as unnecessarily foreignizing and risks an Orientalist Islamicization.

and burgundy lipstick, appears with a "proper" hijab that does not show any of her hair. In take #5 she discusses praying for her long-term boyfriend to agree to marriage; later in take #2 (the film counts down from 10) he has disagreed and the couple has broken up. When asked about the increased modesty, the woman loosens her scarf to reveal her bare scalp. She asks, "Do I look truly terrible?", employing a word (*vaḥshatnāk*) that like "terrible" is derived from an embodied form of fear (or terror, *vaḥshat*) and thus suggests the monstrous.

As the body part that distinguishes feminine veiling from masculine forms of veiling such as covering the legs or arms, hair is a burdened signifier. The buzzcut calls the woman's femininity, and thus "her" very womanhood, into question. It also precludes her sexual desirability, thus rendering veiling redundant in much the same way contemporary Iranian Islamic culture considers old women to be released from the requirement of veiling. The woman states that she has stopped crying since she cut her hair, thus further suggesting that the buzzcut has pulled her out of normative femininity and into a different sort of gendered embodiment that is closer to masculinity. As in the practice of man-wearing (*mardpūshī*) described in the previous chapter (but to different ends), the buzzcut thus operates *as* a veil. Rather than "unexpectedly and unapologetically violate the law," this scene satirizes the law by "queering" it, following its spirit but not its letter. That the protagonist states that the buzzcut "suits [the woman]" (*bihit miyād*) only highlights the haircut's gender and sexual transgression: the buzzcut inherently desexualizes her and she must be reinstated in the circle of feminine attraction by a peer/"sister."

With these observations in mind, I would like to turn to the resonances between the Khatami era debates on the status of women that Atwood describes and reflections on womanhood made in *Certified Copy*; my contention, as stated in the introduction, is that the

latter movie in fact continues a conversation started in *Ten*. Consider the rest of the conversation between Elle and the café proprietress, picking up from Elle's last lines quoted above:

> ELLE: I didn't get married to live alone. I'd like to live my life with my husband.
> [Pause.]
> E: Is a good husband too much to ask for?
> PROPRIETRESS: Our lives can't be all that bad if all we have to complain about is our husbands working too hard. You see, when there's not another woman, we see their job as our rival.
> E: Yes, but we also work, but with moderation. No?
> P: Moderation is our choice, whereas they can't help it. For them, not working is like not breathing: impossible!
> E: I never asked my husband to stop.
> P: Of course not! How could you? The world would simply stop. But we put the breaks on.
> E: My sister keeps encouraging her lazy husband to work.
> P: There are exceptions.
> E: Don't you think there should be a happy balance in everything?
> P: Ideally, yes. But the ideal doesn't exist.
> [MALE VOICE:] Bring us some wine.
> P: Coming. It'd be stupid of us to ruin our lives in the name of an ideal. (in Italian with English subtitles, my revisions)

Much like the conception of an already-masculine "society" described above, men are credited with making "the world go round" (the inverse of the proprietress's contention that "the world simply stop" without them). Elle's corresponding call for "moderation" echoes that of Iranian Reformists like Khatami but extends the value to men as well as women, reminding each of their domestic obligations. She advocates for "a happy balance" in the name of a successful marriage and family values and criticizes James as a husband and father for being only interested "in himself and his job."

In the strident critique, *Between Warrior Brother and Veiled Sister: Islamic Fundamentalism and the Politics of Patriarchy in Iran* (2005), Minoo Moallem suggests that both dominant feminisms and fundamentalism share an investment in an essentialized

womanhood. Defining feminism and fundamentalism as transnational projects that extend from the "West" to the "Middle East," Moallem points to the way "many feminists assume culturalist positions that are informed by fundamentalism and depend on the idea of an essentialized, nurturing femininity, often associated with a glorious matriarchal past" (164-65). She writes of what she labels "Western egalitarian feminism"—that is, the sort of transnational feminism represented by Kate Millett in chapter two, which was current in Iran in the 1950's to 70's, not least of all through the efforts of the Women's Organization of Iran—and so-called "Islamic fundamentalism," "[t]he signifier of 'woman' remains central in both discourses, defining the boundaries of modern/traditional, secular/religious, free/unfree, and civilized/barbaric" (163). For Moallem (this brand of dominant) feminism and fundamentalism are both quintessentially modern projects:

> Fundamentalists and feminists share preoccupations characteristic of modernity—the insistence on man's participation in the political community, the importance of consciousness, agency, responsibility, and choice, and the inclusion of women as equal participants in the political sphere. In this sense both grapple with problems of modernity, one by attempting to create absolute values and the other by trying to resolve the tension between equality and difference. (173)

Moallem's critique helps explain the resonances between Atwood's elaboration of Kiarostami's Islamic Reformist cinema and essentialized womanhood as figured in *Certified Copy*, whether the latter is viewed as a European or Iranian film: Elle's attempt "to resolve the tension between equality and difference" reinvests in the same "idea of an essentialized, nurturing femininity" shared by both feminism and fundamentalism, where the former might be variously defined as religious or secular (as I demonstrate in more detail below). Elle questions the "absolute values" of a regime of gender and sexuality that defines feminine respectability in terms of marriage but simultaneously refuses to honor female desires within marriage—and yet by seeking resolution

within the terms that produce her dissatisfaction (i.e., marriage), Elle reproduces the idea that a woman must be defined primarily as a wife and mother.

In the conversation with the café proprietress, marriage is the only option. This is as much the case for the (almost Islamic) feminism the proprietress represents, which is comfortable with a strict differentiation of roles—or as Moallem would have it, with a fundamentalist production of difference—and for that Elle represents, which bristles against the inequity between these roles but does not attempt to do away with them altogether. Each of these two ostensibly secular feminisms invests in the definition of womanhood according to the institutions of wifehood and motherhood. Figured simultaneously as a peer (i.e., a fellow married woman) and a wise elder in a cross between the sisterly and maternal—indeed one might even thus theorize the aunt as archetype—the proprietress warns Elle against chasing after an ideal: "But the ideal doesn't exist," she responds to Elle's injunction for "a happy balance in everything." As in both feminism and fundamentalism per Moallem's description, she thus adopts a "position [that] encourage[s] women to take steps to transform their outlook and consciousness for the better in order to lead happy lives" (174). The proprietress, in short, advises that Elle change her attitude, because the realities of womanhood as wifehood won't.

Kiarostami quotes the same line in a 2011 interview to offer it as the film's truth, that is, moral: "if you do find a good copy, grab it and stick with it and don't go after the original because you won't find it[…] as the bartender in the film says, *'L'ideale non esiste*.'"[122] That is, if the original is true romance, then the film advocates for settling. Indeed *Certified Copy* seems to reiterate the pragmatic politics of marriage espoused both by *Ten* and by the documentary *Divorce, Iranian Style* (1998) (to be addressed shortly), in which marriage appears as the only—

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[122] Cutler, Aaron and Abbas Kiarostami. "Certifying the Copy: An Interview with Abbas Kiarostami." *Cinéaste* 36.2 (2011): 12-15. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.com/stable/41690997.

and rather unromantic—context through which women might signify as subjects. (Indeed the film is strewn with images of married couples, including a number of brides.) When Elle continues to complain of James' inattention to his family, the proprietress puts it plainly: "He makes you a married woman. That's what counts." Elle seemingly takes the advice to heart. In attempting to woo her husband at a hotel in the final scene, *elle*/she (i.e., the wife, the woman) is the one who has the right idea, and it is James (the man) who has yet to learn.

