ABSTRACT

Dissertation Title: FIGURES OF EXCESS: SUBVERSIVE NARRATIVE STRATEGIES IN CONTEMPORARY IRANIAN WOMEN'S LITERATURE AND CINEMA

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This study seeks "formal" and "thematic" excess in the works of contemporary Iranian novelists and filmmakers, including Shahrnush Parsipur, Moniru Ravanipur, Fariba Vafi, and Marzieh Meshkini. It strives to develop new critical perspectives on the literary contributions of these works in terms of female resistance through their employment of figures of excess. Exploring excessive woman-subjects, the first chapter of this study engages with Shahrnush Parsipur's, novel, *Women without Men* and a number of her other novels, which provide fertile sites for extraordinary and defiant women, who subvert standards of womanhood in Iranian culture. Seeking excess, embodied in strange themes, the second chapter of this study investigates Moniru Ravanipur's magical realist novel, *The Drowned* in conjunction with Parsipur's science fiction novel, *Shiva.* It argues that excessive/strange themes enable each author to

articulate her particular message: favoring fast-paced social and economic progress through highly advanced technologies in *Shiva*, and the preservation of long standing tradition in *The Drowned.*

The third chapter of this study engages with Fariba Vafi's novels, *My Bird* and *A Secret in the Alleys,* in terms of excessive non-verbal and verbal acts, such as "internal monologue" and "verbosity." It demonstrates that in both novels the protagonists' active engagement with traumatic experiences, facilitated by memory and internal monologues, enables them to ultimately process trauma into language. The fourth chapter of this study examines the representations of women in Jafar Panahi's film, *The Circle* (2000), and Marzieh Meshkini's film debut, *The Day I Became a Woman* (2000). It argues that in both films excess not only manifests in "circular" narrative forms, but also in themes and images that evoke the motif of the circle. It argues that these themes speak to the perpetual sense of captivity and despair many women feel in the post-revolutionary Iranian society, for example, those belonging to the rural poor as in *The Day*, or, the urban poor and lower-middle classes as in *The Circle*.

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Preface

"Now I am in a manner that I can split the sun,
like a pomegranate
and from its shining juice,
make my pen's ink
I can now reveal the hiding place of the sun at night
I can even roll away the night
like a tattered scroll
and store it away in a corner."

Pizhvak-e Sukut [The Echo of Silence], Fereshteh Sari (1989)

This study seeks "formal" and "thematic" excess in the works of contemporary Iranian novelists and filmmakers, including Shahrnush Parsipur, Moniru Ravanipur, Fariba Vafi, and Marzieh Meshkini. It strives to develop new critical perspectives on the literary contributions of these works in terms of female resistance through their employment of figures of excess. I provide, here, descriptions for the two main categories (mentioned above) I use in my analyses, as well as a combination of various definitions of the term excess relevant to my critical purpose. Since each chapter in this work examines different manifestations of excess, I begin my analysis by highlighting the type of excess and the main theme/s I study in every chapter. With the concept of excess taking a somewhat abstract meaning in the context of literary criticism, I hope that my developing arguments, related evidence, and examples produce a clearer understanding of the particular permutation of the concept in each section and the way it conveys resistance.

My search for sources, at times even traces, of subversion in the works I engage with in this study employs a number of pertinent definitions of the term "excess" that include: "the state or an instance of surpassing usual, proper, or specified limits"; "the amount or degree by which one thing […] exceeds another"; "an act or instance of intemperance,"[1] and "outrageous or immoderate behavior."[2] At the same time, by excess, in the context of this work, I also refer to a tendency that is perhaps inherent to some, if not all, of these definitions. In her extensive study of "the sacred" in *Recite in the Name of the Red Rose*, Fatemeh Keshavarz uses the expression "tendency for expansion" as a "defining characteristic" of the concept (165). I would like to borrow the expression from Keshavarz since it is pertinent to the point I want to make with respect to the idea of excess here. True, it represents extreme, extraordinary, and at times strange subjects and spaces, but the notion of excess I seek and study in the forthcoming chapters also possesses a "tendency for expansion," a persistent desire for (outward and inward) movement that speaks to its subversive potential.

My definition of the two main categories of excess in this study follows a less abstract logic. Whereas by "thematic excess" my analysis refers to concepts, themes, and characters that in some way exceed the norms, such as mermaids and sea monsters, even the sea, in Ravanipur's novel, *The Drowned*; a woman giving birth to a morning glory as in Parsipur's novel, *Women without Men*; a woman speaking loudly and openly (but not necessarily a madwoman) as in Vafi's novel, *A Secret in the Alleys*, or, even a gypsy, by "formal excess" I mainly refer to stylistic strategies that enable literary or filmic

[1] www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/excess.

[2] https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/excess.

narratives to exceed the bounds of their particular structure or genre, such as the intrusive narrator in Ravanipur's novels, *The Drowned* and *Gypsy by the Fire*, or, the circular narrative form in Meshkini's film, *The Day I Became a Woman*.

Prior to planning this study, my decade-long writings and inquiries into notions of madness/hysteria, female desire and subversion provided the impetus for a critical investigation of excess and the many ways I believe it translates into resistance. The task before me was as enlightening as it was challenging. A large number of contemporary feminist novels by Iranian (and western) writers solidified my belief in the subversive potential of both thematic and formal excess, and yet, I found the critical work done about this narrative niche, especially by contemporary Iranian scholars, to be scant, a "road-less-travelled," as it were. In general terms, even works categorized as "critical" often lacked the investigative depth I sought in secondary sources to sustain and reinforce my methodology. Subsequently, I expanded my inquiries further into Western theoretical frameworks—such as French feminist theory, psychoanalytic theory, and cultural theory—as well as art and poetry. In more specific terms, however, I had the keen insight of a handful of Iranian scholars illuminating my writings, individuals whose pioneering works paved the way for hundreds of women and for the germination of studies such as this.

Though they came far and in between, highly rebellious, intelligent, and curious women occupied Iran's literary scene as far back as the nineteenth century. But, especially after the 1979 revolution, Iranian scholars began to learn and write extensively about female icons such as Tahirih Qorratul-'Ayn (1814-1852)[3], the influential poet and

[3] Because of her outspoken attitude and blatant refusal to give up her faith, she was imprisoned and ultimately strangled with her own veil in 1852.

theologian of the Babi faith, and Taj-al-Saltanah (1883-1936), the writer, painter, activist for women's rights, and Qajar princess. Both women unveiled themselves, left their arranged unions, and spoke openly about their beliefs and desires. Farzaneh Milani describes the recent flourishing of Iranian women's literature as a "literary renaissance" and one of the "collateral, unexpected benefits of the 1979 Islamic Revolution" (133). According to Milani, while only a few Iranian women penned fiction prior to the 1960s, today the number of woman novelists in Iran nearly equals that of the men. Indeed, during the past several decades, Iranian women have used literary and visual arts to convey many of their personal and political concerns. The fact that most of the novels I analyze here were published after 1979 is a testament to Milani's claim. At the same time, it is important to remember that the recent surge in Iranian women's artistic and political endeavors is the continuation of their long history of activism that precedes the contemporary era.

Two of the most noteworthy epochs in the women's movement in Iran were their widespread participation in the Constitutional Revolution (1906-1911) and in 1953, at the time of the CIA-engineered coup to overthrow Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddeq, who had sought to nationalize Iran's oil industry. Perhaps partly because of Iran's history of invasions and Western domination, the plight of women in Iranian literature is often woven into the country's fight for freedom from despotism and foreign influence. Sharhnush Parsipur's magic realism[4] novel, *Women without Men* (published in Iran in

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[4] In *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, Lois Parkinson Zamora, and Wendy B. Faris define magical realism as "a mode suited to exploring—and transgressing—boundaries, whether the boundaries are ontological, political, geographical, or generic. Magical realism often facilitates the fusion, or coexistence, of possible worlds, spaces, systems that would be irreconcilable in other modes of fiction. […] Mind and body, spirit and matter, life and death, real and imaginary, self and other, male and female: these are the boundaries to be erased, transgressed, blurred, brought together, or otherwise fundamentally refashioned in magical realist texts" (5).

1989), is an example of this thematic strategy, foregrounding its female protagonists' struggle for agency and autonomy against the countrywide protests and unrest that took place in the summer of 1953. Having a broad historical view of Iran's sociopolitical climate since before the 1979 revolution, Parsipur does not perceive the plight of the individual and that of her homeland as mutually exclusive, and this position renders her feminist-conscious novel politically charged too.

In the first chapter of the present study, I engage with Parsipur's *Women without Men* and a number of her other novels, which provide fertile sites for extraordinary and defiant women who subvert standards of womanhood in Iranian culture and pursue their desires regardless of the consequences. Hamid Dabashi, in his essay on the subversive aspect of the works of the famed Iranian filmmaker, Dariush Mehrjui, writes: "The greatest privilege we have as human beings is the ability to say no" (Life and Art 134). This ability is what sets Parsipur's protagonists apart from the majority of their female compatriots: they say "no," and they say it quite often. Once they have had enough, they are simply unafraid to say no to convention and to domineering men who, because of their overt disobedience, perceive them as strange, wayward, and loose. Their boldness and eccentricity, the depth of their desires and the force of their ambitions, as well as the intrepid spirit that moves them toward self-discovery and transformation render these women "excessive" in the context of this study (and, often, in the eyes of their traditional cultural milieu).

Influenced by Iranian and European writers and intellectuals of the 1970s and 1980s, Parsipur's brand of realism has a socialist dimension in that it views the writer as

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In "Magical Realism and the Search for Identity in the Fiction of Murakami Haruki," Matthew Strecher defines magical realism as "what happens when a highly detailed, realistic setting is invaded by something too strange to believe" (267).

“committed” to improving her society through literature, what Jean Paul Sartre coined as *littérature engagé.* As such, her novels demonstrate her belief in improving women’s conditions as well as that of the larger collective. While similar to those of her Latin-American predecessors, such as Gabriel Garcia Márquez and Elena Garro, the magical elements in her magical realist novels also encompass mystical thought such as Lao-Tze’s philosophies and the principles of Tao[5]. I address this aspect of Parsipur’s works in the last section of this chapter, “Death, Rebirth, and Nature,” while I examine her novel *Blue Logos* [Aghl-e Abi] (Iran, 1994), and her short story, “The Blue Spring of Katmandu,” (Iran, 1974). Focusing on excessive female subjects, my analysis in this chapter makes use of Judith Butler’s deliberations on gender identity and subversion in *Gender Trouble*, while it also draws on theories of Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva, among others, to explain the manner in which marginality allows Parsipur’s characters to gain some measure of agency. At the same time, my arguments rely on the works of scholars such as Farzaneh Milani and Fatemeh Keshavarz for their insight into modern and contemporary Iranian literature.

In the second chapter, I engage with Moniru Ravanipur’s magical realist novels *The Drowned* (Iran, 1989) and *Gypsy by the Fire* (Iran, 1999), in conjunction with Parsipur’s science fiction novel, *Shiva* (Iran, 1999). Whereas *Shiva* depicts far-fetched inventions and highly advanced technologies as means of social progress through a postmodern science fiction narrative, *The Drowned* leans toward the preservation of long-standing traditions by imagining a remote village, where magical creatures and humans coexist far from civilization and in perfect harmony with nature. Examining *Shiva* and *The Drowned*

[5] Between 1976 and 1980, Pasrsipur studied Chinese language and civilization at the Sorbonne University in Paris, France.

closely, I argue that through excess, embodied in strange themes, each novel articulates its particular brand of resistance. In my inquiries into Ravanipur's works, I often turn to Farnaz Hasanali-zadeh's extensive study, *Az Khak be Khakestar* [From Dirt to Ashes: An Analysis of Moniru Ravanipur's Works], especially in the last section of this chapter, "Time, Space, and Shifting Realities," where I examine Ravanipur's novel, *Gypsy by the Fire,* with respect to formal excess. While in *The Drowned* and *Gypsy by the Fire* formal excess manifests in the intrusive narrators, in *Shiva,* a surplus of social and political criticisms and commentaries overwhelm the soft science fiction genre, thus giving the novel the impression of a political essay.

My analysis in this chapter focuses on the ways in which both "thematic excess"—e.g., extraordinary inventions and fantastical creatures—as well as "formal excess"—e.g., stylistic/genre experimentations—germinate various forms of resistance. Literary genres such as science fiction and magical realism provide an auspicious area for the study of excess, because they envision surreal subjects and situations that push the limits of imagination, rationality, and what we conventionally believe to be reality. It is likely because of their ever-expansive creative potential and liberating quality that Iranian writers such as Parsipur and Ravanipur resorted to these genres to express ideas that often seemed difficult (or dangerous) to represent otherwise.

