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**Exile from Exile: The representation of cultural memory in contemporary literary texts by exiled Iranian Jewish women writers**

I will specifically examine the representation in memory of attitudes towards and by the Iranian Jews in the Revolutionary and post-Revolutionary periods up to 1989. My focus is on traumatic memory to ascertain its significance in relation to my overall question of whether the Jewish women protagonists are represented as alienated or belonging in Iran. I need to emphasise that the mediation of trauma through the literary texts, is subjective and may confirm or resist the historical narrative.

Firstly, I will ascertain whether the Revolutionary and Post-Revolutionary periods stimulate the return of the traumatic, repressed memory of the Jews having been *najes* (ritually impure), despite most of the protagonists not having personally experienced this past trauma. Indeed, the traces in memory are mediated into relevance by the present, and past memory thereby shifts from merely being the past but becomes part of a continuum of memory of trauma and anti-Semitism. Hence, there is a connection to a repressed, layer of trauma and therefore the present acts like a signifier connecting the past trans-generationally transmitted trauma to the present trauma of the Islamic Revolution. A generalised collective memory of humiliation, denigration and persecution over many generations is transmitted to the Iranian Jewish protagonists by previous generations although silences and resistance to transmitting this memory are represented.

A key concept postulated by Cathy Caruth is that the victim is not only haunted by the violent event but also by the reality of the way that its violence has not yet been fully known. However, for most of the protagonists past traumas are merely a trace because of repression of the trauma by members of the extended family. Yet the profound fear of the threat of re-occurrence enacts an imagined concept of the originary trauma so that both the imagined encounter with death or fear of the encounter with death, and the fear of imagined repetition, are privileged.<sup>1</sup> Although I would concur with Caruth that the extent of the trauma is not precisely grasped given the extent of the unspoken past trauma, nevertheless fear of persecution had become an integral part of the Judeo-Persian psyche.

Nevertheless, the trauma is not only based on the interpretation of past memory for the future but is specifically caused by the actions and rhetoric of the Islamic state. The attitude towards the Revolution shifts to extreme fear when Habib Elghanian, leader of the Iranian Jewish community, is executed. In *Land of No* the execution invokes memories of the old blood libel among the elder Jews but these memories lack resonance for Roya. Likewise, the appearance of a swastika accompanied by the wording "Johouds Get Lost" is meaningful for Roya's father but not for Roya. The state of terror experienced by the perceived, potential victims is reflected in *Wedding Song* just prior to the Revolution in a period of anarchy. Family members are too frightened to emerge from

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<sup>1</sup> Having lived in the *mahaleh*, Farideh in *Wedding Song* had experienced explicit anti-Semitism. Her grandmother had related tales of pogroms of the past.

their homes because of the fear of being attacked by young, angry crowds of religious zealots threatening that the Jews would be their next target.

The Jews are also the target of multiple accusations by the regime. One important area emphasised in Khomeini's rhetoric was that because the Jews rejected Mohammed's message and contested Islam, they were sinners, enemies of God and *najes*. In the texts, one of the main accusations is that Jews prioritise materialism and wealth which is equated to a lack of moral values, corruption, exploitation of the Muslims and being promiscuous sinners. One aspect of their ostensible lack of moral values is the accusation that they were complacent about the existence of SAVAK, the Shah's secret police, and the suffering it inflicted under the Shah. Jewish identity, Zionism and Israel are inextricably linked in Shi'a Iran. According to Roya in *Land of No*, when the Islamic regime states that Israel is Iran's greatest enemy, anti-Semitism is re-awakened (Hakakian 2004: 6). In *Septembers of Shiraz* Isaac Amin is accused of being a Zionist spy and a member of Mossad and Jews generally are suspected of being dangerous, enemy Zionists. Because of the danger, the Iranian Jewish community dissimulates opposition to Zionism and to Israel and insists on being regarded solely as Jews and not as Zionists.