Elle's consistent critique of James' absence as a husband and father is the same critique levied by one of the divorcées depicted in Kim Longinotto and Ziba Mir-Hosseini's *Divorce, Iranian Style* as a primary reason for her marital dissatisfaction. Lauded for its intimate access to the Iranian legal system—an access that was, according to Mir-Hosseini, only possible because of the relative openness of the Khatami's administration[123]—*Divorce, Iranian Style* is a documentary of a busy divorce court in central Tehran. There Maryam, a lower middle-class woman who is eventually forced to give up custody of her children due to her remarriage, contrasts her second husband's willingness to share time and laughter with his family with her first husband's focus on work to the point of neglect:

> He'd go to work and all he cared about was money. The only thing that was important to him was money, the only thing he valued was money. A wife and children had no value for him. He'd just say, let me find something for them to eat. But food doesn't make a life for a woman or child. A woman want[s] kindness and affection and feeling, both from her kids and her husband. My [current] spouse too when he comes [home]—what does he want from his wife, affection of course[…] (my translation)

Despite differences in class and nationality—not to mention their distinct secular and Islamic contexts—Maryam and Elle's critiques are uncannily similar. Both couple a husband's financial

[123] See Mir-Hosseini, Ziba. "The Making of Divorce Iranian Style." *ISIM International Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World* (ISIM) Newsletter 2 (1999): 17.

need to provide with an affective responsibility to care, and both deem the former insufficient. Womanhood seems to blossom only in the soil of conjugal and familial affection: as Maryam says "[a] woman want[s] kindness and affection and feeling, both from her kids and from her husband;" or according to Elle, "a good husband" lives alongside his wife and child. "Family values"[124] that privilege the sanctity of the nuclear family and the domestic sphere figure here as transnational and transcultural, investing in an essentialized womanhood that is typified by the roles of wife and mother, roles that speak to her capacities and her needs.

"My father chose (*pasand kard*) it," Maryam says of her first, arranged marriage contracted by her father at age 14, using the same verb (*pasand kardan*) used by brides and grooms consenting to marriage and thus stressing the extent to which her own choice was curbed by her father: he cleanly replaced her place in arranging a match that was to his liking. Maryam then attributes her growing discontent with the marriage as an awakening to the world. "In Tehran a person's eyes and ears are opened," she says, later repeating the same idiomatic phrase to suggest how "ignorant" she had been—indeed, the subtitles translate the phrase when employed in the negative (i.e., "my eyes and ears were closed") simply as "I was ignorant." In Maryam's telling, her second, "love marriage" figures as a product of urban migration tied to a larger story of personal progress, a narrative that is common in teleological accounts of modernization such as that historically pursued top-down in Iran.

As Moallem writes of the way many feminisms call for women's self-determination via an attitude change as opposed to calling for structural social change (a critique I have drawn out above via the café proprietress), the perceived "goal" in these feminist projects "is to become an individual" (174). In her own accounting Maryam seems to have achieved this via her second

[124] Indeed the phrase is used in the subtitles in *Divorce, Iranian Style* to translate Maryam's complimentary descriptions of her second husband.

marriage. Individuation is thus not opposed to legal and emotional bonds with men for Maryam's feminism, which seeks to manipulate the social and state institutions around her—including marriage, and the court—to her benefit but, for whatever reason, does not or cannot imagine breaking away from them or breaking them. In defending herself against Mrs. Maher's charges that she knew she would have to give up custody to gain her divorce in the first place, and moreover that at the time she willingly relinquished custody—the same judge had granted Maryam's divorce half a year prior, so that Mrs. Maher was privy to those arguments—Maryam attests that she was "not [her]self" then, giving the impression that she was willing to do or say whatever it took to release her from her first marriage, an expedience only comes back to haunt her. The allusion to authentic selfhood is nevertheless notable: becoming an individual is to become oneself—but of course, as *Certified Copy* makes all too clear, the self is scripted. Female subjectivity in particular seems unable to escape the institutions prescribed for it, namely, heterosexual marriage and motherhood.

Like Elle, Maryam figures marriage both as the avenue for fulfillment of a woman's desires and as the site of those desires' frustration. And like Elle Maryam comes up against a sisterly figure who tries to keep her in check. But whereas *Certified Copy* leaves motherhood lurking in the background in order to prove the significance of marriage, Maryam's self-professed narrative as represented in *Divorce, Iranian Style* comes up against a discourse of feminine respectability that takes marriage for granted in order to stress the significance of motherhood. This difference in emphasis may be what constitutes the biggest difference between the secular and Islamic contexts as they are conceived by each of these two films.

In an article on divorce in Iranian women's cinema, comparativist Nasrin Rahimieh explicates a subsequent scene of *Divorce, Iranian Style*, in which Mrs. Maher, the court

secretary, uses the absence of the judge to censure Maryam as a bad mother. Rahimieh summarizes the position as the follows: "[Mrs. Maher] argues that, in marrying her second husband, Maryam was merely pursuing her own desires and that a mother should always put her children first" (103). As suggested by the use of "merely" above and drawn out more explicitly by Rahimieh soon after (104-5), Mrs. Maher's censure rests on the assumption that Maryam's individual desires must cede to her maternal role. As in the protagonist of *Ten*, Maryam's assertion of her individuality as a woman comes into conflict with what Rahimieh has described as terms of motherhood that "have deep roots in Iranian cultural history" tracing back to the Constitutional Revolution (1905-9), terms by which "[b]eing a good mother be[comes] synonymous with self-sacrifice and self-denial (Rahimieh 103-4). "These expectations," Rahimieh explains, "were inextricably interwoven with the creation of responsible and well-educated subjects in the twentieth-century Iranian discourses about women's place in a modern nation" (104). Explicating the scene as Mrs. Maher's personal investment in propping herself up as an ideal modern mother at the expense of Maryam, Rahimieh exposes the way the absence of a male authority figure—i.e., the cleric and judge—becomes an opportunity for one woman to adjudicate—or "hold court, if you will"—on another (104-5).

By Mrs. Maher and the code of feminine respectability she represents, Maryam's desires for individuality—even if achieved via marriage—are understood as individualistic. Analogously in *Ten*, the protagonist's young son accuses his mother of being "selfish" (*khudkhwāh*) for divorcing his father then remarrying. In *Divorce, Iranian Style*, the demonization of female desire relies on its sexualization. Repeatedly Mrs. Maher alleges that "it was out of lust/desire" (*bih khāṭir-i havasish*) that Maryam remarried, thereby sexualizing Maryam's desires. In this post-Revolutionary court of feminine respectability that is in session when court is officially out

of session, use of the word "*havas*"—which means both "lust" and "desire," and is notably translated as the former in subtitles—demeans Maryam's second marriage, assuring that it not be honored with the same sanctity with which marriage is otherwise treated culturally and by the court. As in the café proprietress' logic in *Certified Copy*, respectable womanhood as achieved in full for Maryam and other subjects in *Divorce, Iranian Style* only through marriage. But in the Islamic context at hand—i.e., the post-Revolutionary court, evidently whether officially in or out of session—responsible mothering floats to the top as the most important aspect of feminine respectability. The slippage between "desire" and "lust" becomes significant, coding the desire for *re*marriage (as opposed to the first marriage) as "merely" a carnal matter: Maryam, Mrs. Maher's logic goes, should have stayed single to keep custody of her younger daughter (custody of the older daughter had already been given to her father immediately upon divorce). Indeed that is eventually the decree she faces: Maryam does not succeed in maintaining custody.

In *Certified Copy* Elle seems to insist on the same resolution of motherhood and conjugally satisfied womanhood. Her capable but not model mothering is evidenced early on, when Elle reluctantly leaves the talk at her son's badgering, thus giving up on her intellectual—and seemingly also, romantic—pursuits to cede her desires to her son's in a quotidian example of self-sacrifice. When he calls to bother her on the phone during her "date" with James in part II, she is more impatient, but even then she remains on the line until her son's problem has been solved. Arguing with James immediately after hanging up as they leave the café, she accuses him of neglecting his family. A moment ago at the café James has just attested his lack of family values. Pressed to answer why he doesn't speak Italian when his family lives in Italy by the café proprietress, a question that Elle has to translate for him and which prompts her to explain the proprietress's mistake, he agrees to "play along" by flirtatiously saying looking her up and down:

"Obviously we make a good couple." But when he is pressed to speak again—Elle refuses to script his next lines—he proves not to be the sort of man with whom Elle wants to be coupled. "My family live their lives and I live my life. They speak their language and I speak mine. That makes sense doesn't it?" James states unapologetically. Speaking the same language again serves as shorthand for cultural understanding and shared values; this "family" has neither.