In the third chapter, I engage with Fariba Vafi's meditative novels, *My Bird* (Iran, 2002) and *A Secret in the Alleys* (Iran, 2008), in terms of excessive non-verbal and verbal acts, such as "internal monologue"[6] and "verbosity."[7] My analysis seeks to demonstrate

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[6] In the context of this study, I consider the expressions "internal monologue" and "interiority" as interchangeable. By both expressions my analysis refers to the character's inward talk with herself, colloquially referred to as self-talk.

[7] In the context of this study, the term refers to being highly vocal and expressive.

that in both novels the protagonists' engagement with traumatic experiences, facilitated by memory and internal monologues, enable them to ultimately process trauma into language. Drawing on Ann Kaplan's reflections on trauma narratives in *Trauma Culture* and Lisa Hinrichsen's writings on the emancipatory function of memory in *Possessing the Past*, I argue that the female heroes in Vafi's novels resort to excessive internal monologues in order to inwardly articulate memories of conflict and abuse, before they can heal and gain an outward voice. Utilizing Kathleen Rowe's *The Unruly Woman,* in the second section of this chapter, I focus on verbosity as a strategy to transgress patriarchal norms. I provide examples from *A Secret*, and Vafi's other novels, to clarify the distinction between verbosity and silence, while I also examine other non-verbal acts that constitute resistance, such as walking.

Similar to the recent body of literature produced by native Iranian writers or those living in exile, post-revolutionary Iranian cinema[8], deeply rooted in the country's literary tradition, has had a significant role in bringing vital gender-related issues to the forefront of culture and politics. The New Iranian cinema's political tone, figurative language and the fact that it has afforded Iranian women a voice both in front of and behind the camera, thus providing them with opportunities for *self*-representation, make it relevant to this study. Therefore, in its fourth and final chapter, I examine the representations of women in Jafar Panahi's film, *The Circle* (2000), and Marzieh Meshkini's film debut, *The Day I Became a Woman* (2000). Having won a number of international awards and facing a panoply of screening difficulties[9] inside Iran because of their candid portrayal of

[8] Currently referred to as the New Iranian cinema.

[9] *The Circle* is still banned from screening in Iran. *The Day I Became a Woman* was released for screening in Iran, after resolving issues over certain shots—e.g., a young girl sucking on a lollipop.

women's lives, both films depict women's quest for fulfillment and freedom in a theocratic system fraught with public scrutiny, mandatory veiling, and rampant scarcity of social activities and professional opportunities.

As my analysis demonstrates, in *The Circle* and *The Day I Became a Woman* excess not only manifests in "circular" narrative forms, but also in themes and images that evoke the concept of "circle"[10]—e.g., a young female inmate giving birth to a baby girl in prison. Drawing on Dabashi's reflections in *Masters and Masterpieces of Iranian Cinema*, I argue that these themes speak to the perpetual sense of captivity and despair many women feel in the post-revolutionary Iranian society, for example, those belonging to the rural poor as in *The Day*, or, the urban poor and lower-middle classes as in *The Circle*. Since both films end where they begin—the beach in *The Day* and a prison cell in *The Circle*—they represent formal excess through a circular narrative form. While both films employ circularity to highlight the idea that women's circumstances in Iran, in some cases, resemble a vicious cycle, they also subvert the influence of the circle by collapsing all temporalities into the present in the end.

In the last section of this chapter, "On the Path to Becoming: Resistance and *Jouissance*," my analysis seeks to illuminate the concept of "becoming," as well as themes that evoke the idea of circle. Considering the female characters' pursuit of pleasure and fulfillment and their efforts to subvert patriarchal influences, I argue that both represent thematic excess in *The Day*. Working closely with Farhang Erfani's critical study, *Iranian Cinema and Philosophy: Shooting Truth*, I draw on the Lacanian

[10] In the context of this study, I assume that the concept of circle signifies excess due to its close relationship with notions of perpetuity and eternity.

theories of female desire to explain the subversive aspects of women's pursuits in Meshkini's film.

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1. Excessive Subjects: Shahrnush Parsipur's *Women without Men* and the Girl Who Became a Tree

"The unruly woman is especially vulnerable to pollution taboos because by definition she transgresses boundaries and steps out of her proper place. Women who do so, intentionally or not, have always risked punishment, from accusations of witchcraft, hysteria, and madness, to the more subtle forms of social ostracism […] Angry women […] are dangerous and vulnerable not because of their intentions but because their anger unsettles ideologies of gender."

The Unruly Woman, Kathleen Rowe (1995)

I. The Conflict in the Self

In her seminal work, *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler points to an evident paradox in the representation of women as "political subjects," claiming that even though such representation can be a means of extending "visibility and legitimacy to women, […] the domains of political and linguistic 'representation'" will grant this privilege only to those they already acknowledge as "subjects," that is to say, men (7). In other words, so long as women are defined by the masculine linguistic system, which refuses to grant them subjecthood—what Sally Robinson describes as the difference between the two distinctions: "women" and "Woman"—they will not be represented as political subjects (Engendering the Subject 190). Of course, by woman as a "political subject," I am referring to woman's overall authority and voice within the pubic sphere, which, ultimately, translates into her authority in the realm of politics.

On the other hand, Robinson contends that women cannot achieve this privileged position by "usurping the (masculine) place of enunciation, without changing the politics of enunciation" (191). What women can do instead, Robinson suggests, "is a radical rethinking of what it means to be a subject and, specifically, what it means to become a woman-subject in patriarchal cultures" (191). According to Robinson, women can, in fact, achieve subjecthood—through "*self*-representation"—by negotiating between "normative representations of Woman […] and what those representations leave out: the possibility that women can be subjects of discourse and history" (190). In this chapter, I argue that women can become subjects—architects of their own destinies—
when they transgress conventional definitions of womanhood, when they begin to think outside of the masculine logic, when they learn to speak the language of their own desire, and when they "*self*-represent," often from the margins of the patriarchal discursive systems. Working through Shahrnush Parsipur's magical realist novel, *Women without Men*, and a number of her other works, I examine excessive woman-subjects who boldly defy tradition, step outside of the domestic sphere, embrace the perils of the unknown, and ultimately speak out and "*self*-represent" on their own terms and from marginal places of enunciation (190).

A common theme in the majority of Parsipur's novels, but perhaps most evident in *Women without Men*, is the determination to leave the safety of one's home and seek a life beyond what convention prescribes. Stemming from a conflict in the self, the desire for independence, mobility and transformation is a personality trait that most of Parsipur's female characters share. Indeed, Parsipur's women are unapologetically ambitious. What is more, they tend to confront their circumstances and the possibility of

resisting their fates the way a child would face a risky situation. That is not to say blindly, but with a defiant sense of purpose that flouts most fears and concerns. In fact, this unique resolve, often nuanced by a certain innocence, leads to the germination of excessive personas for whom growing in the ground like a tree, rising from the dead, giving birth to one's own twin or a flower, time travel, and reading minds become somewhat of a second nature. This, indeed, is the main objective of this chapter: to shed light on the excessive facets of Parsipur's women and the function of such excess as a novel mode of resistance.

Nowhere is this sort of idiosyncrasy more evident than in the character of Mahdokht[11], one of five female protagonists in *Women without Men*. Despite having "no tolerance for conflict of any kind," to the point of wishing for "universal harmony even among all shades of green in the world," Mahdokht is a world of contradictions (Women without Men 1). A young schoolteacher and a self-proclaimed spinster, she pines for the opportunity to travel far and beyond, while at the same time she is frightened by how this freedom may affect her chastity and honor. Mahdokht's narrow perception and confusion are evident in the way she thinks about her name. She finally comes to the conclusion that becoming a tree is the best way to realize her wish for freedom and new experiences. But, as she contemplates becoming a "tropical tree," she worries whether foreigners, ignorant as to her origin, would corrupt her name by mispronouncing it: "Madokt," "Madok," "Madik" (9). Even when Mahdokht examines her features in the mirror, she hardly displays a clear sense of recognition. Eventually, she reminds herself, "I am a tree.

[11] A combination of "mah," meaning "moon," and "dokht," meaning "daughter," in Persian.

[…] I should plant myself," and because she is unable to separate her identity from her preoccupation with chastity and virginity—likely because that is what her culture does—she believes that her virginity is a tree too (8).

Mahdokht's fixation with others' mispronunciation of her name points to her identity crisis, and it speaks to her insularity and seclusion. Her conflict underscores the connection between naming and one's ability to identify with the self. Living a life of seclusion in a very traditional Iranian home, Mahdokht does not seem to know what she really needs or deserves. In many ways, she has been invisible to others, and, as a result, she seems incapable of *seeing* herself as worthy of having desires and ambitions. In her article, "Beyond Equality: Feminism and the Power of Naming," Rebecca Kotz refers to naming women as a way of resisting patriarchal influences and reaffirming the feminine self. Associating "being named" not only with being recognized (and valued) by others, but also with self-recognition and self-empowerment, Kotz writes, "[We] have been overlooked all our lives. Our achievements, ideas, and accomplishments have been historically attributed to men. So, women need to be seen, women need to be heard, and women need to be *named*" (Kotz). Mahdokht's struggle to identify with her self is the beginning of her quest. The next step, as Keshavarz declares, is to hold on to her imagination and "get out of the corner that has been 'assigned' to her" (Jasmine and Stars 86).

As she contemplates planting herself in her family's garden in Karaj[12], Mahdokht comes upon one of their servant girls having sex with a gardener one day. In spite of her benevolence toward the young and the poor, she wishes that the girl were dead: "I wish

[12] A small city and a vacation destination outside of Tehran.

she had gotten pregnant so they [the girl's brothers] would have killed her" (8). An indication of her sexual repression, Mahdokht's hatred for the girl is rooted in her preoccupation with chastity and virginity. She strives to make sense of what she has seen, and she recalls being asked on dates on multiple occasions but refusing the offers every time to prove she is a decent girl. She feels utterly lonesome, but being steeped in traditional views of femininity, she sees her wish as the only means of breaking away from her limited existence, while still maintaining her chastity (8). In his essay, "Breaking Taboos in Iranian Women's Literature," Kamran Talattof argues that Mahdokht's reaction toward the young girl has to do with her confusion and inability to articulate her own sexuality: "She is not able to clarify her position on the issues that subsequently arise in her mind. She therefore wishes to become a tree in a garden to escape the pressure of dealing with her thoughts" (44). Mahdokht's wish to become a tree may be viewed as her refusal to face the cultural underpinnings of her oppression, or to confront the complex question of her sexuality, as Talattof claims. But on the other hand, her extraordinary choice signifies a subversive act, one that ultimately transcends normative definitions of female desire and pleasure.

By virtue of becoming a tree, Mahdokht's new subjectivity allows her to devise a new language of desire that is all her own, outside of the "phallocratic sexual economy" (This Sex Which Is Not One 199). By planting herself on a riverbank and hoping to grow roots in the ground, Mahdokht unsettles the patriarchal logic. Her peculiar choice also challenges what heteronormative standards define as feminine sexual pleasure. In *This Sex Which Is Not One*, Luce Irigaray encourages women to be open to different forms of pleasure in lieu of what customs and conventions dictate: "And if you find yourselves

attracted by something other than what *their* laws, rules, and rituals prescribe, realize that—perhaps—you have come across *your* nature" (203). According to Irigaray, throughout the history of Western philosophy men have defined female nature. Men, as Irigaray claims, have taught women their needs and desires without allowing them to have "a word to say on the subject" (203). Surely, Western philosophy with its long-standing patriarchal leanings had its reasons for this supremacy. In order to purge female desire from its original folly (that of Eve, of course), and to also control female sexuality (and female authority), both concepts have been linked to heterosexual love and marriage. At the same time, the concept of heterosexual union/marriage has been linked to notions of property and ownership throughout history.

Through her peculiar choice, Mahdokht flouts the eternal myth of heterosexual bliss and its presuppositions relating to property and ownership—a woman belonging to a man and/or vice versa. By choosing to become a tree in order to achieve fulfillment and freedom, Mahdokht resists heterosexual pleasure. What is more, the unilateral way in which she seeks pleasure unsettles the Freudian theory of female desire as a perpetual "lack," resulting from what Freud conceptualizes as "penis envy." Because she envisions her desire outside of the parameters of the male (or even female) sex, Mahdokht's desire is essentially non-gendered. Far from a "dark continent," here, Parsipur creates a continent of her own, where woman engages in self-pleasure and self-love, in lieu of heterosexual love. According to Irigaray, heteronormative standards of sexuality and the Freudian theories of female desire have deprived women not only of their own pleasure, but also their autonomy and freedom. In other words, the glorification of heterosexuality

and romantic love in patriarchal cultures, as Irigaray argues, have been detrimental to women's agency in both their private and public lives:

> 'Penis envy' translates woman's resentment and jealousy at being deprived of the advantages, especially the sexual advantages, reserved for men alone: 'autonomy', 'freedom', 'power', and so on; but it also expresses her resentment at having been largely excluded […] from political, social, and cultural responsibilities. 'Love' has been the only recourse, and for that reason she has elevated it to the rank of sole and absolute value (51).