Nevertheless, anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism take religious and political forms which are conflated with other anti-Semitismisms. In some of the literary texts Jews are constructed as the scapegoat for varying reasons. Just prior to the Revolution the Jews are perceived as dangerous aggressors who have carried out killings by order of the Shah. The blood libel is evoked. Feelings about Jews are not only expressed verbally but also physically, as in *Moonlight* the protestors set fire to businesses owned by Jews. Blind hatred of Jews by some Muslims is exemplified, conflated with the religious belief that the Jews are sinners and unbelievers.

It is striking that despite the historical discourse delineating the Jews as victims of the Revolution and Islamic regime, the literary texts to some extent simultaneously resist and confirm the objective facts of history appertaining to the Jews and contradictory narratives are articulated. This can be inherently attributed to the relationship between the factuality of history and its incommensurability with the more subjective structure of personal narrativisation of history in terms of memoir and novel. This is not to doubt the veracity of the historical narrative, but to interrogate the subjective response to it through the heterogeneous literary texts which represent the fictionalisation of historical memory mediated by the complexity of individual, subjective narrative which represent personal versions of history. The individual narrative serves as a counter-memory to official hegemonic history and gender is one of the determining factors as women's history is frequently a counter-history that restores lost history. Generally the historians, who are mainly Jewish males, focus on Jewish aspects of identity in relation to the Revolution and Islamic Republic, whereas the protagonists construct themselves in a more heterogeneous sense.

One area of disparity between subjectivity and definition by the Muslim state is the assumption that all the Jews are Zionists. In the narratives Israel is not meaningful for all

the Jewish protagonists. For Sheyda in *Murs et Miroirs*, the only significance of Israel is in connection with the Passover prayers when she annually recites: 'This year we are in exile but, next year in Jerusalem'. Israel does not evoke any particular feelings for her and she does not understand why she should leave the country of her birth to live in a place she has never seen. The notion of Biblical exile and redemption in the form of Israel is resisted at the pragmatic level of the present which is secular time and space and is in contestation with Biblical time and space analogous to historic, mythical time.

A further aspect of subjectivity is that of gendered counter-memory. These narratives of Jewish women are elided by the historians who are mainly Jewish males.

From a site of exile and therefore belatedness, Roya articulates the trauma of having been denied so much as a Jew, a woman, a secular citizen and a young poet. She thereby separates the categories of Jew and woman, as does Farideh: 'A woman and a Jew, I didn't belong to my country of birth'. The Islamic regime mediates a double segregation as Jews who are women, are represented as doubly impure and dangerous to the cohesion of the Shi'a nation. Hakakian's view is that women generally suffered a greater loss of opportunities than Jews and the literary texts generally privilege the notion of being more oppressed as a woman rather than as a Jew after the Revolution, particularly as Jewish identity could be concealed because the Jewish women looked Iranian.<sup>2</sup> In *Septembers of Shiraz* Shala, a Jewish woman, is attacked on the basis of her female identity in that men throw acid into her face because she is wearing her headscarf loosely exemplifying the fact that all women are endangered under the regime which deems that the purity of the nation must be safeguarded by its women.

Nevertheless, the two categories of Jew and woman are connected by Roya's use of the metaphor of Nazi symbols so that the Jewish woman can be considered Jew, woman and Jewish woman. For Roya the compulsion for women to veil causes her to feel exiled in her home town because of the enforced segregation signified by the wearing of the scarf and she expresses her abhorrence by linking the symbol of Jewish segregation under the Nazis with the shock of the enforced wearing of the hijab.: 'We were girls living in a female ghetto. Instead of yellow armbands, we wore the sign of inferiority on our heads'. Suffering and trauma linked to fear and denigration are embodied in the memory of the Iranian Jewish protagonists because of their identity both as Jews and as Jewish women so that I posit a doubling of the wound.