Elle responds sarcastically, "That makes a lot of sense," repeating the sentence twice in English, and thus deploying James' language against him. She invokes the title in complaining of her son's stubbornness: "Certified copy of his father!" (my translation). Family is thus figured according to the terms of art: like a skilled artisan, it produces imitations from generation to generation, copies that are perfectly passable but also somehow missing something due to their inauthenticity, their unoriginality. But again, the ideal does not exist. In other words, the middle-class subject is doomed to follow inherited forms—in gender and sexuality of course as well as in personality. Hence the number of multigenerational heterosexual couples James and Elle encounter throughout the day, from an old couple exiting a church hand-in-hand (figure 3) to the many newlyweds in various scenes that are posing for the same generic pictures.

James' unconventional—surprisingly, somehow queer—conception of family is based on individual fulfillment and thus searches for the unreachable goal of the authentic self. But as Elle points out, this quest is itself gendered. Where Maryam's search for fulfillment is doomed because of legal and cultural structures that disallow it, Elle's is more directly and unapologetically threatened by a husband who uses to his advantage a culturally structured patriarchy that is intertwined with his linguistic imperialism: James' search for his fulfillment at the expense of hers. Walking out of the café they fight about this anti-family philosophy of family and about their "son." Elle's criticism of James' lack of time and attention echoes

Maryam's retrospective criticisms of her first husband. Like Maryam she does not want to give up on mothering herself but rather demands a complementary fathering that is as invested in economies of care: in the affective labor required to sustain a happy marriage, the argument goes, men should work as much as women do.

In discussing naturalized feminine domesticity and care, Moallem critiques Western egalitarian feminism for "challeng[ing] the naturalness of domestic work" while failing to prioritize "an examination of the impact of the sexual division of labor on women's political rights" (166). Given that *Divorce, Iranian Study* is a documentary about divorce, it is particularly striking that Maryam does not explicitly engage the idea of rights, limiting her criticisms to her former husband; on Maryam's part this may be strategic—she is appealing to a judicial-clerical audience that inscribes women's rights within Islamic legal discourse, as it is understood—but in fact that only makes any resonances between Maryam and Elle more notable. Indeed rights are similarly absent from the conversations in *Certified Copy*: the film instead focuses on individual happiness, as if that could be achieved in and through the husband and family alone. Elle and Maryam each offer a feminism that demands gender equality without striving either to dismantle the family structure or to demand state support to keep that structure intact.

Indeed in its naturalization of male care and patronage—that is, quite literally, patriarchy—Elle's feminism is most uncannily similar to Maryam's. When Elle and James wander through a piazza, Elle admires a statue that depicts a woman resting a head on a man's shoulder. By offering an image of a woman finding repose in a man, the sculpture champions gender roles that, as in the Islamicate, figure men as guardians[125] over and patrons of women, as described above in reference to Khatami via Atwood. Elle tries and fails to claim this view in

[125] This concept is derived from the famous and controversial Quranic verse 4:34, which inscribes men as "the guardians of women" (*qawwamūna ʿala -n-nisāʾ*).

solidarity with another French wife also in the piazza with her husband. She starts a conversation with the couple that is inaudible to James and us viewers, then calls James over. After much prodding from Elle, the woman's husband summarizes "her" views for James: "Remember, you said that what was touching about the statue was the serenity of the woman's face as she rests on the man's shoulder" (my translation). But the woman objects to her husband, alleging that the view he has summarized was Elle's, though she may have momentarily agreed. She thus refuses the precise vision of complementary and secondary womanhood Elle provides and withholds the sisterhood Elle seeks. When the woman goes to clarify her own views, her husband sidebars James to offer some fatherly advice, and we never hear what she had to say; Elle's values are those that stick.

As if to highlight the difficulty of translating this idea of "protection" from an Iranian to a Western context, in *Let's See Copia Conforme* Binoche describes seeing the statue after hearing Kiarostami praise it as "a slap in the face." The documentary shows the process of building the sculpture, which was evidently commissioned for the film, and having it installed in the piazza in which the scene takes place. Laughingly reflecting on her disagreement with Kiarostami in an interview that is spliced with shots of the sketches for the sculpture and of its scaffolding—images that reveal this supposedly classical archetype as a modern fiction—Binoche takes offense to the fact that the woman is positioned "behind" a man who is "so happy with himself." The word "behind" operates literally and metaphorically, suggesting the rifts between an egalitarian feminism and a feminism that embraces difference. Indeed, as to the latter, the Islamic feminist slogan "equity, not equality" comes to mind. Despite other overlaps, it seems that the question of strict egalitarianism where the secular and Islamic diverge.

In *Let's See Copia Conforma* Binoche elaborates on her objection to the sculpture thus: "But I didn't see it as protection. I thought that was the prehistorical [idea of] protection that we don't need anymore. Hello?! This is over." Seemingly unknowingly she thus describes the Iranian Islamic idea of male guardianship and patronage—a basic principle of Shia Islamic jurisprudence that Islamic feminists do not contest but rather use to their advantage[126]—as outdated, and even "prehistoric," repeating familiar Orientalist tropes. After a clip documenting her argument with Kiarostami while shooting is shown, Binoche states in interview, "At first I thought, it's *impossible* for me to play me loving this statue because it doesn't make sense." Binoche thus distances herself from the feminism espoused by Elle, and the director who created her: for a modern woman such as Binoche, it seems, it is "impossible" to imagine taking comfort in a man by standing behind rather than beside him. The disagreement between Kiarostami and Binoche at once signifies the director and star's gender and cultural difference, the latter of which is stressed by the fact that their argument takes place with Kiarostami speaking in Persian with a live interpreter, though elsewhere he and Binoche are depicted casually relating in French. But as the reel shows, an infuriated Binoche does in fact manage to make an "impossible" performance look real, and *Certified Copy* successfully translates this Iranian Islamic celebration of male guardianship of women onto a European mise en scène. Post-Revolutionary gender politics and Islamic feminism are thus deployed in service of an ostensibly secular project of gender critique.

Alone with James in the piazza after the elderly tourist couple has left, Elle reiterates that she likes the sculpture not for its art but for its "subject" (*sujet*). Content is thus privileged over

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[126] Consider for example Iranian Islamic feminist activism that uses the idea of *nafaqah*, or a wife's right to financial maintenance during marriage, to obtain a small settlement upon divorce. For starters see Osanloo, Arzoo. *The Politics of Women's Rights in Iran.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009.

form, adding to the impression that certified copies reproduce one another substantially as well as superficially. James responds accusingly in French, “I can’t believe you’d be so… sentimental,” opening the door to a critique of Elle’s ideas. But that critique remains unspecified: is the idea of male guardianship ethically suspect or is Elle just being accused of being too cheesy? The scene hints at the existence of alternative conceptions of womanhood and feminism but rests on an Iranian Islamic logic that may have been so completely taken for granted that Kiarostami himself did not see it. Indeed, perhaps a certified copy can be all content, no form: Binoche’s “Frenchness” and the European setting evidently need not interfere with the reproducibility of contemporary Iranian conceptions of companionate marriage and essentialized womanhood as wifehood and motherhood.

Playing at Being Sisters: The Story of Vexed Transnational Sisterhood

None of Kiarostami’s films goes as far in cohering, and thus perhaps deconstructing, the category “woman” than *Shirin* (2008). Released two years before *Certified Copy*, *Shirin* represents the first time Binoche appears in a Kiarostami film, a casting that, I argue, serves to universalize both a transnational middle-class womanhood and its possible critique. As in *Ten* and *Certified Copy*, the films that precede and follow it in the director’s filmography, respectively, *Shirin* realizes female subjectivity in and through thwarted heterosexual romance—but by turning to mythic romance rather than to the institution of modern marriage.