What is more, realizing her wish allows Mahdokht to gain insight into her self as well as the inner life of a tree. Unsettling the masculine logic, her decision to merge with nature mythologizes female desire. It expands notions of identity, femininity, and pleasure by imagining a non-linear cosmos wherein woman and nature connect across multiple planes. In *Leaping Poetry,* Robert Bly discovers a "floating leap" at the center of many great works of art, a leap that facilitates the flight from "the conscious to the unconscious" (1). Describing this quality, Bly writes, "In all art derived from Great Mother mysteries, the leap to the unknown part of the mind lies in the very center of the work" (1). According to Bly, living open to one's natural instincts provides the necessary "innocence" to move back and forth between the known and the unknown aspects of the psyche. In *Women without Men* the reader is privy to such a leap through Mahdokht's extraordinary transformation into a tree—from that of an "object soaked in conscious psychic substance to an object or idea soaked in unconscious substance" (Bly 4). Parsipur recognizes the liberating quality of such a leap, while she also believes that it may be

more native to women given their (biological) resemblance to nature. In an interview with Luna Shad in 2009, Parsipur expressed her views on woman's kinship with nature:

> […] As women, our minds, for some reason, are more in harmony with nature. If you consider earth, it is quite feminine. You plant a seed there and it grows. The earth is capable of being pregnant and giving birth. If you consider the sky, it also seems like a vast uterus that contains all the stars, planets, and galaxies. Therefore, a woman is no stranger to nature and life (translation mine).

Even though some critics take issue with this ideology, claiming that it propagates the repressive idea of "biology-as-destiny," Parsipur's views on femininity go hand in hand with her belief in the mutuality between the sexes. Her perspective may seem too idealistic to some, however, for Parsipur, women's kinship with nature and their ability to perpetuate life do not render them inferior to men; rather, they endow women with mystical powers that are theirs alone. I return to this issue in the last section of this chapter, discussing death, rebirth, and nature.

Quite like Mahdokht, Munis, another protagonist in *Women without Men*, is curious about her sexuality, and she wants to understand the language of her body. After her conversation with her best friend, Faiza, about virginity and finding out that it is an "orifice" as opposed to a "membrane," Munis feels so disheartened that she contemplates suicide. Recognizing her lifelong misconception about her body reminds Munis of her sense of confinement in her parents' home and her overall ignorance because of her isolation:

> Munis was thinking obsessively that for as long as she could remember she had looked at the garden through the window convinced that virginity was a delicate, vulnerable membrane. At the age of eight she had been told that God would not forgive a girl who lost her virginity in any way. […] Something had broken inside her and a cold rage penetrated her body. She thought of her childhood days when she had longingly looked at hedges and trees, hoping for a time in her life when she could freely climb them without compromising her virginity (25).

Although the conversation between Faiza and Munis about virginity may appear trivial to some readers, in the context of the Iranian culture, especially in the 1980s when *Women without Men* was published, the subject of woman's virginity was not only a delicate matter, in many ways defining her reputation, but it was also a cultural taboo in the realm of public discourse. These facts speak to the novel's initial censorship by the authorities (*Women without Men* is still banned in Iran) as well as Parsipur's courage as a writer. Different than most of her contemporaries, Parsipur cares little, if at all, about such proprieties, so her novels often entail explorations in sexuality as a part of their protagonists' personal journeys.

As with Mahdokht, Munis's desire for a deeper awareness of her body is entwined with a hankering for a better understanding of the world. Forbidden from going outside and participating in the anti-Shah protests, Munis feels utterly confined and conflicted. She cannot think of a viable alternative to the stagnant life she has been living, so she seizes the small measure of agency she can grab and takes a leap. After watching the raucous throngs of demonstrators expressing their support for the nationalist Prime

Minister, Mohammad Mosadeq, Munis closes her eyes and jumps off the roof of her house. But she does not die. She rises to her feet and wanders the streets for a whole month, watching people, visiting shops, and reading books. When she returns home, she is assertive, fearless, and clairvoyant. To preserve his honor, her tyrannical brother, Amir, stabs her then buries her body in their backyard. But when her friend Faiza digs her up, Munis surfaces once again. The two women decide to leave their homes behind and go to Karaj to "live by the fruits of [their] own labor and not to have any [man] to order [them] around" (68). Even though truck drivers rape them and leave them on the side of the road, Munis and Faiza continue on their path until they arrive at the garden in Karaj, where all of the five protagonists in the novel ultimately congregate.

At the same time, in a different part of the city[13], a young prostitute by the name of Zarrinkolah is also having an identity crisis. Though of a jolly temperament, Zarrinkolah, who has to serve more than thirty customers each day, begins to see them as headless. Troubled by the possibility that she may be going mad, she leaves the brothel for the local bathhouse, where she spends hours scrubbing her body. Finally, she breaks down and cries. By the time she arrives at the shrine of Shah Abdolazim, the doors are closed, and she spends the night alone in the courtyard under the moonlight. Zarrinkolah's transformation begins in the bathhouse and continues into her night of solitude. When they open the doors of the shrine in the morning, she does not go inside. She does not cry anymore either. As Keshavarz elucidates in *Jasmine and Stars*, "There are no teachers or holy figures involved" in her cleansing; all "the purity comes from

[13] Tehran.

within her" (95). Revived by her new freedom and thirsty for "a breath of cool air" amid the summer heat, she, too, heads for Karaj (66).

By the time Munis, Faiza, and Zarrinkolah arrive in Karaj, a wealthy widow by the name of Farrokhlaqa, who has accidentally killed her husband by pushing him off the stairway, decides to purchase the garden in Karaj from Mahdokht's family. The women hear from the locals about the garden and its new owner, so they make their way there. Since she does not wish to live there alone, Farrokhlaqa allows the women to live in the garden on the condition that they help her with the chores. As a result, all of the four protagonists end up living in the garden, where Mahdokht has planted herself.

The women's decision to leave the city and sojourn in the Karaj garden points to the binary nature of the symbolic system, often associating femininity with nature (and disorder) and masculinity with logic (and order). At the same time, subverting the male order and seeking refuge in nature afford them time and space for contemplation and growth. In fact, a number of contemporary novels highlight this desire for breaking away from the bonds of patriarchy, as a strategy for gaining insight into the self. In Margaret Atwood's, novel, *Surfacing,* for example, the protagonist, who is searching for her missing father, abandons her companions and spends days in the wilderness, ruminating her past, meandering in the forest, drinking water from creeks and sleeping in caves. In *Of Woman Born*, Adrienne Rich describes the purpose behind this young woman's wandering in the wilderness:

> She has worked her way back—through fasting and sacrifice—beyond patriarchy. She cannot stay there: the primitive (her father's solution, the male—ultimately the fascist—solution) is not the answer; she has to go

> and live out her existence this time. But she has had her illumination; she has seen her mother (242).

Indeed, "living out [their] existence" is exactly what Parsipur's protagonists do. As Rich's text suggests, woman's quest for self often leads to the mother, not one's birth mother per se, but the cosmic force that gives birth to all. Rich further elucidates the way Atwood's protagonist draws knowledge and strength from Mother Nature:

> The search for the father leads to reunion with the mother, who is at home in the wilderness, Mistress of the Animals. In some obscure, subconscious way, Atwood's narrator begins to recognize and accept her own power through her moment of vision, her brief, startling visitation from her mother (242).

In *Women without Men* the garden not only unifies the women, but it also allows them to unite aspects of their fragmented self. Away from the city's male-dominated setting, nature and solitude afford them wisdom and the opportunity to change. In an interview titled *Destruction & Language*, Marguerite Duras underscores the importance of breaking away from the strictures of a man-made hierarchical system—convention, patriarchy, all that feed and breed the male order—as a way of self-discovery and transformation:

> I am speaking, if you will, of man's passage through a void: the fact is, [s]he forgets everything. So as to be able to start over. […] that is to say destruction as a capital stage […] or 'as a capital moment of change from one form to another' (110).

Considering this phase as a "capital stage" highlights its significance in the women's quest for self. It also represents the "passage through a void" for all of the protagonists in the novel, because it enables them to purge themselves off their previous material existence. The Karaj garden embraces and protects the women like a mother (Mother Nature), even though it only provides a transitional stage along their journeys. The women know that they must eventually leave the garden, return to the outside world and face new challenges. Nonetheless, The garden's mystical aura and the way it facilitates their eventual transformation is remarkable. The garden is a place where a young woman plants herself in the ground and grows into a tree that sings. Mahdokht is no longer invisible or voiceless as she used to be. The garden is home for Munis, a young woman who gains the ability to read minds and cross the boundaries between life and death twice. The garden also houses Zarrinkolah, a prostitute who becomes clear as glass in the course of her pregnancy, and gives birth to a morning glory. In *Jasmine and Stars* Keshavarz describes the innovative synthesis of the magical and the real in *Women without Men* as an "essentially defiant […] act of insubordination" (106). Away from customs and conventions, the Karaj garden represents a unique space where these women can put the pieces of their fragmented self together and become whole again.

Seeking mobility and refusing to be confined to the domestic sphere, all of the protagonists in the novel, except for Mahdokht, willingly face homelessness and the possibility of being violated and ostracized. As Keshavarz argues, "Discovering the world is not for sissies. It means losing the protection of home, or abandoning it because it has never *really* provided much protection. It means taking responsibility for yourself" (96). As they forgo safety and stability for the sake of discovering the world, Parsipur's

protagonists subvert cultural norms. In the process, they are perceived as brazen and wayward, even unfeminine—certainly not feminine in the conventional sense. These traits resonate with bohemian sensibilities, thus calling to mind the image of the "gypsy woman," a strange figure whose cultural meaning is often associated with mobility, eccentricity, and courage. In *Words Not Swords* Farzaneh Milani describes the gypsy woman as an excessive figure in Iranian literature:

> She has a public presence and an identity that is not subject to any of the conventional boundaries. Rejecting geographic frontiers as well as traditional notions of femininity, neither submissive nor domestic, she abandons her 'proper' place and invades the public arena of attention. Vocal rather than silent, transgressive rather than submissive, mobile rather than walled in, she challenges the prevailing values of the established order (178).

Their waywardness renders the protagonists in *Women without Men* as "outsiders" (Milani 178). No longer feeling at home with the status quo, they occupy the margins of the male-dominated system. Capricious and strange, they are now able to act and speak from this periphery as "border crossers" (178). But that is all right because if they don't, the conflict within lingers, the questions persist, and the desire to grow and be free remains strong. No way can they go back. The task before them now is to redefine their identities and envision new lives. As we witness their eventual transformations—subtle as they may be—the women become "articulate rather than loud, autonomous rather than unruly, free rather than promiscuous, courageous rather than aggressive" (Milani 179).

Leaving the domestic sphere and taking to the road are essential aspects of the protagonists' journeys in *Women without Men*. Mobility seems to go hand in hand with their inward soul searching, hence facilitating their growth. To further illuminate this theme and provide a broader view of Parsipur's excessive characters, I would like to expand my analysis beyond *Women without Men* at this point. Parsipur's magical realist novel, *Touba and the Meaning of Night* (1989, Iran),[14] for example, highlights the importance of being mobile in its protagonist's final transformation. In the last pages of the novel, Touba, now quite old, on the verge of madness and delirium, walks out of the house that has been her refuge and prison for more than half a century. She takes in everything, as though seeing her hometown and its people for the first time. Carrying her tar and a bag full of pomegranates—signifying, perhaps, the innocent blood of the two young girls who were buried under that tree—she babbles on about the girls' murders at the hands of their kin, a secret she had to keep all these years. When a young man offers to walk her home, Touba replies, "No house, there is no returning now. I must tell the truth" (327). But when he asks her to reveal the "truth," Touba becomes mute. Her silence points to her inability to articulate what she begins to understand: a feminine intuition and self-awareness that may be incomprehensible to men. She hands out the pomegranates to passersby then rests at a street corner, plays her out-of-tune tar and begins to sing. Her desire to play the tar and to sing is an indication of her wish to articulate the words she has kept inside for decades, as her offering pomegranates to strangers suggests unburdening herself from her lifelong quietude and complacence. Because she feels complicit in the girls' murders, sharing the pomegranates also suggests

[14] The English translation of the novel was published in the U.S. in 2008. Please see the works cited pages for more information.

her desire to rid herself off the bloodstains she has carried for years. Culminating in her final breakthrough, her walk seems to help her clarify her thoughts: “It was useless. She leaned the tar against the wall and resumed walking. She had definitely discovered the truth, but could not verbalize it” (327). When she returns to the house, Touba feels as a stranger would toward the place. She knows she can no longer stay there and she is ready to leave the house and the world for good.