Although the historian, David Menashri, suggests that Khomeini's Islamic doctrine inevitably led to the Jews being treated as inferior to the Muslim majority, the situation described by the narrators is more nuanced. Despite the perceived threat to the Jewish community with the onset of the Revolution, a desire for equality for all Iranian people is represented by the Jewish protagonists. They thereby situate themselves in the main discourse of the nation rather than positioning themselves as marginalised Jews. In *Land of No*, totally committed to the ideology of the Revolution, Roya declares that Khomeini will liberate Iranians given that the masses suffered so that a few could lead a life of

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<sup>2</sup> This concealment of Jewish identity was reiterated by female Iranian Jewish interviewees in Los Angeles (October 2009).

luxury. She perceives the multiple executions, including Elghanian's, as justified punishment for those who had caused the misery of the downtrodden. Elaborating on the significance of the Revolution, Roya provides an underlying reason for Jewish students joining the Revolution, that is, to enact a shift in their identities to that of secular Iranians who will assimilate into the new Iran promised by the Revolution. However, a sense of betrayal and anger is represented by the Jewish protagonists as they are defined solely as Jewish by the Islamic regime. There is a disparity between the construction of Jewish identity by the Islamic regime and by the Jewish protagonists themselves and this is a trauma. In several texts this is manifested in the characters' realisation of their mistaken idealisation of the Revolution and of the belief that the Jews are truly Iranian.

In connection with a sense of belonging, an aspect that is both implicit and explicit in the narratives is the Jewish concern about separation from the Muslim majority due to their Jewish identity. The characters resist and subvert the construct of the polarised Jew alienated from the majority. In *Wedding Song*, prior to the Revolution, Farideh articulates her anxiety at being considered untrustworthy as a Jew, enacted by her Muslim friends ceasing talking to her. It is telling that once more, the Jews are defined by the other according to the latter's assumptions and the Jews therefore feel endangered. For Isaac in *Septembers of Shiraz*, because of his prison experience of having been tortured because of his Jewish identity, he realises he has metamorphosed into the traditional Jew in contestation with his own definition of himself as a secular Jew. Roya feels resentful about being stereotyped as the weak, cowardly Jew. The pervasive desire to belong in contestation with the hegemonic discourse of the regime is represented.

Nevertheless, the texts emphasise that with the new regime everyone, not only Jews, suffered and experienced fear and this representation challenges the hegemonic representation by the historians of a polarisation between Jew and Muslim. Concepts are inversed and established notions of truth, causality and meaning, shift leading to the instability of temporality. Time is also 'out-of-joint' because of the pervasiveness and proximity of violent, premature death. There is a pervasive sense of the confusion, fear and powerlessness of the characters negotiating new, unfamiliar political parameters where from their perspective cruelty and chaos predominate.

It is noteworthy that further layers of memory from exile construct an alternative dialectic. Belatedness is represented as Hakakian states that Iran was not an anti-Semitic nation given that there had been two thousand years of a history of co-existence between Jews and their Persian neighbours. She asserts that the regime's campaign was against secularism and modernism and that waging the war against the Jews was easier under the old, familiar guise of anti-Semitism. She explains that her family left Iran not because of anti-Semitism, but because academic and professional opportunities were decreasing for those who did not subscribe to the ruling ideology. This affected everyone but specifically women and members of religious minorities. Nevertheless, in interviews with exiled Iranian Jews in Los Angeles, a constant trope was that of the profound humiliation experienced by the Jews and the concomitant agony of being shaped by another. The contrast between the repressed narrative of trauma and the verbal representation from the space of exile is striking. Yet, further shifts arise as some of the interviewees condoned, rationalised or justified the discrimination.

The underlying discourse is of a conflicted, ambiguous, liminal space both of imagined belonging to Iran and of victimisation and exclusion. Some minimise anti-Semitism to belong to the Iranian nation as otherwise they would be situated in a liminal space of non-belonging in exile.