Like most Kiarostami films, *Shirin* is a metacommentary on cinema and the gaze, a discourse on representation that I argue is intertwined in these three films with a critique of gender performance. *Shirin* is composed of what is ostensibly a series of close-ups on women moviegoers as they watch a melodramatic adaptation of the classical tragic romance *Khusrau o*

Shīrīn (figure 4). As the short "making-of" documentary *Taste of Shirin* (2008) reveals, however, Kiarostami in fact invited a long roster of Iranian actresses (plus Binoche) to his home and filmed them for five or six minutes each as he coached them on what expressions or gestures to make and how to emote; at least some, or possibly all, of the hundred or so actresses were told to think about a difficult time in their lives, preferably a "love story" of unrequited love (*nākāmī*), while others traced a stick figure drawing with their eyes or were told a small clock mounted beneath the camera was the intradiegetic screen.[127] Kiarostami evidently decided what to do with the footage only later—unless of course, this alleged ignorance as to his intentions was also a performance; nevertheless, a dramatic reading of the adaptation was later recorded as a soundtrack and the isolated takes edited so that as to give the impression that all the women are in the same theater, sharing the same emotional journey while watching the romance. As Shirin's love story goes south, many of the women begin to cry, and their tears run through the film's second half.

The gendered politics of this film are difficult to parse. Given the abundant tears and the sacrifices that Shirin makes for her love for Khusrau—including her kingdom; she is the reigning Queen of Armenia—the narrative locates womanhood in loss and solitude. But the exaggerated emotional tenor of the film that the women are watching intradiagetically suggests that the film we are watching satirizes and critiques that narrative. The film thus seems to draw a lineage from Shirin to her contemporary "counterparts"—in fact a line of multigenerational, upper middle-

[127] Saeed-Vafa writes: "Kiarostami told me that he filmed each famous actress in his living room, as part of the same material he used in *Shirin*; he attached a blank sheet of paper to the camera and asked each actress to look at it and think for six minutes about a previous romantic relationship she had or to think about love in general" (Saeed-Vafa and Rosenbaum 134). But the documentary *Taste of Shirin* suggests that his direction of the women was possibly more fluid and less consistent.

class secular women represented by famous actresses—and simultaneously criticize the melancholic narrative that such women are forced to adopt.

Indeed the film must be read as a layering of screens and viewers that centers the process of its own production. Like *Let's See Copia Conforme*, *Taste of Shirin* was released the same year as the film whose making it documents. Kiarostami's welcoming of these behind-the-scenes takes suggests his own interest in publicizing the subterfuge of his films and creating a dialogue with viewers around artistic process. That is, these films are as much "about" (to echo Mulvey's construction) their story-telling as they are about the stories they tell. *Shirin* then adds an additional twist by taking the female gaze as its very subject. It is the story of how women relate to stories, and moreover, how women write their own stories—and histories—modeled after the stories and histories they receive.

In paraphrasing a conversation with Kiarostami on *Shirin*, filmmaker and critic Mehrnaz Saeed-Vafa writes that the director suggested that the film "taught him something about women that he didn't know before […] something to do with discovering the world of women's emotions" (Saeed-Vafa and Roesenbaum 135). "Women" operates here as a homogenized peoples or culture about which one might learn, and "the world of women's emotions" is then reified as a distant object (indeed an entire planet) man might observe and study but whose underlying logic, if existent, is likely to continue to confuse.

But if watching *Taste of Shirin* teaches anything about the process of making *Shirin*, it is that Kiarostami did not discover, but rather, directed women's emotions. Calling from the shadows as his cameraman films each small group of women, the director tells the actresses when to look distracted or to smile with their eyes, when to put a finger to their eyes or to adjust their scarves. This footage is, in other words, as crafted as any other feature film rather than an

objective archive to be mined,[128] as the paraphrased Kiarostami suggests. Again paraphrasing Kiarostami, Saeed-Vafa writes of the process of filming *Shirin*: "Most of them [the actresses] became emotional, and according to him it was Binoche more than anyone else who started crying" (Saeed-Vafa and Rosenbaum 134). The actresses, naturalized here as "they, women," are thus imagined to fall prey to the force of their own stories, which the film in turn conceives as versions (or adaptations) of the tale of Khusrau and Shirin. That tale, like any number of modern tragic romances such as *The Love Stories at Amijima* from 18th-century Japan or the Shakespearean *Romeo and Juliet*, ends in suicide, thus inscribing and reinscribing feminine pain.

Indeed if the clips shown in *Taste of Shirin* are indicative, Kiarostami curiously does not explicitly tell the women to cry, despite his otherwise micromanaging their gestures and guiding their embodied emotions. Yet by suggesting that they contemplate heartbreak in the form of unrequited love, he solicits tears. Then when the tears arrive, they are used to produce spontaneity and authenticity, thereby obscuring the methods of their manufacture. "This film has no director," Kiarostami tells the actresses during filming, "[it] has no assistant director, it's just you and yourselves. If you're good, [the success] is yours, and if not, it doesn't matter to us" (in *Taste of Shirin*, my translation). Kiarostami thus naturalizes a quite literal—that is, dramatic—performance. Put in relief by the gendered act of crying, the naturalization of a rudimentary gender stereotype mystifies the very idea of performance: are the women acting or not? What does it mean to act (as an agent) or to act (as an actor)? But I do not wish to suggest that the actresses' tears are necessarily *not* "real." Instead I would like to highlight the way this artistic process deconstructs the very idea of affective realness. "The world of women's emotions" is

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[128] Of course this observation is not to fetishize the distance between feature and documentary films: even a documentary would not provide such an archive, as a film like Kiarostami's *Close Up* (1990) makes all too clear.

inscribed here at once as genuine and highly constructed, rendering it impossible to make any claims as to either the falseness of those gendered emotions or their authenticity.

Binoche's role in this film is to suggest the universality of the (Iranian) women's experience, thus cohering the category "woman" without any modifier or plurality. Singled out above in the statement "it was Binoche more than anyone else who started crying," Binoche operates as an exemplar of a teary emotiveness these women—seemingly all women—share (see figure 5). In *Shirin* the screen operates as a mirror for the female viewer, drawing her into the experience while male viewers remain on the periphery. (Indeed the male viewer's marginalization is also reflected intradiegetically: male moviegoers in *Shirin* only appear in shadowy backrows and are never seated in the front row.) Kiarostami's popularity in France and globally ensures that the women watching are not all Iranian; the presence of an internationally renowned actress such as Binoche then invites not only French but also other non-Iranian women to see themselves in this mirror, that is, on screen. Like her fellow moviegoers Binoche is veiled. This de-exotification and normalization of the veil ensures that the perceived singularity of public veiling (such as is mandatory in Iran and Iranian cinema) not be allowed to interrupt the desired mirroring between on-screen and off-screen female spectators. "Anyone"—where that universal constitutes an especial appeal to Western audiences—can see herself in Binoche's "shoes," or rather, scarf.

Binoche appears three times in the film, interweaving her narrative with those of the Iranian actresses. The repetition of her veiled image against those of her Iranian counterparts couple with an attendant de-exotification of the veil establishes a sisterhood across intra- and extradiegetic seats, with spectatorship serving as the stage that makes visible an experience of universalized, homogenized womanhood.

It is as if the culturally and historically specific critiques of the status of women in post-Revolutionary Iran presented in *Ten* were being tested for their universality across time and geography. *Shirin* caches in on Binoche's persona to conceptualize a transnational sisterhood based on a conception of the nation that itself contains the seed of a premodern globality (recall that Shirin is Queen of Armenia and Khusrau King of Iran). In *Certified Copy*, the last of the three women's films, Elle faces various women interlocutors, such as the café proprietress and the French tourist described above, that serve to bring multiple contemporary Iranian feminisms onto the world stage, and face-to-face with possible challengers. But like the character "Juliette Binoche" in *Shirin*—note that the credits consist of a bilingual list of names repeated in Persian and English—Elle as a character can never fully be dissociated from Binoche, given the latter's star status: indeed the role won her Best Actress at Cannes in 2010, and Binoche's performance only shines more brightly in contrast to Shimell's halting amateur acting.[129] Thus inasmuch as *Certified Copy* might be said to offer a more complex story of competing and frustrated lines of sisterhood that are either achieved or attempted by Binoche-playing-Elle as described above, *Shirin* lays the groundwork for such complexity by establishing Binoche-playing-Binoche as the sign of transnational sisterhood.