Similar to Touba, Hoori,[15] the narrator and protagonist in Parsipur’s novel, *Sag va Zemestan-e Boland* [The Dog and the Long Winter] (1974, Iran) feels like a prisoner in her parents’ oppressive home. Hoori’s chest, like Touba, is full of secrets and unspoken wishes, and her ongoing reflections are accompanied by a multitude of walks—her solitary walks, her walks with her brother, Hosien, and with her lover, Manoochehr. Mourning the untimely death of her brother, Hosein, a political dissident, Hoori, who is contemplating suicide, struggles to articulate her identity crisis to her parents: “But I’m not lonely. I just don’t have an identity. Where is my identity?” (translations mine unless noted) (287). In the novel’s enigmatic final pages, Hoori, now resembling a ghost-like being, walks through endless hallways, and she eventually arrives at a grave site:

> I lay on the grave, on my stomach. My head touched the stone. It wasn’t cold. It was warm. Warmth emanated from the deep, from somewhere that was and wasn’t. Soft and pleasing warmth. My ear touched the grave. I felt the warmth with my whole being. A voice issued from the deep. A shy voice, but alive. The sound of a heart, my heart, its beating. Not loud, not very clear, but alive (348).

[15] Meaning heavenly maiden in Persian.

Abandoning her home and engaging in a long contemplative walk appears to be crucial to finding some measure of wholeness in the end. Although the narrative does not make clear whether Hoori comes upon her brother's grave or someone else's, in the end, her mental and physical explorations serve as a conduit for inner peace.

Parsipur's penchant for these illuminating walks, philosophical reflections, and revealing tête-à-têtes is evident in nearly all of her novels. Women need to listen to their inside voice, step out of their homes and experience the outside world, she seems to remind us. This is, perhaps, one of her reasons for weaving together her protagonists' inner conflict with the political crises that affect their social milieu. At the same time, the individual's quest for self always takes center stage in Parsipur's novels. Similar to *The Dog and the Long Winter*, in her novel, *Blue Logos* [Aghl-e Abi],[16] the protagonists' identity crisis takes up the foreground. As she dovetails the personal with the public/political in *Blue Logos*, Parsipur seems to resist the temptation to "stage the public events […] and then toss [her] protagonists into their midst" (Marrouchi 71). So, life-changing sociopolitical events find their way into her narrative only as they "impinge[s] upon her willful, eccentric, and unpredictable" characters (Marrouchi 71).

Highlighting the quest for self, *Blue Logos* seems to pick up where *Women without Men* left off, particularly in terms of Munis's journey. It engages with mystical theories of self, while complicating conventional notions of gender identity. Similar to *Women without Men* and *Touba and the Meaning of Night*, as it combines magical elements with real events, *Blue Logos* depicts the nascent relationship and subsequent

[16] Published in 1994 by Zamaneh Press, in San Jose, California, in Persian.

philosophical discussions between a police sergeant[17] and a woman who initially pays him a visit to file a complaint. After their first encounter, Sarvan and the woman meet in his apartment, which verges on ruin because the city around them is prey to constant bombardments. Though the novel does not directly convey the reason for the aerial attacks, its publishing date—1994, only a few years after the conclusion of the bloody conflict with Iraq that lasted nearly a decade—suggests that it depicts the city of Tehran during the Iran-Iraq war.

As they form an intellectual bond, gender divides between Sarvan and the woman seem to fade and vital existential questions take up the foreground. *Blue Logos* challenges "preexisting construction[s]" of gender identity, as each character begins to perceive their sex as not only interrelated, but, in many ways, complementary (Freeman 4). This correspondence in terms of their sexual identity represents a "state of genuine sexual difference, rather than a traditional male/female binarism" (Film and Female Consciousness 2). In fact, in the final pages of the novel, Sarvan, who has been pressed by his alter ego, an unruly gorilla, to be masculine and assertive, is unable to distinguish between himself and the woman, and he starts to believe that *she* has been a part of him all along. The woman, in turn, communicates a similar sentiment: "I am the woman inside you. But as the woman inside you, I have a man inside me. The man inside me likely has a woman inside him" (350).

A lifelong proponent of Taoism[18] and Lao-Tze's principles, Parsipur, in her translation[19] of Max Kaltenmark's *Lao-Tze and the Principles of Tao* [Lao-Tze va A'in-e

[1] Persian translation: "Sarvan."

[18] Also known as Daoism, Taoism is a religious/philosophical tradition of Chinese origin emphasizing living in accordance to the Tao—"the way." Taoism differs from Confucianism by not emphasizing rituals and social order, rather, it emphasizes naturalness, simplicity, spontaneity, and the Three Treasures: compassion, frugality, and humility.

Tao] (1987, Iran) writes: "A complete human being has a masculine and feminine presence [...] and because a large number of people are afraid to know this, or disregard their feminine nature, a lack of balance usually occurs" (95). In *Lost Wisdom*, Abbas Milani alludes to this overarching premise in *Blue Logos*: "[Parsipur] reveals that all borders and boundaries are porous […] [she] cannot confine herself to a static version of reality" (105). By unsettling entrenched gender roles, *Blue Logos* promotes a mutual correspondence between the sexes in lieu of division. It produces ambivalence to underscore the significance of knowledge and experience, irrespective of one's sexual identity. Although this ambivalence renders its protagonists peculiar (and excessive), it also creates borderlands, spaces on the margins of the patriarchal culture, where they can express their subjectivity, regardless of their sex/gender identity.

Blue Logos underscores fragmentation when Sarvan finally slays his alter ego, the gorilla, by cutting him into pieces. The woman, on the other hand, recounts witnessing her own death through a fatal accident. She tells Sarvan that she watched herself being run over by a trailer truck and disintegrate into pieces. These bizarre events not only underline the splitting of the self, but also the importance of self-destruction as a step toward transformation—what Duras refers to as a "capital stage" for change (Destruction and Language 110). The quest for achieving illumination and unity within the self is embodied in the woman's vision following her supposed death. As she describes to Sarvan, she watches her pieces scatter over the "southern sea," but soon after, merging together in the deep and becoming a diver searching for pearls (Blue Logos 275). This sentiment resonates with Hoori's final contact with death as a way of achieving

[19] From French to Persian.

wholeness. It also alludes to the Taoist principle that calls for the disintegration of the self—getting rid of its worldly/material obsessions—in order to achieve illumination, to locate the "jewel/pearl" within, as *Blue Logos* seems to suggest.

Blue Logos opens up liminal spaces for the germination of new subjectivities by unsettling conventional gender binaries. At the same time, it espouses intellectual openness as a catalyst for growth. During her conversation with Sarvan, the woman explains that the "empty spaces" of one's persona are where new thoughts take shape, similar to the empty spaces in the soil, where flowers are able to grow (Blue Logos 301). She then reminds him that because of his judgments and presuppositions the empty spaces in his mind are limited: "You do not pay attention to the empty spaces. You are not able to free yourself from presuppositions. You should empty your mind completely and take in everything when you confront a new experience" (301). Once again, alluding to the Taoist principles, her description underscores the void within the self as a requirement for achieving enlightenment:

> To know, means possessing the most extraordinary awareness which Lao-Tze coins as light. But the holly is not just glad from knowing this law, but to return to Tao, it breeds the light in its core—because this return has an intellectual meaning which consists of identifying the Tao within, realizing unity, and its subsequent simplicity and void (Kaltenmark and Parsipur 76).

I will return to the discussion on mystical thought in Parsipur's novels as they relate to illumination and rebirth in the next section, and in the final section of this chapter, "Death, Rebirth, and Nature." The section that follows further investigates liminal sites

and the ways in which they enable Parsipur's protagonists to gain knowledge, agency, and voice.

II. Knowledge and Power

Audacity, eccentricity, and curiosity make Parsipur's female protagonists inherently excessive. Their traditional cultural context cannot contain them. They are conflicted internally, and as social beings, increasingly dissatisfied with their lot. They simply want more in the way of experience and intellectual growth, and they are not going to wait or rely on men to get what they want. They recognize the connection between developing inner lives and seeking a larger public presence, so they seem to follow the sentiment: ""Enter your own self and discover the world […] but also go out into the world and discover yourself"" (Marrouchi 56). It may take them their whole lives and they may not arrive at what they initially sought, but their future, though far from perfect, will be of their own making.

Such is the case for Touba, in *Touba and the Meaning of Night,* once she resolves to die. After long decades of tending to obligations, duties, and proprieties, Touba chooses to die on her own terms. When she returns home after her lengthy walk in the streets, she knows full well that her lifelong house arrest is over. In the final pages of the novel, Touba gives birth to her missing half, Layla, and both of them plunge to the depths: "to the roots of the pomegranate tree," where they meet the two slain girls, Setareh and Maryam, whose bodies have been buried under the tree (Touba 331). Then, the two women sink even deeper:

> They descended to the depths of metal, to the depths of fire. Particles of Touba's being were turning around themselves, her head and feet were all one. She had become as one singular particle, and she screamed from the pain (332).

Only when she has sunk this far, Touba is able to perceive "a ray of light" (332). For the first time in her life, she comes in contact with her own consciousness. Beside her, Layla recounts her life as a wife and mother, while Touba beholds vivid memories flashing before her eyes. Layla speaks of both of their lives, as though they shared a whole history, as though they were one, not merely in their lifetime, but also centuries ago. *Touba and the Meaning of Night* follows mystical notions of unity. It represents Touba's descent into the self as a way of gaining knowledge and strength. Fraught with apocalyptic images of death and rebirth, the end of Touba's life marks the birth of a third persona, thus emphasizing change (and regeneration) in the way of self-empowerment:

> Touba was now someone else. She no longer had the need to search for truth. In the wilderness, between those two women, sat a third one who held a weapon in one hand and in the other a fistful of damp earth, a souvenir from someone, something, or someplace (337).

To achieve illumination, Touba faces the ultimate disintegration. Her body explodes into "thousand earth particles," and she sees "through every particle" as though "through a thousand eyes" (337). In *A Persian Mosaic*, Dylan Oehler-Stricklin articulates the magical/mystical quality of this scene: "[…] We see reason and rationality struggling and largely failing to attain enlightenment, while simplicity and a serene, child-like, highly unconventional spirituality succeed" (106). It is true that in a mystical experience

such as Touba's conventional reason and rationality do, to a large extent, fail. However, Touba's experience is far from "simplicity" and a "childlike […] spirituality," as Oehler-Stricklin claims. To become enlightened and empowered, Touba must first find the source of power within her. Since she is no longer attached to this world, eventually, she abandons her physical body in order to merge with all beings and achieve wholeness.

Excessive subjects such as Touba and Layla create new spaces for female consciousness on the peripheries of the symbolic system. Through recurring images of the female body, creating and re-creating, *Touba and the Meaning of Night* devises a feminized language within a mystical realm, one that resembles Jacque Lacan's formulation of the "imaginary" in that it contains "no difference and no absence, only identity and presence" (Moi 99). One of the fundamental sets of related concepts in the Lacanian theory, the imaginary and the symbolic represent the pre- and post-oedipal stages in a child's life, respectively. Whereas the "symbolic" corresponds to a child's association with the Law of the Father/the phallus through its entry into language, the "imaginary" corresponds to the child's pre-oedipal stage when the child "believes itself to be a part of the mother, and perceives no separation between itself and the world" (99). Touba's extraordinary connection with her surroundings and with Layla in the final hours of her life brings to mind Lacan's concept of the "imaginary." At last, when Layla beckons Touba to get up and meet her end, her placenta separates from her with a "thunderous sound" and falls on her children's heads. And as the two women watch "groups of people drown[ed] in blood," Layla reminds Touba that she needs to let them go: "It is up to them to become liberated or not liberated" (Touba 337). By freeing Touba from her maternal burden, Parsipur re-inscribes her subjectivity as an autonomous

woman. As Layla reminds her, she is responsible for her own liberation now, as her children are for theirs. Through provocative images of the female body, Parsipur constructs a new feminine realm: "a femininity or alterity on the basis of female sensuality and sexuality, and its difference from the male" (Bolton 4). That is to say, femininity not as lack of masculinity but that which valorizes "the expression of their own sex and gender," as the other of the male, and in a "state of genuine sexual difference" (2).

While emphasizing self-reliance, both *Touba and the Meaning of Night* and *Women without Men* highlight the significance of "relational identity" (Bolton 3). By demonstrating vital bonds between their protagonists, both novels reveal that women need the company of other women along their paths, since such relationships enrich their experiences and allow them to conceive of themselves, to speak about themselves, and to hear one another. The bond between Touba and Layla, for example, is essential to their quests for knowledge and strength. Interiority and self-reflection are imperative, Parsipur seems to remind us, but growth hardly occurs in a vacuum. Through these bonds, Parsipur develops a "feminine syntax" that is based upon "[…] the gestural code of women's bodies […] and again: in what they "dare" – do or say – when they are among themselves" (This Sex 161). The revealing conversation between Faiza and Munis about virginity, for instance, marks the beginning of Munis's sexual awakening. Following her suicide, Munis spends days wandering the streets, and finally comes upon an intriguing book: "*Sexual fulfillment or How to Know Our Bodies*" (Women without Men 28). It takes her thirteen days to find the courage to approach the street vendor and purchase the book. She then takes refuge to a deserted alley and reads the book three times cover to

cover. When she looks up from the book, Munis sees the “external world in a different light”; she feels she has undergone “a process of growth and maturation” (28).