The explicit invocation of sisterhood sets *Shirin* in motion. The disembodied voice of Shirin opens with a Scheherazadian metanarration that sounds over a background of women's wailing: "Listen, my sisters. It's time for my story, time for my story." Right here, above Khusrau's lifeless figure […]" (my translation). Sisterhood and heteroeroticism are thus

[129] Rosenbaum goes so far as to refer to the "the pairing of an awkward nonprofessional actor [i.e., Shimell] with a gifted professional actor [Binoche]" as the first threat against verisimilitude in the film, which soon becomes more completely "unhinged" (Saeed-Vafa and Rosenbaum, 147). Though I will also note that employing amateur actors is characteristic of Kiarostami's work and Iranian New Wave cinema in general. The effect is further blur the binary that sets feature films against documentaries.

intertwined. Just as the circumscription of a woman's space based on the experience of being a wife functions to posit a heterosexual marriage in *Certified Copy*, the inscription of a woman's space via the explicit invocation of sisterhood serves as preamble to—and ultimately frames—a story of heterosexual romance in *Shirin*. The king's dead body literalizes and dramatizes the absent husband of *Certified Copy*: "Look, sisters," Shirin commands female viewers, "Look how still his face is […]." Comparing the two films suggests that the conspicuously absent male is as necessary to establishing bonds between and among women (as in *Shirin*) as establishing a women's space is perquisite to a story of heterosexual romance (as in *Certified Copy*).

But in *Shirin* the film's conceit ultimately short circuits this triangulation in order to demarcate a more expansive women's space. That is, the fact that as an audience we can only watch women who watch this (fake) adaptation of *Khusrau and Shirin* redirects what would have been—or is, in the fiction of the intradiegetic world—a mediated female-female gaze that takes the male beloved as its shared object to instead render a direct female-female gaze of women spectators watching women spectators. In short spectatorship is feminized, as is the gaze. Accordingly this brand of—at best romantic, and at worst melodramatic—cinema is posited as a homosocial women's space[130] wherein to view is to empathize is to assume femininity. And yet the consistent presence of male moviegoers, even if in the background, insists that the public space of cinema writ large remains coed: the male gaze is thus reintroduced but exists alongside the female gaze. The gaze is thus always gendered, but not, as Western cinema theory à la Mulvey[131] would have it, strictly male or voyeuristic.[132]

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[130] This formulation purposefully inverts expectations that homosociality be reserved for men.
[131] Mulvey 848 (Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." 1975. *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*. Eds. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999, pp. 833-844.
[132] Indeed Rey Chow cites a history of criticism of Mulvey's essay and centers questions of the female via Teresa de Lauretis' work on the female spectator in "Seeing Modern China: Toward a Theory of Ethnic Spectatorship"

In *Displaced Allegories: Post-Revolutionary Iranian Cinema* (2008), Mottahedeh characterizes post-Revolutionary Iranian film as "the apotheosis of 1970s feminist gaze theory" as defined by Mulvey in that "the veil confronts the voyeurism inscribed in cinematic spectatorship [so that] the female body is effectively protected from the spectators' voyeuristic gaze, and public space is maintained as male space" (2008 2 and 10, respectively). Mottahedeh describes an active form of looking that implicates the (masculinized) looker as much as the (feminized) looked-at. The theory of spectatorship that defines post-Revolutionary cinema in Iran, Mottahedeh describes, is neither voyeurism nor "a fetishism based on distance;"

> Rather, the act of looking transforms the viewer's identity. Ideally, the act of looking collapses the distance between the subject who sees and the subject looked at. In the context of film viewing, the look unto the screen collapses distance and touches the very site of heterosexuality and desire in the female body on screen. The look is tactile. As Fatima Mernissi, in her discussion of sexuality in the [orthodox] Muslim context, has argued, "The eye is… just as able to give pleasure as the penis" [Mernissi *Beyond the Veil*, 141]. (2008 9)

In this context the gaze serves as a form of touch and thus is subject to regulation when traded between the two genders, where heterosociality serves as the assumed site of sexual attraction and pleasure. This regulation is codified by the Ministry of Culture in the form of Rules of Looking that ensure proper modesty. As Mottahedeh, describes, the Rules "enforc[e] the veiling of Iranian women from their male counterparts both on and in front of the screen" (2008 9). Sexualizing the female body, the Rules posit veiling "as a shield against [unlawful] heterosexual desire" (Mottahedeh 2008, 9), where "unlawful" means outside of marriage and outside the privacy of the home. This added caveat is significant, for like other forms of institutionalized

(originally 1991, also in *The Rey Chow Reader* cited in full in Works Cited, pp. 92-122). I do not pursue these feminist debates on theories of the gaze in detail here in order to focus on an Islamicate theory of the gaze.

veiling in contemporary Iran, the Rules are not meant to bar but to protect heterosexual desire, sanctifying that desire and asserting its centrality to individual happiness and the social order.

Hamid Naficy echoes a number of these claims in the fourth volume of his detailed account of the broad history of Iranian film, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema* (2011-12). In a section titled "Hijab and Looking: An Islamicate Gaze Theory," Naficy like Mottahedeh posits a theory of the gaze that contrasts with that posited by Western feminists and Mulvey in particular. Echoing Mernissi à la Mottahedeh, Naficy suggests that Islamicate hijab defines women's sexuality as excessive and "exhibitionist" and men's capacity to defend themselves as inversely weak (106). He roots these ideas in classical Persian poetry and Iranian Shia jurisprudence:

> […] the eyes are not passive organs like the ears, gathering information from outside and transmitting it to the brain for processing. Eyes are active, even invasive organs, whose gaze in Persian love poetry is often likened to an arrow that deeply pierces the beloved, the object of the look. Religious literature also formulates the gaze as invasive, but in a far more aggressive and sexualized manner. (Naficy 106)

The religious literature that Naficy elaborates includes a quote from Ayatollah Ali Meshkini, a prominent post-Revolutionary cleric, that attests, "Looking is rape by means of eyes" (Meshkini qtd. in Naficy, 106).[133] That is, looking is touching. Visuality is not a matter of receiving or interpreting the world, or what Naficy terms "information gathering," but of interacting with that world in ways that imply choice and agency, and accordingly require ethical and moral regulation.

Veiling—that is, the code of modesty the Rules of Looking are meant to institutionalize—is thus described as "a dynamic process in which both men and women are

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[133] Indeed Meshkini's further assertions that "kissing is rape by means of lips, touching is rape by means of hands, whether the vulva admits or not, that is, whether actual sexual intercourse takes place or not" (Meshkini qtd. in Naficy, 106) resonate with Hamid Dabashi's characterization of the milking scene in Kiarostami's *The Wind Will Carry Us* (1999) as "one of the most violent rape scenes in all cinema," accusing Kiarostami of adopting a European, colonizing gaze imposed upon the Kurdish minority the film depicts (Dabashi, Hamid. *Close Up: Iranian Cinema, Past, Present and Future*. London and New York: Verso, 2001. See 254-7).

implicated" (Naficy 109). Naficy reads the power of the male gaze as a threat to the male seeing subject: "Power relations in the relay of gazes in the Islamic world seem the obverse of those posited in Western feminist gaze theory: the aggressive male gaze supposedly affects not the female target but the gaze's male owner" (106). Naficy arguably exaggerates, as an uninhibited male gaze also compromises the woman in question—indeed, protecting women from objectification is the sort of "honoring" of women that Islamic feminists attribute to mandatory veiling[134]—but his claim nevertheless clarifies the ways modesty and veiling is the shared responsibility of both genders. In other words the Rules of Looking regulate heterosexual desire not only for women's sake but for the public good.