Although her conflict stems from a lack of knowledge about her sexuality, Munis’s quest does not culminate in her reading of the book. Upon her return home, Amir, her brother, stabs her in a fit of rage and buries her in their backyard. But later on, when her friend Faiza unearths her, she is more assertive and intrepid than before; this time, she can even read other people’s minds. In spite of her “infinite awareness of things,” however, Munis’s isolated life in the garden gradually makes her feel obsolete, and she longs “to be ordinary, average” (101). She feels that she is in a state of stagnation and decay and in need of putting her mental and physical faculties to work. So when she asks the “good gardener”[20] what she should do to become one with light, he replies:

> Don’t seek to become light; that is a journey of no return. […] Now I tell you to go in search of darkness anew. Descend to the depths. There you will see the light aglow in your hands, by your side. That is being human. Now go become human (110).

Hearing this, Munis turns into a “whirlwind” and flies away in “a cloud of dust” (110). She spends seven years passing through seven deserts, and finally returns home, older and tired, but also “replete with experience” (110). She puts on a clean dress, as the novel informs us, and becomes a “simple schoolteacher.” Although Munis’s enlightenment is more gradual in compare to Touba’s, her intellectual awakening, during her prolonged journey, is the culmination of her quest for insight into herself and the world. Continuing on her path toward growth, she finally chooses a life of service.

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[20] The only gardener and male figure in Farrokhlaqa’s garden, he initially asks to be called as such.

In spite of the novel's magical realism framework, Parsipur refrains from drawing rose-tinted destinies for its protagonists. Their experiences and new abilities may be extraordinary at times, but in the end, they mostly arrive at realistic conclusions. Even Mahdokht's desire to grow as a tree and ultimately transform into seeds embodies the common, corporeal wish to travel the world. It is perhaps the extent of Mahdokht's physical and intellectual confinement that begets her astonishing metamorphosis; it takes extreme measures to get her out of her conventional cocoon. And yet, in spite of her cautious temperament, she opts for the most amazing life in compare to the rest of the women. I would like to argue here that not all of the protagonists in *Women without Men* opt for a life that promotes heterosexual, or even sexual, fulfillment, because the novel seeks to expand the scope of female desire. In fact, only two of the women, Farrokhlaqa and Faiza, ultimately choose to get married and carry regular relationships with men. In contrast, Munis selects a simple life of service and Mahdokht opts to travel by transforming into seeds.

When Mahdokht plants herself on the riverbank, for nearly two years, she suffers through the rainstorms, and the winter frost freezes her all over. Her journey seems to be laden with pain and anticipation instead of pleasure, yet it leads to the culmination of her wish to gain mobility and knowledge. A sign of her budding insight, her eyes remain open throughout her painful transformation, gazing at the river that flows by. By the end of the second winter of her life as a tree, Mahdokht feels "an explosive burst of energy" and a "force within her body" that make her ache (104). Now as she stares at the river, she no longer sees a "continual stream,"

> […] But a flux of liquid drops rushing in the riverbed helter-skelter in their numberless multitude. This exacerbated her pain. Her senses infiltrated the droplets of the river current and made her palpitate in unison with the heartbeat of each drop (104).

Finally, the pressure inside her reaches an "explosive force," but instead of being an "instantaneous blowout," her physical change is "nuanced and in stages": "It was as if her tissues were coming apart slowly and jarringly. In a perpetual state of transmutation, Mahdokht is "separating from herself, suffering excruciating, unbearable pain like birth contractions" (105). An indication of Parsipur's experimentation with diverse forms of female (re)productivity, this stage leads up to Mahdokht's final transformation. At this point, not only her self expands beyond its limits, but Mahdokht's vision becomes more keen and acute than before. Merging with her surroundings, she recognizes the oneness of all beings: "The water was no longer a mass of droplets but fractured into infinite tiny bits of atoms of ether" (105). The gradual development of Mahdokht's vision is as significant as her overall metamorphosis, because it involves the manner in which she "sees" the world. This is the evolution of her perspective; she no longer perceives the world as she did before, with a partial, insular view. When it all comes to a "sudden end," Mahdokht gets her wish: she bursts into "a mountain of seeds," which are scattered into the river by a strong wind, thus travelling "to all corners of the world" (105).

As they grow, Parsipur's protagonists gain new insight into themselves and the world. They no longer suffer subjugation and silence. They interrogate cultural norms and use the elasticity of tradition to stretch the limits of their lot. In the process, the conflict inside them turns into vital questions, which terrify and excite them at once,

questions every liberated adult comes to: what do I want to do/who do I want to become? Naturally, some of them arrive at an answer with more certitude than the others: in old age, Touba opts for death following a profound spiritual awakening; Munis selects a quiet life of service and learning, while Mahdokht chooses mobility and freedom from ordinary life. The imbrication between physical and intellectual liberation is an inevitable part of this growth process. "Power," as Elaine Scarry articulates, "emerges from an interaction between physical and verbal acts in the course of which the body is transformed into the voice" (226 Beizer). *Women without Men* demonstrates this assertiveness when Munis, having risen from the dead for a second time, stands up to her brother without a shred of trepidation. On the eve of his wedding, Munis walks into his bedroom and gives Amir the ultimatum:

> 'And you, bastard', she hissed, 'You must live and make do with her. If you raise your hand to her, or hurt her in any way, I will return and swallow you whole. Do you understand?' Amir nodded in the affirmative (45).

When they feel that their voices are not being heard, Parsipur's protagonists use their bodies as an instrument of resistance. Such is the case for Hoori, the protagonist in *The Dog and the Long Winter.* Although it takes her some time to fully appreciate her brother's rebellion, Hoori follows his example: she defies her tyrannical father and continues her relationship with her lover. And quite like her brother, Hoori suffers a heartbreaking fate. She endures forced abortions, becomes an outcast in her family home, and is finally admitted to a mental institution. But in the end, she remains resolved and content about her rebellion.

Before moving on to the final section of this chapter, I would like to briefly discuss Zarrinkolah, the young prostitute who fled the brothel and sojourned in the Karaj garden. Next to Mahdokht, Zarrinkolah's transformation is one of the most remarkable in *Women without Men*. Unlike the other women, Zarrinkolah lives a life of seclusion in the Karaj garden. The only person she keeps a constant contact with is the gardener whom she ultimately weds. But even then, she hardly performs the domestic duties of a wife. As the narrator reveals, Zarrinkolah becomes pregnant, but ultimately gives birth to a morning glory, which continues to "flourish on the bank of the river," the same place where the Mahdokht tree is growing (113). When her husband beckons Zarrinkolah to get ready for they have to leave behind the garden, the couple embraces the morning glory, as it wraps "its foliage around them," and they rise "to the sky in a puff of smoke" (113).

Not only does Zarrinkolah's marriage to the gardener challenge conventional notions of heterosexual union, but her approach to motherhood also puts her at odds with the patriarchal standards. Her relationship with the gardener seems more like a non-sexual partnership between two distinct and relatively independent individuals than a traditional marriage. During her pregnancy Zarrinkolah becomes transparent like glass, and by the time she is about to give birth, she has become luminescent like a "figure of clear crystal, refracting the light in many colors" (99). According to the narrator, Zarrinkolah loves the morning glory "as her own child," but her behavior toward her spawn does not resemble an ordinary bond between a mother and her child (113). In fact, soon after she gives birth, the gardener takes the flower away and plants it on the riverbank next to the Mahdokht tree. When it grows sufficiently, the morning glory serves as a vehicle for its parents and not much else. Rather than requiring its mother's

care, as a child does, the flower functions independently, and in the end facilitates its mother's mysterious final journey. Through Zarrinkolah's story, Parsipur shifts the nature of reproduction, whereby a woman engenders a flower rather than a human child. Moreover, procreation and childrearing, in the case of Zarrinkolah, do not hold the traditional values ingrained in Iranian culture. That is to say, neither marriage nor motherhood seems to be the ultimate goal and/or achievement in her life.

In the following section, I provide a more in depth discussion of the mystical aspect of death and its potential for spiritual revival and rebirth in Parsipur's works. Given the connections they draw between nature and women's capacity for reproduction and regeneration, I further examine this dimension of Parsipur's narratives and the cultural and political implications of her notions of femininity.

III. Death, Rebirth, and Nature

Pregnant with possibility, death, in Parsipur's magical realism world, does not represent "the end," rather; it symbolizes a transitional phase leading up to the characters' physical and/or spiritual/intellectual transformation. Particularly in the case of her female protagonists, death constitutes a subversive space, a radical choice, with the potential for enlightenment and rebirth.

Munis's suicide provides a proper example of this. Standing on the roof of her brother's house, Munis closes her eyes and just leans forward (Women without Men 25). Feeling utterly confined, she believes death to be the only way to break free from her invisible prison. According to the narrator, "Within five seconds she was plastered on the

pavement below, face up, eyes open, staring at the blue sky" (25). Though we are inclined to think of her as dead at this point because of the potential impact of her freefall, we hardly get the surety. Finally, in tears and in pain, Munis rises at nightfall. She is alive and free, with the awareness that she is not the same person as she was before jumping off the roof. Walking down the street, she scrutinizes the man she saw from the rooftop being shot and falling into a ditch. In spite of the fact that the man is dead, she engages in a conversation with him. Lying on his back and beholding the night sky, the man tells Munis that she can no longer nurse him back to life and that she should follow her own path. After her month-long wandering, reading books, and watching the political activities and anti-Shah protests, Munis recognizes the remarkable changes she has undergone. For her, death turns out to be just a part of her personal journey. It facilitates her growth and eventual change.

Women without Men maintains an intimate connection with death, not only through its frequent occurrence—both Munis and Mahdokht die twice in the course of the novel—but even more so because its protagonists do not display the general fear of dying. Mahdokht, for example, embraces her body's eventual disintegration. For her, the dissolution of her material body is synonymous with liberation and rebirth. Like Munis, Mahdokht dies twice: first, when her body grows roots in the ground and freezes over in the course of two winters, and then, when her frame explodes into a mountain of seeds. Alluding to a panoply of possibilities, death does not represent a static or frightening place in *Women without Men*, and its inherent ambiguity is often intertwined with a sense of anticipation and wonderment. In fact, instead of diminishing the characters' senses, death seems to shift the mode of their awareness. A vivid example of this phenomenon is

Touba's experience, which defies common conceptions of death. Her ability to "see" does not end upon the break down of her body. In fact, it enables her to surpass the limits of her perception. Baffled as to the changes she has undergone, Touba can hardly believe how differently and acutely she can perceive things, so she asks Layla if she is, in fact, dead, and she finally hears her response: "You are dead" (Touba 338).

In her short story, "Love's Tragic Tale" (1990, Iran),[21] Moniru Ravanipur envisions a radical and imaginative type of rebirth for her protagonist, one that, in some ways, resembles Mahdokht's metamorphosis. "Love's Tragic Tale" recounts the story of a woman writer who longs for the pleasure of love and intimacy, instead of professional success. When she eventually abandons the hope of gaining the affection of the man she has fallen in love with, she turns into words. In his article, "Feminist Discourse in Post-Revolutionary Women's Literature," Iranian scholar, Kamran Talattof draws an apt comparison between Mahdokht's transformation into seeds and the woman's transformation into words. Alluding to the subversive nature of these radical changes, Talattof writes:

> Seeds and words have one thing in common—they are sources of production, one in nature, and the other in text. Both are represented here as universal. This universality transcends women's role in domestic production, reproduction and economic stability. The difference is that now these women do not stay at home to raise children or produce value for men but are free to travel all over the world, which has been recreated anew by them (152).

[21] The English translation of this story was published in the U.S. in 1996 in a collection of short stories entitled *Satan's Stones* [Sangha-ye Sheitan].

Turning into seeds or words represents a symbolic death, an excessive response to their repressive circumstances, so the women choose to change themselves into "a creative entity—seeds in nature or words in culture" (155). As Talattof claims, the women's metamorphoses are the antithesis of death, since "the metaphors of seeds and words both suggest female creation and productivity," though not in a conventional sense (153). These transformations enable these women to transcend the limits of their lot and become productive in innovative ways: to replace "procreation" with other forms of productivity (155).

To hark back on the point I made before with respect to Zarrinkolah, these diverse forms of female productivity not only broaden the scope of female desire, but they also "disrupt heterosexual, reproductive […] hegemonies" (Butler 26). I will return to the metaphysical/mystical aspects of such transformations in the following chapter exploring "excessive spaces," however, before continuing my analysis with respect to death and rebirth, I would like to point to the subversive quality of Parsipur's use of "seeds" and Ravanipur's use of "words." Through thematic excess, that is to say, women ultimately transforming into seeds and words, both authors essentially feminize the two symbols, which tend to signify male "sexual" and "literary" authority within the symbolic system. In other words, both authors, take the two potentially male symbols and feminize them in creative ways.

In addition to blurring the lines between life and death, Parsipur's novels unsettle the borders between the living and the dead. They demonstrate this characteristic, for instance, when Munis speaks to the protestor who has been fatally shot, when Faiza hears Munis's plea through the ground, or when Touba hears the voice of the young girls

buried under the pomegranate tree in her backyard. The characters' proximity to the dead also reveals an overall lack of the fear of dying, especially when the alternative involves physical stagnation or emotional/intellectual decay. Parsipur's protagonists refuse to languish or remain immobile, and they opt for death, if it entails coming back to life in a freer, more itinerant form, as is the case with Mahdokht and Munis.

In instances where proximity to the dead is, for whatever reason, inevitable, the characters seek other forms of spiritual/intellectual revival. In Parsipur's short story, *Bahar-e Abi-ye Katmandu* [The Blue Spring of Katmandu] (1974, Iran)[22] the strange and reclusive female protagonist cohabits with the corpse of an older man who appears to have been dead for some time, since she watches "roaches climbing up the bed and disappearing in his velvet robe" (Crystal Pendants 13). The woman is utterly disturbed by the dead man's presence in her small room, and yet makes no effort to remove his body; instead, she buys a sofa and makes a habit of sleeping on it to avoid sharing the bed with him. To make matters more complicated, she fusses over the cleanliness of her room, cooks regular meals, feeds her canaries and pigeons, and even purchases poison to get rid of the roaches, but does not attempt to get rid of the man's dead body. It is as though clearing her room, her mind, and her life from the dead man's oppressive presence is not a possibility, and, as a result, she feels that she must devise an alternative mode of resistance.

In spite of being dead for some time, the man, with his hardened features, frayed yet elaborate garb and golden crown, exudes a lingering sense of gloom, fear, and angst. Even in death, his appearance brings to mind that of a daunting, cruel king. Although the

[22] Originally published in Iran in 1974 in a collection of short stories entitled *Avizeha-ye Bulur* [Crystal Pendants].

narrative maintains this enigmatic aura till the end, a closer look into its publishing date clarifies some of the ambiguities it represents. "The Blue Spring of Katmandu," as a part of a collection of short stories entitled, *Avizeha-ye Bolur* [Crystal Pendants], was published in Iran in 1974, not long before the 1979 Islamic Revolution and during the final years of the Pahlavi reign, an era marred by political oppression and extreme censorship. These conditions speak to the narrative's cryptic plot, its protagonist's preoccupation with the dead king, and her feelings of isolation and despair. Somehow unable to rid herself of his imposing presence, she seeks a different form of escape and an opportunity for spiritual revival. Subsequently, she engages in continuous mental flights to a remote monastery in Katmandu. Similar to the Karaj garden in *Women without Men,* "The Blue Spring of Katmandu" represents an alternative realm, a mystical retreat, when its protagonist faces the possibility of physical and/or intellectual decay. I return to my previous line of reasoning here: death, or the characters' proximity to the dead, in the context of Parsipur's works, opens up new vistas of resistance by bringing about alternative (and mystical) modes of being. Parsipur not only regards life and death as "parts of the same truth," but she also believes death to be a "revolution like the changing of the seasons from spring to summer and from fall to winter" (Lao-Tze and the Principles of Tao 129).

Being able to cross the boundaries between life and death, coupled with their capacity to perpetuate new life, renders Parsipur's woman-subjects excessive. As they die, often to come back to life again through some form of rebirth, they seem to contain and defy nature's laws simultaneously. Being fertile draws them closer to Mother Nature, while their kinship with nature affords them mystical powers. At the same time, this sort

of kinship tends to accentuate women's biology (and "biology-as-destiny"). By the same token, critics may object to Parsipur's frequent use of themes such as virginity and maternity, or, her portrayal of female characters that settle into traditional roles of wife and mother. But these thematic choices do make sense, if we consider Parsipur's use of magical realism. First, if she is to depict authentic accounts of the lives of Iranian women, many of whom do settle in domestic roles for a variety of reasons, such portrayals are inevitable. Second, because the symbolic system dominates all literary endeavors, no one, including Parsipur, can speak completely outside of the masculine discourse. In fact, by virtue of their marginality, their place on the borders of the male dominated culture, Parsipur's protagonists are able to express themselves more freely.

This subversive narrative strategy often embodies what Irigaray dubs as a vacillation between "inside" and "outside": "I am going to make an effort—for one cannot simply leap outside that discourse—to situate myself at its borders and to move continuously from the inside to the outside" (This Sex 122). In *Powers of Horror*, Julia Kristeva adopts the concept of "abject"[23] to explain misogyny in narratives of horror[24]. Kristeva situates the female abject in a similar borderland, describing her as that which "disturbs [conventional] identity, system, order" (4). The female abject functions from the peripheries of language and culture, since she is unable to occupy the male-dominated center (4). I would like to argue here that Parsipur's novels achieve a similar aim by employing magical realism. Combining realistic and magical themes enables Parsipur to perform what Irigaray coins as a vacillation between inside and outside. While her

[23] Literally meaning as "being cast off," "abjection" is the term adopted by Julia Kristeva through a post-structuralist perspective as that which disturbs conventional identity. Referring to the duality within one's corporeal reality: the "self" and "other," with other being the aspect one wishes to cast off.

[24] In the context of Kristeva's essay, horror is synonymous with suffering.

novels' realism lay bare many of the cultural constraints her protagonists face, the magical aspect of her works allow her to create excessive subjects, who are able to exercise their will and fulfill their desires from the margins of the patriarchal culture.

Writers such as Parsipur have been keenly aware of the subversive potential and emancipatory quality of literary forms such as magical realism. As a "rebellious aesthetic," magical realism allows these authors to unsettle and erode the "dominance of Western post-enlightenment rationality" and its particular brand of literary realism that often structures reality without much consideration for marginalized groups such as women and the subaltern" (Hinrichsen 207). As I previously mentioned however, the subversive scope of this genre remains somewhat limited so long as it represents women's stories within a male-dominated discursive system.

2. Excessive Spaces: Encountering Strangeness in Shahrnush Parsipur's *Shiva* and Moniru Ravanipur's *The Drowned* and *Gypsy by the Fire*

"[…] And it is here that the meeting takes place […], between the streets of rebellion, in the alleyways of transgression, in the plazas of those who do not accept the state of things, in the outlying areas of an imagination that does not resign itself to organized life."

Extreme Bodies, Francesca Alfano Miglietti (2003)

I. Shiva

In her science fiction novel, *Shiva*, Shahrnush Parsipur combines realistic characters and events with highly imaginative and surreal elements in order to articulate her political ideals. Inspired by the postmodern[25] science fiction genre and its inclination to soft science[26] as opposed to hard science, *Shiva* promotes far-fetched inventions and technologies as means of social progress, but refrains from providing lucid descriptions of these technologies. Instead, it focuses on the particular function of these inventions in improving social, economic and political conditions in post-revolutionary Iranian society. Innovation and technology coupled with the tireless efforts of a secret group of Iranian intellectuals and activists ultimately help to create propitious outcomes in the country's sociopolitical landscape. In this section, I investigate resistance in Parsipur's novel

[25] Postmodern sci-fi narratives adopt new narratological strategies to address the realities of the postmodern era such as theories of evolution and relativity. As a result, they often unsettle the Bakhtinian ideas about the centrality of time and space in fiction.

[26] "Soft science fiction," such as the science fiction novels of Ursula K. Le Guin, focuses less on scientific accuracy and scientific theories and more on social and/or psychological issues, among other issues.

through two types of thematic excess; one manifesting in the strange and spectacular inventions that pave the way for fast paced and broad ranged reforms, and the other taking shape in an overabundance of social commentaries and political theories throughout the novel. These two thematic strategies, as I argue, allow Parsipur to represent and materialize her utopian ideas for her homeland.

Shiva depicts the life of an Iranian writer living as an exile in the United States. On a quiet evening in her home in Berkeley, California, she receives an unexpected call from a young man by the name of Manoochehr. He requests a meeting and astonishes her when he shows up almost immediately, despite the fact that he lives in Tehran. Once they get acquainted, Manoochehr tells the narrator that he has used one of his extraordinary inventions as his mode of transportation and that in order to further his humanitarian goals he has invented other machines. After a lengthy discussion about their mutual hopes and dreams for their motherland, the narrator agrees to return to Iran and work with him as his assistant and advisor. In Tehran, Manoochehr and his father invite her to participate in a secret assembly of intellectuals bent on tackling national as well as international issues and finding solutions to various problems. As a regular attendee of the assembly, she soon finds out that the members, one fourth of whom happen to be women of different professions (including a prostitute), address one another by numbers and wear masks in order to protect their identity.

Except for occasional accounts of the personal lives of the small group of men and women with whom Manoochehr, his father, and the narrator work, *Shiva* mostly encompasses their efforts toward improving social conditions in post-revolutionary Iran. To that end, we become privy to the development of Manoochehr's highly advanced

inventions, including a transportation device, a healing device with rejuvenating capabilities, a water-producing device, a mind-altering device, and a surveillance device with which the group monitors political activities both inside and outside of the country. These machines, to whose inner workings we are not given a clear and specific schema, allow the group to materialize various plans such as producing regular rain in hot and arid areas of the country to promote more efficient farming, healing the aging and the sick as well as the wounded veterans of the Iran-Iraq war, and transporting individuals both inside and outside of the country.

With the secret group's plans in progress, it does not take long for the international community to take heed of the subsequent developments in Iran. As the narrator relates, the remarkable effects of the healing machine sparks the interest of other nations, in both the East and the West, thus instigating a re-reading of "Persian scientific, literary, and philosophical works," in an attempt to uncover the secret behind the recent improvements in the country (translations mine unless noted) (Shiva 178). In addition to having to deal with the Islamic Republic's mounting suspicion of their activities, Manoochehr and his colleagues face similar misgivings on the part of western powers. For example, they discover that the United States has been contemplating using a nuclear bomb to destroy the Islamic Republic. In spite of this grim prospect, the secret group maintains its pacifist attitude. They reject the idea of selling Manoochehr's inventions to developed countries or the scientific community and making hefty profits. Furthermore, to deflect the threat of the nuclear bomb, they decide to use one of Manoochehr's inventions to turn back time so as to erase traces of their activities as well as Iran's recent bitter history with the West.

Shiva provides an aperture into the narrator's progressive ideas for her country, but it also reveals her mistrust of the West, particularly its reaction to the reformist policies that begin to take shape in Iran. On the whole, the novel's ideological stance vis-à-vis the West remains ambivalent at best. By the time Parsipur began to pen *Shiva* in the late 1990s, she had lived in the United States for a few years. She was free of the oppressive influence of the Islamic Republic, but not entirely devoid of the pessimism many Iranian intellectuals share with respect to the imperialist tendencies of the West. During a lengthy dialogue with one of Manoochehr's colleagues, a statesman conveys this pessimism to his interlocutor: "[…] If Americans found out that you possessed these machines they would snatch them from you so that you wouldn't reveal their secrets to Iranians. Then they would get rid of you because as far as they are concerned third world countries should not be able to invent anything" (Shiva 188). The narrator does not take a side in this discussion, and instead keeps a broad perspective. On a number of occasions, she engages in discussions about the absence of scientific and technological advances in Iran and attributes the country's lack of an efficient social system to its enduring adherence to the Islamic doctrine. She ultimately draws the conclusion that religion and the state must operate separately, and that nations must take responsibility for their advancement or backwardness. Calling herself a "reflective social democrat," she avoids simplistic assumptions: "I am well aware of the widespread point of view that Iran must not become developed. Of course, there may be reasons for this ideology. Perhaps I would share the sentiment, if I were in a global leadership position" (93).

Using the narrator as her alter ego, Parsipur combines fact and fiction, experience and experiment, to criticize many of the current policies of the Islamic Republic, but to

also promote social and political change in Iran. In fact, a close look at Parsipur's personal circumstances reveals the similarities she shares with her novel's narrator, including the fact that she has been living in Berkeley, California, as an exile, for a number of years[27]. And perhaps that is why the narrator—recognizing their interchangeability, I will use this term hereafter, unless it is necessary to indicate the author's name in my analysis—decides to return to Iran and become an instrument of change. A case in point is when she takes a firm stance against mandatory veiling and expresses the necessity to promote sex education and free contraception for women, as well as the need to modify the legal age of marriage for women from 9 to 18 and for men from 15 to 21. In one of their meetings, a member of their secret assembly touches upon the same issue condemning the Islamic Republic's policy to lower the legal age of marriage for men and women: "To prevent sexual corruption and immorality they have lowered the legal age for marriage. But true immorality is when nine people have to sleep in one room and are ready to tear each other apart at any time" (45).