In *Shirin* the male gaze is indeed so much voyeuristic as invested in a project of cohering and understanding the category of "woman" through a sustained study of the female gaze—a female gaze that is, incidentally, directed toward a male beloved and a tragic romance that thus reinscribe female subjectivity in relation to men and heterosexuality. If we take seriously Mottahedeh's claim that Iranian cinema is "a woman's cinema,"[135] then *Shirin*—not to mention, *Certified Copy*—reveals the extent to which that woman's cinema (at least in the hands of certain auteurs) pitches women's homosociality as, paradoxically, both the effect of and requirement for eroticized heterosexual desire. Homosociality is here sanitized of any possible eros or sexuality and cordoned off from histories of homoeroticism (representation and otherwise) to suggest a

[134] Consider, for example, the Revolutionary slogan quoted by Moallem on 108, "My sister, your veil is more powerful than my blood" (*Khwāharam hijab-i tu koubandih tar az khūn-i man ast*) (my translation), or Moallem's consistent engagement with the Islamic feminist and politician Zahra Rahnavard, brought further into the limelight after publication of Moallem's book due to her marriage to Mir-Hoseein Mousavi, who contested his alleged loss in the 2009 presidential election, an event that sparked widespread protests. Moallem summarizes the Iranian Islamic feminist position on veiling as a weapon against objectification in reference to Rahnavard as such: "To resist capitalist rulers and challenge sexual objectification, [Rahnavard] asks women to return to veiling and the Muslim family, where women are considered subjects rather than objects of the marriage contract" (185-6). Particularly relevant here is this position's presentation of marriage and wifehood as the means by which female subjectivity is reached.

[135] The title to chapter one of *Displaced Allegories* is "National Cinema, a Woman's Cinema."

shared female subjectivity achieved through individual experiences of heterosexual desire that follow classical molds. Looking at how "she" looks (*nigāh mīkunad*), *Shirin* assumes the singularity of the female gaze, theorizing that gaze in terms of loss and unfulfilled desire. While the character Shirin announces the film as "[her] story," as if to attempt a strictly homosocial space, "his" gaze is posited both alongside and through hers, both in the form of the male moviegoer shown on screen and structurally in the masculine position the film forces the viewer to occupy. "His" hand as evidenced in the metanarrative around the film—a narrative that, considering Kiarostami's consistent inquiry into the very ideas of fact and fiction, must be read interlineally with the film itself—then further roots the male gaze and imbricates it with the type of feminine spectatorship the film stages.

Due to the institutionalization of binary gender whereby all viewers are assumed to be either men or women, heterosocial and homosocial significations thus overlap for each individual viewer. I must stress that the "his" in "his hand" (above) does not denote a biological description of the director but rather refers to a masculinity that is defined by the film as the very position of remaining at a distance from the affective experience of womanhood. In this I depart from Mottahedeh, suggesting that "a fetishism [of woman] based on distance" is indeed operative in *Shirin*, not to mention *Certified Copy*, but, I argue, that distance exists in a dance with identification. That is, inasmuch as the film requires its viewers to participate in a fiction of femininity as clichéd emotiveness, it makes all viewers on some level assume a male gaze—just as it also allows all viewers to assume the female gaze as their own by foregrounding the female spectator in such a way that suggests her interiority has been exposed. The film cordons off a "women's world" from which male characters and the director claim distance but also allege access.

But in making a spectacle of feminized pathos, it—perhaps inadvertently, perhaps quite purposefully—simultaneously puts into question what access the women "themselves" have to their own such pathos. The actresses are, after all, putting on a performance, a fact the director is only too happy to divulge. If this idea of performance is taken seriously, the dance between distance and identification defines the female viewer's experience as much as the male's. Comparing *Certified Copy* to *Report* (1977), Kiarostami's first feature film, which also deals with the dissolution of a marriage, film critic Rosenbaum writes: "One might even say that Binoche gives a far more aggressive (or at the very least, assertive) 'star' performance than [Shorheh] Aghdashloo did in *Report*, which underlines the extent to which all the professional actresses in *Shirin* are giving performances, even as alleged spectators" (Saeed-Vafa and Rosenbaum, 147). By highlighting the quality of Binoche's acting in *Certified Copy*, Rosenbaum implies the performativity of a performance that is read as more natural such as that of the actresses in *Shirin*, Binoche included. At the most rudimentary level of comparison, both films include close-ups of Binoche crying, with tears streaming down her otherwise nearly still face. Indeed Elle's quiet crying at the café precedes James' exit to the courtyard and Elle's subsequent conversation with the proprietress that constitutes the narrative turn, thus imbricating this simple (and simplistic) image of feminine pain with the invocation of heterosexual marriage. Both films serve to inscribe womanhood in embodied sorrow while also denaturalizing that narrative via a sustained engagement with the idea of performativity.

Ideas of gendered performance and gendered gazes are intertwined in *Certified Copy*, as well as in *Shirin*: indeed if both are understood to stage the relationship between actor and viewer, the two cannot be undone. After the scene in the piazza described above in which Elle admires the statue of a woman resting on a man's shoulder, the couple finds themselves at a

restaurant. Elle excuses herself to go to the bathroom, prompting a long shot of her primping herself in the bathroom mirror figured as the film screen, thus inverting the dynamic I have explicated in *Shirin* wherein the screen operates as a mirror not for the actor/actress[136] but for the viewer. Elle applies red lipstick, arguably an icon of femininity in and of itself, and puts on earrings. She takes her time and seems to enjoy the process of feminine ornamentation, trying on various pairs of earrings. Yet seemingly this individual feminine ritual unmediated by language requires the male gaze to be considered successful. In the midst of a bilingual fight in French and English when she returns to the table, Elle pleas for James to look at her: "Look, your wife. Who made herself up for you today. Look. Open your eyes" (my translation). In this scene multilingualism ironically seems to represent a breakdown in communication, and communion. Elle's demand to be looked at endows the body with the capacity to exceed language and heal the fault lines the latter both manifests and creates. Part of the couple's argument centers on their failing sex life and James' disinterest. That the former are subjects discussed in veiled (though clear) terms suggests that the demand to be looked at moreover functions as a demand to be touched. That is, the gaze is afforded a tactility and power that mirrors an Iranian Islamic gaze theory as elaborated above: as Naficy has described, the gaze has the capacity of "deeply pierc[ing] the beloved;" or as Mottahedeh succinctly puts it, "The look is tactile." Considering *Certified Copy*'s evident reliance on an Iranian cinematic theory of the tactile, sexualized gaze, it then seems to follow that in the scene at hand, the Rules of Looking are ultimately upheld. As if to betray Kiarostami's continued commitment to the Rules of Looking even when working outside the (physical) Iranian context, James does not look at Elle in the admiring and sexual manner she wishes, and Elle's desires are left unsatisfied on screen.

[136] In *Certified Copy* too this dynamic exists for "both" genders: at the end of the film James looks into a mirror that is also figured as the screen.

I argue more broadly that *Certified Copy* largely adheres to the same codes of censorship and self-censorship instituted by the Rules of Looking as Kiarostami's more explicitly "Iranian" films set in Iran and in Persian. In *Shirin* Kiarostami does away with showing love scenes altogether, representing them only audibly; in *Certified Copy* the viewer's voyeuristic desires are teased but never gratified. Indeed the couple never shares a single kiss. That romance goes missing from a romance is a convention of post-Revolutionary Iranian cinema but practically unheard of in Western cinema, full-stop, much less Western romance, thus further distancing this film from the classification "European."

When James and Elle visit their (supposed) matrimonial bed in a quaint hotel at the end of the film, the expected sex scene never arrives. In the hotel room, Elle's odalisque-like pose on the bed (figure 6) is suggestive, and yet the fact that the scene never climaxes only mocks the viewer's expected voyeurism. The end of *Certified Copy* might thus be read as the heterosexual counterpart to the homoerotic beginning of *A Taste of Cherry* (1997). There, as aforementioned, the protagonist Mr. Badei solicits men for an unknown task through his car window, an iconic opening sequence that has been compared by Mulvey and other scholars to a gay pickup scene.[137] Mulvey quotes Kiarostami's response to such homoerotic readings: "I did, of course, mean to create this impression. To bring in a slight hint of vice was interesting… I liked tricking the spectator, and confronting him with his own perversions, his own fantasies" (Kiarostami qtd. in Mulvey 25). The director's latent homophobia aside—seeking gay sex is here termed a

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[137] Mulvey writes: "Lines of unemployed men try to look in the windows, soliciting for work like prostitutes soliciting a kerb-crawler" (Mulvey 25). Consider too Schnoover and Galt's apt analysis of the controversy around homoerotic readings of this scene: "When some reviewers noted how easy it is to read this scene as gay cruising for anonymous sex, other critics and fans jumped to defend Badii's hetero- sexuality, insisting that he is only looking for human compassion. What is interesting in this discourse is the way that, for the latter critics, the homo- erotic implications of the scene would foreclose on its universal ethics (of care for the other). Queer bonds here can represent only specific interests rather than the universal concerns needed to see the film as humanist" (Schoonver, Karl and Rosalind Galt. *Queer Cinema in the World*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016. See 119-120).