The narrator's politics—I refrain from calling it her feminist ideals, because such ideals seem to be finely intertwined with historical and geopolitical factors for her—delves into women's rights and sexual freedom in Iran when the secret group intervenes in the public stoning of a female adulterer in Shahr-e-rey. Once Manoochehr removes the woman from the site with his transport machine, the narrator engages in a sobering dialogue with her, discovering that she was indeed forced to marry a forty-five-year-old man she did not know at the age of thirteen. In response to the narrator's enquiry, the woman further indicates that she ended up bearing three children for whom she did not

[27] After her lengthy incarceration, as a political prisoner, in Iran, Parsipur moved to the United States in 1994 and has been living in Northern California since.

care either. “I even hated my children because I felt they were his. [M]any times, I contemplated killing myself along with them so I could be free,” the woman confesses, “[…] My lover was our neighbor. He came to the door for something. I brought him in and gave myself to him. After he left I felt as though I was free. As though I had slain my husband” (57). Similar to the narrator’s views on the matter, the woman’s testimony is devoid of absolutism and detestation. She tells the narrator that she thought about her misfortunes while in prison. She expresses that most of all she desires solitude, a place of her own, and the ability to go back to school, like she did as a young girl. Drawing the same conclusion as the narrator, Manoochehr expresses his disillusionment with women’s conditions under the Islamic Republic:

> I must confess I get out very rarely because I can hardly tolerate many of the things I see nowadays. I get sick from the sight of women in black chador. Especially when I see young schoolgirls walking about wearing the chador. I think, in a healthy society women and men exercise. But here women are tied down […] and then they say woman is slow-witted and without a scientific mind. Well, if I was a woman here, I wouldn’t have a scientific mind either, likely because I had to marry at thirteen and bear six children (58).

Although the narrator’s idea of gender equality seems to be entwined with an insistence on the interdependence and mutuality between the sexes, her observations and discussions reveal her disillusionment about Iranian women’s overall lack of agency and autonomy in both the private and public spheres. If women pine for anything that belongs to a man in a male-dominated milieu such as the Islamic Republic, the narrator seems to

imply, it is the significant sway of his authority and his voice more than anything else. In her article, "A Desire of Their Own," Jessica Benjamin provides a similar perspective on women's desire for agency: "[…] what Freud saw as the little girl's early masculine orientation really reflects the wish of the toddler—of both sexes—to identify with the father who is perceived as a representative of the outside world. […] As long as the traditional sexual division of labor persists, the child will turn to the father as the 'knight in shining armor' who represents freedom, the outside world, will, agency, and desire" (8). I would like to argue here that by disregarding the traditional sexual division of labor, *Shiva* represents a space, where men and women not only work together toward a common goal, but they also exercise their agency and express their desires in a place of mutual respect and understanding. In such a scenario, both men and women are subjects. The narrator's ongoing collaborations with her (male and female) colleagues, their open dialogues about a variety of social issues including women's rights, and their mutual acceptance of each other's views, underscore this theme.

What is more, the narrator challenges conventional definitions of gender in the novel, when she expresses her desire to change Manoochehr's name. During one of their initial conversations, the narrator tells Manoochehr that she would like to call him Shiva instead. He agrees, expressing a general dissatisfaction with his name. When the narrator describes to him that Shiva represents the Hindu god of creation and destruction, he tells her that he is in favor of the inherent duality in his new name: "I like this name. It is better than Manoochehr, which means divine-visaged […] Shiva is a better name. I shall always be aware that I can be as capable of being evil" (15). The narrator complicates normative standards of gender identity in Iranian culture not only by renaming

Manoochehr, but also by choosing this particular name in lieu of his previous name. While Shiva seems to be a fitting designation for a person with extraordinary creative capabilities, it is also important to note that the Hindu god's imposing image is often depicted along with his consort, Sati, goddess of power, felicity and longevity. The union of the two Hindu deities implies the imbrication of two separate aspects/parts to make up a whole. Equally interesting is the fact that in Iranian culture Shiva is strictly a female name. Given his extraordinary aptitude, Shiva represents an excessive persona in the novel, but this evident ambivalence in terms of his identity allows him to subvert normative gender roles as well. Moreover, "gender inversion" in Shiva's case has social implications; it underlines the immanent duality within each person, not merely in terms of the connection between the masculine and feminine dimensions of the self, but more importantly when it comes to one's capacity for doing good as well as evil (Rowe 102). It is as though the narrator reminds us of the significance of our aspirations and deeds as part of a collective, and that at the face of such imperative conventional definitions of gender must bear little, if any, significance. Here, as in other places in her novel, Parsipur devises a language of revolt through counterpoint and contradiction, a language that "does not ask us to be anonymous spectators, but rather obliges us to emotion and participation," regardless of our sexuality and/or gender distinctions (Miglietti 50).

I want to hark back to the point I made at the beginning of this chapter about the overabundance (or excess) of social commentaries and political views that give this novel not only a subversive tone but also, at times, the feel of a political essay rather than a work of fiction. Throughout its five hundred and forty two pages, there are but a handful of places where landscapes or natural sceneries have been described, while a multitude of

lengthy philosophical discussions, dialogues and internal monologues exploring political issues and historical perspectives take up nearly the entire novel. It often veers on abstraction but not without a purpose; it pulls away from the normal direction of representation to imagine a hyper-reality based on sheer frustration and desperation about the present state of a place that is fast becoming intolerable. As a result, the novel's fictional and realist themes represent this underlying tension through excess. Alluding to a similar exaggerated realism depicted in Rosso Fiorentino's famous painting, *Deposition* (1521), Francesca Alfano Miglietti writes, "Imagination [here] is used as a force that serves to foment dissatisfaction, obliging the mind to live far from itself; imagination 'is dangerous' and opens the eye to a world that is no longer the world of things but rather the world of the various sites of desire and thought" (47). Shiva's intensely curious and enthusiastic persona, his far-fetched inventions, his angst and frustration with the status quo in his homeland (and those of his colleagues) drive the storyline. Despite its narrator's objective tone, nothing in the novel is motionless. In a desperate, frenzied effort to change the present state of things, every member of Shiva's secret group is doing something, each "agitated in a dimension that rejects the 'background', all protagonists of a single, total, clamorous drama" (50). With feverish intensity of imagination, the novel's narrator underlines an eccentric vision for change in a magical dimension, where almost "nothing is contained," where life must triumph over decay and desire over inertia, where mobility of the enlightened masses must overcome the immobility of history (50).

While Shiva's spectacular inventions work to improve social and economic conditions in Iran, particularly for the less privileged, the novel maintains its ongoing critique of many of the policies set by the post-revolutionary political establishment.

These two parallel efforts, one rather pragmatic and the other more ideological, include the novel's keyed up message of change. In many ways, *Shiva* is a call to action, which, despite its pressing nature, is nonviolent and inclusive. In fact, the narrator's social and political ambitions (as well as those of her colleagues), throughout the novel, extend beyond the best interest of her compatriots. Nearly all the members of Shiva's secret assembly agree that development in Iran will be, to a large extent, incumbent upon the growth of its neighboring countries (Shiva 221). "No one [nation] would be meddling in the affairs of another," the narrator explains, "if all nations were working diligently toward their own progress" (221). Once again, the narrator alludes to the necessity for the separation of religion and state, attributing the lack of social and technological progress in Iran to the ongoing intrusion of Islamic ideology in the shaping of public policies. Pointing to the reliance of the Islamic law on the principle of "taghiyah," which tends to favor concealment and secrecy, the narrator deems it an impediment in the way of mutually beneficial relations between Iran and the international community. She argues that implementing such mandate in the twenty-first century is "impossible," and she insists on transparency as a way of battling backwardness:

> […] They say that ninety-nine percent of the religion is based on taghiyah. What does it mean? It means that the Iranian individual must hide everything; must pretend to be stupid; must not trust anyone. That he does not have the right to share his secrets with anyone. That he has to hide color, light, perfume, music, dance, love, and women […] But when you hide things, you ultimately get confused. When you hide your mistakes,

you become disturbed. Your mental faculties ultimately falter and decline (220).

While condemning the widespread secrecy practiced by Iran's current regime, the narrator emphasizes the significance of transparency and diplomacy across national borders. She calls for a bilateral willingness for collaboration and forewarns that, if not mended, the lack of growth in developing countries such as Iran will ultimately adversely affect the developed world: "It is possible to let the Third World roll in filth, but because in the long run no one will be left to buy its commodities, Western capitalism will be ultimately forced to shed its skin and become something else" (220). Social and economic transformation, as the narrator puts it, cannot take place without an overhaul in foreign as well as domestic policies. To that end, she associates the slow rate of industrial growth in Iran with its recent surge in population, and with mass migrations from villages to the cities. These socio-economic shifts, the narrator maintains, not only affected the country's agricultural sector negatively, but also induced poverty and kept the middle-class from growing. On the other hand, she views Iran's recent population hike an offshoot of excessive religiosity and an overall lack of education and social awareness, particularly in the rural regions. So, she alludes to the need for public policies on early sex education as one way of controlling population growth. Substantiating her claim, a member of their secret assembly calls again for changing the legal age of marriage as another strategy: "Before anything else, we have to modify the legal age for marriage, then, even by force, people must be kept from having their daughters marry at a very young age. How can you make a twelve-year-old child understand that having too many

children is wrong? Before she starts to realize this, she has had six children already. Sex education must be incorporated in the elementary school curriculum" (45).

Shiva's inventions enable his colleagues to find solutions to a number of these problems. In time, they establish free clinics using his healing machine to cure the sick and reinvigorate the old and severely injured. His water-making technology nourishes arid grounds across the country, thus making farming possible. Moreover, his experiments lead him to invent an extraordinary substance, which he coins as "the thousand-and-one element," and from which he is able to make other substances including gold. Working with a number of public officials, members of Shiva's secret group eventually succeed in shaping various public policies, not to mention promoting one of their colleagues—Ahmad Bahrami—as the new presidential candidate. While promising to abolish many of the existing mandates like compulsory veiling, polygamy, and public stoning, Bahrami vows to rebuild the country's urban and rural infrastructure, promote various political parties and factions, and encourage higher education, advancement in technology, free speech, and improvement in women's conditions. In the novel's final pages, Shiva and his colleagues use his machines to turn back time in order to ward off the nuclear bomb threat from the West. This action, though necessary, nullifies many of the improvements Shiva's inventions brought about including Bahrami's presidency. Nonetheless, the novel concludes with an optimistic tone and an open letter from the members of Shiva's secret assembly to the president, asking him for a forward-thinking, broadminded and efficient sort of leadership.

Given its overall optimism, a prominent criticism of *Shiva* has been its utopian portrayal of situations and events, what popular culture may coin as a typical "happy

ending" story. True, certain characters, particularly Shiva's immediate colleagues, may seem too agreeable and cooperative throughout the novel. Hardly any memorable conflict occurs between them, as they strive to realize their humanitarian goals, in spite of an uncooperative, dogmatic government, and under the distrustful Western gaze. They face ideological challenges as well as logistical problems, but almost every time Shiva's inventions help to get them out of "sticky" situations, such as producing large quantities of gold to fund their operations, saving an adulterer from being stoned to death, turning back time to erase all information and recollections about a nuclear attack, and battling pollution and harsh climates with rain-making technologies. As such, critics may say, this is just too simple; circumstances like these do not happen in the real world. While a brusque and simplified response to such a claim would be "that is the whole point," a more informed explanation begins by reminding pundits of the novel's genre and the manner in which soft science fiction narratives such as Parsipur's novel represent dystopian landscapes then set out to resolve seemingly unsolvable problems through fictional themes.

True, save for abstract images and general descriptions, Parsipur hardly provides a clear view of Shiva's inventions or the inner workings of the machines he develops, but again, that is far from the point she is trying to make. As I explained at the beginning of this chapter, Parsipur uses a postmodern version of the mainstream science fiction genre, namely soft science fiction, to delineate her overarching political message. Much has been said about the bleak state of things in Iran's recent sociopolitical climate, Parsipur seems to suggest, why not then focus on alleviating the problems by using a highly imaginative literary genre such as soft science fiction. We have known that female

adulterers face harsh punishments in Iran (as well as many other countries, in the Middle East or elsewhere), that arid climates impede efficient farming practices, that all young girls need an education and must learn about their own sexuality, and that freedom of speech, press, and assembly must be unquestionable rights for all individuals in a democratic system. We have known it all; it is time for change now, it is time for urgent action. In order to highlight her political ideals, Parsipur utilizes soft science fiction, and her depiction of utopian outcomes, as an offshoot of Shiva's inventions, renders her novel an altogether counter-hegemonic text.