"perversion"—the comment not only reveals an explicit investment in spectatorship as a mind game but also elucidates the crucial role thwarted sexual desire plays in that game. What Mulvey calls Kiarostami's "uncertainty principle" leaves the viewer wondering: text or subtext, script or spontaneity, fact or fiction? Moreover the ultimately equal treatment of homoerotic and heteroerotic desire in these two scenes seems to push against one of the first assumptions of *Certified Copy*, that of naturalized heterosexuality. Indeed if the lesson of *Certified Copy* is that ideal love is inherently impossible, a comparative reading of these two moments suggests that all sexuality is inherently unsatisfying.

As if to demonstrate Naficy's point about veiling the male gaze, James seems rather uninterested in sex: he starts off by gazing not at Elle but out the window, and when Elle lies on her side, he maintains his distance and remains standing (figure 7). There his face is cast in shadow, so that one cannot read desire into his gaze; indeed Elle calls him "cold" (*froid*). When he does finally sit down at the edge of the bed, without touching her but while seeming to thaw—he tells her that she has grown "even more beautiful" with time—a shot-reverse shot depicts James staring down into his lap. He looks up as she repeatedly whispers "Stay!" (*Reste!*) but does not sustain the gaze. In the next few pairings of shot-reverse shots he consistently breaks eye contact, and ultimately, he reminds her of his nine o'clock train. In some sense this final sequence resists classification as a sex scene in ways that exceed the veiled male gaze per the Rules of Looking: though the film figures marriage as the only space for erotics, it ultimately contends that erotics within marriage are impossible, suggesting a deep cynicism about romantic satisfaction, at least within the bounds of normative middle-class heterosexuality.

Indeed that Binoche appears physically unveiled in *Certified Copy* does not in and of itself constitute an infraction of the Rules of the Gaze. As a figure the unveiled woman is

becoming increasingly common in post-Revolutionary Iranian film and television as approved by the Ministry of Culture in the name of realism (i.e., in historic settings that did not abide by public veiling). In fact Naficy suggests that though the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance cited "improper attire" (i.e., Binoche's low-cut dress) as justification for banning *Certified Copy*'s Iranian release, the ban was actually levied in retribution for Kiarostami's public denunciation of the (then recent arrests of directors Jafar Panahi and Mohammad Rassoulof (328-29).[138] Given these historic circumstances, the interruption of the desiring male gaze enacted by the ban thus seems to be more about interrupting the male homosociality of a community of artists and auteurs than it is about "protecting" the female body or organizing a coed public sphere. Censoring the female body thus becomes the means by which to censor a politics that is critical of the state, and female sexuality is figured as a threat in order to curtail the more real threat of male bonding outside the avenues offered by and beneficial to the state. That is, I would like to offer a reading of the Rules of Looking that draws attention not only to how these rules attempt to guide and adjudicate relations *between* the two genders but also *within* them: the regulation of heterosexuality requires a regulation of homosociality precisely in order to prevent the homosocial from "slipping" into the homoerotic. Indeed for Mottahedeh, the "homosocial" comes coupled with the "heteronormative,"[139] not unlike the dynamics I have elaborated above in *Certified Copy*. But inasmuch as the ban only serves to publicize one male director's act of sacrifice for his peers—or rather, the king of Iranian cinema's sacrifice, perhaps not unlike Shirin's sacrifice for Khusrau—the punishment does not foreclose but only cracks the door open

[138] Indeed in much of the film, including especially the scenes explicated above between Elle and the café proprietress, the audience gains few glimpses of the offending breasts. This series of shot-reverse shots mostly frames Elle's torso either well or just above the neckline, and when on occasion the camera moves out, Elle's hand or arm often serves to censor any possible glimpse of cleavage.
[139] See Mottahedeh 2008, 152 and 153.

to a homoerotic reading, figuring the auterial homosocial in the same terms as mythic heterosexual romance.

Conclusion

In the essay "When Whiteness Feminizes…: Some Consequences of a Supplementary Logic" originally published in 2002, Rey Chow explores the consequences of defining woman as the second term. What Chow dubs "the supplementary logic of 'woman' in the contemporary West" can lead us in two directions, either to the specter of "a project aimed single-mindedly at legitimizing the idea of woman" that can be accused of essentialism, or more compellingly to calling precisely such essentialisms into question (81). For Chow the alleged singularity of "man" calls into question singularity itself. "Woman" thus invites still other subjectivities defined according to race or class:

> By the time "woman" arrives at man's side, as it were, the coupling of "man-woman" is already obsolete, not so much because its twosomeness is heterosexist as because such a twosomeness itself will have to be recognized as part of something else, something whose configuration—as class or race, for instance—becomes graspable exactly at the moment of the supplement's materialization. (Chow 81)

The couple form thus invites not only a third term but perhaps a fourth or fifth, or yet others.

In this and previous chapters I have demonstrated that the heterosexual couple, though defined varyingly in Iran from 1966 to present, is always iterated in relation to a third: here, women's homosociality, and in other chapters, women's homoerotics, whether figured consensually or violently imposed (or perhaps a little bit of both). Viewing the three films *Ten* (2002), *Shirin* (2008), and *Certified Copy* (2010) together, one discerns an increased investment in an essentialized womanhood defined against man and in terms of marriage. Though the director may not have labeled them as such, the films form a trilogy on women's issues that

moves from an exploration of the interiority of one woman to that of women as a group to that of one woman representing women (i.e., woman as Woman).

Even still *Certified Copy* continues to evade us in more ways than one: does the film reproduce that essentialized womanhood or put its very production on display? Ultimately, I argue, this riddle remains as unresolved as that of the movie's central conceit. A generous reading practice at least allows us, per Chow's suggestion, to side with the critical: the film offers a performance of female subjectivity as achieved in relation to man (i.e., in the context of heterosexual marriage) in order to put the performativity of that performance on display. It offers a critique of gender essentialism by showing the innerworkings of "woman" as a structure, an outsiding of the inside that might be the theoretical equivalent of the famous architectural move made by Renzo Piano and Richard Rogers in designing the Centre Pompidou in Paris, whose façade sports color-coded pipes circulating, in the museum website's poetically sparse bullet points, air, electricity, water, and people.[140] Relatedly the film's very conscription of erotics only in service of heterosexual marriage denaturalizes that very alignment, posing not only (homo)eroticism but also forms of queerness as questions that, even if unanswered, refuse to go away.

Curiously, despite this study of womanhood and the possible unraveling of the very category "woman" that is made to cohere here, the question of other forms of difference is hardly posed. Indeed in all three of what I am calling Kiarostami's women's trilogy there is an uncharacteristic disengagement with questions of ethnic and racial difference that are otherwise foregrounded in much of the director's oeuvre: *Ten* and *Shirin* both center upper middle-class Iranian women, while the conspicuous absence of non-white Europeans in *Certified Copy* that

[140] "The Centre Pompidou – The Building." *Centre Pompidou*, https://www.centrepompidou.fr/en/The-Centre-Pompidou/The-Building. Accessed 11 June 2019.

seems to gesture to a Europe before contemporary mass immigration. I claim that the line of transnational sisterhood I have drawn between the latter two films figures Iranian womanhood in terms of whiteness, stressing again, as in chapter two, the ways whiteness serves as prerequisite to entering the transnational community of feminist sisters I have described here via characters like Elle and the actresses in *Shirin*. The feminisms presented in these three films—not to mention the fourth that I have staged as their interlocuter, *Divorce, Iranian Style*—are multiple and diverse. This kaleidoscope is in many ways contained in the vexed figure of Elle, whose ideas about and practice of womanhood draws on perhaps unexpected sources. And yet all those feminisms wrangle with the supplementary logic of woman, reproducing and critiquing its logic in turns. If a critique of the essentialism of woman necessarily opens the door to other critiques as Chow suggests, then perhaps the assumed alignment between femininity and whiteness that undergirds these works only prompts an examination of that assumption and the globalized, racialized politics of power in which it is produced, and which it upholds.

Given a shared interest in a transnational whiteness that can be discerned across these various Persian-language and non-Persian language, seemingly Iranian and "not-Iranian," works, it may be ironic that Kiarostami's *Certified Copy* has in fact been racialized precisely in its subsumption into the category of "global film." The dynamic nature of race and racialization has been a consistent line of inquiry throughout this work. The case of Kiarostami's *Certified Copy* makes all too clear the contradictory logic of difference, which can be applied or withheld when convenient for the dominant group: Kiarostami is one of the few Iranian directors who has successfully been reframed in terms of world cinema, and yet relative to Kiarostami's other

works, *Certified Copy* remains undertreated in scholarship, though perhaps less so in popular criticism.[141] Why?

I view the scholarly undertreatment of this film as an academic blind spot that overemphasizes geography and language to prevent more productive engagements of the work. This collective inattention is imbricated in webs of neo-Orientalism that posit the postcolonial and/or "Third World" as always-already particular—or as Chow would have it in describing dominant methods in the field of sinology, as "unique"[142]—and, moreover as precisely that which is *not* European, even when those works themselves arguably participate in quite the opposite politics of reifying racialized power as whiteness. How could a film set in Europe with European actors assume and engage historically specific Iranian Reformist and feminist debates? I have attempted to prove that *Certified Copy* does in fact do just that.

According to my reading this film thus instantiates the ways the Iranian context is and is not "unique." Balancing particularity with commonalities borne of productive comparison ultimately allows us to map the ways an emerging global, and globalized, heterosexuality also takes for granted non-Western histories of sexuality, projecting Global North and Global South—in this case, European Union and Iranian—sites onto one another in complex circuits of translation and mistranslation. In some meaningful sense *Certified Copy* translates middle-class Iranian heterosexuality into global bourgeois straightness, where "straight" itself invokes a gay/straight divide that erases indigenous and hybrid histories of homoeroticism in favor of a homonormative that can be cleanly excised from heterosexuality. Indeed not only is Elle anonymized as wife/woman by her name but "James Miller" too has a name so common as to

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[141] Naficy refers to the film as "highly nuanced" (328) but focuses on controversies around the film, as I will soon explicate, while Rosenbaum spends about a page explicating the film in "Watching Kiarostami Films at Home" (cited above).
[142] See Chow 2010, 117.

suggest the universality of his character as every man, and every husband; the sort of bourgeois marriage that comes to define the two, it would seem, is so scripted that neither elle/"she" nor he need be particularized. Nevertheless the film itself focuses on female subjectivity, as if to suggest the singular pressures under which it is burdened, and through which it is defined. Elle retranslates the Iranian woman as married and straight, regardless of being veiled or unveiled, religiously Muslim or secular, or upper or lower-middle class. This allows for her transnationalization and universalization so that the Iranian woman becomes every woman—and in a sense, every woman becomes Iranian, whether Iranian or not.

Perhaps the lesson of *Certified Copy* and the academic lacuna as to its debt to post-Revolutionary Iranian Reformist and feminist sources and gender debates might be summarized as follows: it is precisely not the untranslatability but the *translatability* of the Islamic site of analysis that is so threatening.

Figures

Figure 1. From *Certified Copy*. Screenshot captured by the author 4 June 2019.

Figure 2. From *Certified Copy*. Screenshot captured by the author 20 June 2019.

Figure 3. From *Certified Copy*. Screenshot captured by the author 20 June 2019.

Figure 4. From *Shirin*. *Screenshot captured by the author 28 August 2020.*

Figure 5. From *Shirin*. *Screenshot captured by the author 28 August 2020.*

Figure 6. From *Certified Copy*. Screenshot captured by the author 20 June 2019.

Figure 7. From *Certified Copy*. Screenshot captured by the author 20 June 2019.

Postscript

In the realm of translation theory adjacent to the academy—by which I mean, translation theory by practicing translators who often, if affiliated with the academy at all, are so affiliated askance, via creative writing departments and programs rather than traditional literary studies—mistranslation is increasingly gaining speed as a branch of translation practice. In a Deridian turn at once serious and ironic, mistranslation has become the newest form of translation itself. One must ask: deconstructed and collapsed, what does either term mean?

The basic idea behind the identification of mistranslation with translation is, in short, that translation is impossible. Given this impossibility, mistranslation becomes the only legitimate way to translate. Implicit here is a postcolonial, anti-imperial stance that views translation as an act of colonization, and in response, calls for the translator's humility.

Consider, for example, J.G. McClure's 2015 article, "In Praise of Mistranslation: On Conversational Translation," in which McClure contemplates variously translated lines from Homer's *Iliad* to conclude that "Although none of them are mistranslations, they all say more about the translator's history and culture than about Homer's. Objectivity is impossible."[143] Rather than "wring our hands and pull our hair and weep," McClure suggests, we might "celebrate the translation as a new piece of art."[144] Humility then gives way to empowerment. The translator exists alongside the author, and deference to the original text's value requires standing on one's own.

Translators and theorists like Johannes Göransson and Joyelle McSweeney take an even darker tone. In *Deformation Zone* (2012),[145] Göransson theorizes translation as a "wound,"

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[143] McClure, J.G. "In Praise of Mistranslations: On Conversational Translation." *The Cleaver*, 11 May 2015. Online.
[144] McClure (above), n.p.
[145] Göransson, Johannes Göransson and Joyelle McSweeney. *Deformation Zone.* New York: Ugly Duckling Press, 2012.

foregrounding the violence of cultural contact. "I would like to think of translation as a wound through which media enters into a textual body," he writes, thus implying that the very act of writing is also a violence, or deformation. Here the psychic violence of imperialism and, more specifically, of Western colonialism—indeed, the latter famously the subject of Franz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), a foundational decolonial text—is generalized to all translation, indeed all writing. Anti-imperialist humility morphs into a deeper self-abnegation, not to mention—ironically, for an argument that aims to critique violence—masochism.

Perhaps by now I have betrayed my skepticism of such skepticism. What of South-South translation? What of, as I have tried to explore above, bilingual translation that claims equal access to North and South cultural positions? The latter does not do away with a North-South power deferential—of course not—but it does manage to complicate it: is translation always an act of violence? Might it in this case be termed an attempt at diasporic self-expression? Is translation always-already failure?

Here I'd like to suggest we approach translation—and with it, mistranslation—from another foot. Like the authors above, I advocate for mistranslation, but I do so as a tool for accurate translation (which I believe in). Above, and especially in chapter three, I have discussed instances in which purposefully mistranslating the literal sense of a word better gets at its political and cultural sense. In translating slang and cursing, the challenge of contemporary translation, mistranslation is a powerful tool. Indeed, based on my own practice, I contend that mistranslation is often the best way to translate the colloquial, and when not the best method to tackle a particular word or phrase, remains necessary to the translator's toolkit.

As the term "toolkit" reveals, I do believe that translation is productive, and I do believe it is a craft. I do not believe it is impossible, not even rhetorically (again, note that McClure's

"impossibility" only opens up possibilities). South-to-North contemporary translation can help deconstruct Orientalist and other cultural stereotypes, as I attempt to do in translating Mahsa Mohebali's work; but the language of impossibility stands too close to engrained imperial and colonial modes that otherize the foreign and claim an Other who is just too different to understand.

As any translator and mistranslator worth her salt, I believe that translation is fundamentally political. My inquiries into race, class, gender, and sexuality above all attempt to grapple with these politics. But I wonder whether our critique of the inequalities that structure our world might be better served by claiming that communicating with one another is never impossible. Not in theory, and not in practice.

- Mariam Rahmani, Los Angeles, April 2021

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