The fact that Parsipur refrains from complicating her novel with sub-plots and scientific technicalities allows her to create an excess of ideological concepts and social and political commentaries. At the same time, she makes use of "strangeness" by imagining advanced technologies that also highlight the need for sociopolitical transformations. In other words, Shiva's amazing machines represent another excessive theme, which supplements the novel's ideological excesses.

II. The Drowned

While in Parsipur's science fiction novel, *Shiva,* highly advanced technologies serve as instruments of social and political change, Moniru Ravanipur's magical realist[28] novel, *The Drowned* [Ahl-e Ghargh] exposes the hidden ills of modernity and the way it disturbs the tranquility of a remote village near the Persian Gulf, by rupturing the intimate bond between its inhabitants and magical sea creatures. Although they utilize

[28] To avoid confusion, I will refer to the novel's genre as magical realism in my forthcoming analysis, while recognizing that because it seems to lean on folk/fable tradition, it can also be categorized as fabulist.

"strangeness" through different literary genres, both novels combine realistic themes with highly imaginative elements to ultimately drive their disparate political message home. Published less than a decade after *The Drowned*,[29] Parsipur's novel, *Shiva*, captures post-revolutionary Iran, while Ravanipur's novel depicts Jofreh several decades prior. Because it contains social and political criticism, Ravanipur's brand of magical realism, in *The Drowned*, takes after that of her Latin-American predecessors, which emerged from a Third-World consciousness and spoke mostly for the socially and geographically marginalized. My analysis in this section seeks to unearth both thematic and formal excess in Ravanipur's novel and explain the manner in which they enable her to articulate a language of resistance.

Published in Iran in 1989, *The Drowned* depicts the post World War II era and the impact of modernity when city folks—Westerners, petty merchants, political dissidents, as well as the Shah's[30] army—find their way to Jofreh, a small village in the southern region of Iran. The city dwellers find the villagers strange, while they seem awestruck by modern effects like radios, motorcycles, guns, and alcoholic beverages. The villagers subsist through fishing, and because of their close connection to the sea they believe in magical sea creatures like mermaids and sea monsters. When the seasons cooperate and Bu-Salmeh, the tyrannical ruler of the sea, looks favorably upon them, the men come home triumphantly. But when they get caught in his wrathful stormy grips, the women of Jofreh take to the shore with their black flags and offerings, lamenting and pleading to Bu-Salmeh to let their men return home unharmed. The women believe that similar to the

[29] *The Drowned* was published in 1989 in Iran, while *Shiva* was published in 1999 in the United States.

[30] Mohammad-Reza Pahlavi (reign 1941-1979).

capricious Bu-Salmeh, the mermaids to whom they refer as “abi,”[31] can become enraged, turn red, and drown the fishermen’s boats. So they harbor a sense of awe and respect for the mermaids as they do for Bu-Salmeh.

Resilient and in tune with nature, the women of Jofreh are more unified than the men; they also have an intimate bond with the sea and its ethereal inhabitants. Regarding the women as propagators of life and keepers of tradition, men marvel at their natural tendency to relate to the earth, the sea, and the mermaids. The novel draws a shroud of mystery around the women and their connection with the mermaids. We can glean this magical air from Madineh, the wife of the village chieftain, who, as the narrator declares, is a hybrid, half-human and half mermaid. When her husband, Zaer, watches Madineh sing and dance in a ritual to ward off the evil spirit, *Dei-zangroo*, and end the lunar eclipse, he is amazed by her peculiar nature and believes her to have supernatural powers:

> Women played the drum, Madineh sang, Boobooni, looking upward to the sky, danced […] [T]he men listened to Madineh’s voice from atop the water reservoir, and Zaer searched his memory to no avail. None of the village men knew Dei-Zangroo. How did Madineh know about Dei-Zangroo, and where had the women seen this ceremony? The men listened to their women repeating refrains from Madineh’s song, and, amid awe and terror, Zaer finally came to the conclusion that women are related to the occult, a realm men could never access (translations mine unless noted) (174).

[31] Meaning in Persian: of/from water, also the color blue.

Ravanipur's feminist tendencies in *The Drowned* are reminiscent of Parsipur's in *Women Without Men*, since they allude to the mystical powers women derive from their kinship with nature—the earth, the sea, and the moon:

> The women beat the drums, sang, and danced until that dark and ugly hand released the moon. The moon sat in the sky, worn and beaming. The sea turned blue at once and the mermaids laughed (174).

At the same time, female prowess, in the context of Ravanipur's novel, extends beyond women's physical abilities and their capacity to perpetuate life. So the men of Jofreh look up to and depend on their women as the "main protectors of the world" and keepers of peace and harmony (174).

Unlike Parsipur's novel, *Shiva,* where women seek change, the women of Jofreh fight to maintain their tradition and keep modernity at bay. *The Drowned* depicts the time in Iran's history when pro-Soviet sensibilities were taking root among the political dissident, who saw remote places like Jofreh as potential recruiting grounds. Naturally, fear of anti-government activities brings the army and government officials to the area, and when they inform the villagers that they plan to establish a gendarmerie there, the women of the village decide to stand up to them. As the narrator relates:

> It took an entire year to build the station. The women of the village destroyed the walls each night. They wrestled with soldiers who spoke so many different dialects, but no one had the power to stop them, not even the constant blaring of the warning shots that frightened the seabirds (243).

In a similar fashion, when the army colonel issues his first mandate, ordering the fishermen to obtain permits before setting out to sea, the women of Jofreh swarm the station again in protest:

> Zaer and the men made their way toward the station, but the women had arrived there before. Kheiju [Zaer's only daughter], who was one of the first to get there, grabbed a young, scrawny soldier's collar and picked him off the ground, shrieking […]. [T]he women swarmed the station hollering and the soldiers, not wanting to wrangle with them, ran out and suddenly the village was filled with the sound of bullets. Minutes later, the doors and windows of the station were being broken and the colonel was begging Zaer to calm the women (246).

Once the women of the village rise up, their men fight along with them. They also have the magical sea creatures on their side. Even the seabirds help the villagers fight the army and stop its expansionist schemes, when, in the middle of the night, they attack the station by throwing stones at the structure:

> Standing by the window, away from Nakhoda-Ali and alone, Boobooni saw the seabirds' white heads emerging from the water and throwing small stones that the mermaids had placed in their beaks at the newly built wall of the station and ruining it (250).

Because they live in peace, the women of Jofreh do not seek change. What they do or say matters in the village, and, as a result, they are able to express themselves and pursue their love interests more freely. For instance, Nabati, Zaer-Gholam's daughter, carries on a love affair with Mansoor and becomes pregnant with his child. Overwhelmed and

conflicted, she drowns her baby in the sea, but she eventually marries Mansoor, despite his mother's explicit disapproval. Similarly, Kheiju, Zaer's only daughter, secretly falls in love with Mah-Jamal and knocks on his door late at night to profess her love. When the two are finally married, according to the narrator, it is Kheiju who takes her mystified husband's hand and draws him to their bedchamber, because "like all women who learn things intuitively, she knew that her blue-eyed man did not know the ways of the world" (117).

Not only does *The Drowned* endow the women of Jofreh with agency and influence, but it also broadens the definitions of gender and identity by representing magical beings, hybrid creatures, and ambivalent gender distinctions. For example, in the case of Mah-Jamal, the novel provides conflicting details about his origin. At one point the narrator indicates that he is the product of a love affair between a fisherman and a mermaid, while in another instance, she explains that Mah-Jamal is the result of union between a gypsy and the brave young rebel, Shir-Mohammad Tangestani. What renders Mah-Jamal's identity more ambivalent is the coexistence of conventionally masculine and feminine traits in his character. He is a very kind and gentle man, indecisive, shy, and soft-spoken, yet he becomes a political agitator, an anti-Shah rebel, toward the end of the novel, and is finally killed by the government guards. In a similar fashion, Mah-Jamal and Kheiju's twin daughters, Hamayel and Shamayel, challenge conventional definitions of femininity. Shamayel takes to the company of her beloved deer, Tara, and dreams of marrying her some day, while Hamayel rejects her femininity, and dresses like a boy. According to Farnaz Hasanali-zadeh, after witnessing the bleak fates that befall their friends, and in order to avoid the burdens of marriage and motherhood, both girls "make

strange decisions. Shamayel wishes to marry her deer and Hamayel alters her identity and dismisses her sex" (From Dirt to Ashes 93). Perhaps because of their distance from the city, the villagers do not perceive characters like Madineh and Mah-Jamal as peculiar or frightening, so Shamayel's family acknowledges her affection toward her deer, as it also accepts Hamayel's masculine tendencies. By imagining strange creatures, *The Drowned* creates spaces where these idiosyncratic identities thrive without pressure from dominant culture, which often propagates gender binaries and heteronormative standards.

In the last chapters of the novel, the narrator presents bleak images of what befalls the people of Jofreh, thus rendering a pessimistic view of the impact of modernity in a place of "edenic harmony with nature" (Linville 64). She laments the people's gradual loss of connection with nature following the influx of a wide array of city dwellers to their village. The rapid changes that take place in their natural environment leaves the people of Jofreh with a growing sense of displacement. Once their bond with the sea and the mermaids is broken, they find themselves adrift in time and space. As a result of their alienation from their old way of life, the villagers experience identity crises. Their new reality leads to anxieties about reconciling the self with Other, and, the past with the present. Caught in the grips of modernity, and not being able to move at its pace or to go back, so many of them take to the sea, go mad or die.

In his article, "Viktor Shklovsky: Différance in Defamiliarization," Lawrence Crawford elucidates Shklovsky's theory of "defamiliarization" by way of Jacques Derrida's concept of "différance," which alludes to both "differ," to make different, and "defer," to delay perception. Crawford explains defamiliarization as that which alters people's perception of a familiar concept, thus forcing them to think about it in different

and more complicated terms. I would like to argue that the magical (or, strange) elements in *The Drowned* serve to defamiliarize Jofreh and its people, and, therefore, invite a different and deferred reading of the impact of modernity in their lives. As a result of this complex reading, by the end of the novel, we come to sympathize with the villagers, in spite of the peculiarity of their beliefs and lifestyles.

In the end, many of the characters in the novel join the narrator, lamenting their misfortune. Mah-Jamal's last words, for instance, convey a profound sense of loss and disillusionment. After the government guards shoot him, he bellows with all his might, "There is no pearl!" (368). The narrator then reverberates Mah-Jamal's final reflections before he dies:

> He was at home, in the depth of the green waters… how futile man strives to stand on his two legs and cry out the truth… but then what was the truth? In the midst of pain, a bitter smile sat on his lips. The truth was that the whole world had sunk into the green waters and people were the drowned (368).

Here, *The Drowned* draws a parallel between the sizeable pearl that the villagers had sought for years and never found, and modernity, considering both of them as nothing more than a dazzling illusion of bliss. What we can deduce from Ravanipur's novel is that the culprits in this case are many but all of them, the Shah, his cronies, or even Western tourists, all share the cloak of modernity. This suspicion, even fear, of westerners also manifests in the novel's magical elements. An event that speaks to this theme depicts Mah-Jamal's unborn son uttering, "thieves! thieves!" from inside his

mother's womb (130). Joining him and forewarning the reader that "The whole world must be aware of the presence of the blonde-haired thieves," the narrator further declares:

> Zaer's grandchild issued warnings before being born. A unique child who had inherited the gift of premonition from his father. And with what ruse the thieves of this world will deceive people? They would come smiling in a ship that moved like wind, from the sea to the land, made by the highest wizard in the world, to be your undoing and to steal all you have in the middle of the night (130).

I would like to focus on another significant issue related to the time period in which *The Drowned* was published. By 1989, Iran had not only endured months of social, political, and economic chaos, following the 1979 revolution and the subsequent establishment of the Islamic Republic, but it had also suffered nearly a decade of war with Iraq. Even though by then the universities were open after the regime's two-year-long purification process, dubbed as "cultural revolution," oppression and censorship still cast their ominous shadow over most intellectual and artistic endeavors. Many writers and artists found (and still do, to this day) that the only safe way to convey their oppositional stance was through a subtle and symbolic mode of expression that managed to escape the censor. In light of these facts, it makes sense to consider Ravanipur's evident pessimism toward Western modernity in the novel as a cover for her mistrust (or disappointment) of the new regime in Iran. Mah-Jamal's last words and final reflections certainly point in that direction, particularly when he says: "The truth was that the whole world had sunk into the green waters and people were the drowned" (368). More aptly

put, Mah-Jamal's last thoughts may be an indication of Ravanipur's disillusionment at the failure of the Islamic revolution to deliver on its promises.

On the whole, while offering a somber view of modernity, *The Drowned* represents a broad perspective on the changes that take place in Jofreh, particularly in its last chapters. For example, it depicts Mansoor and his wife, Nabati, becoming corrupted by certain influences of modernity, as he loses all of the profits he has made through his business dealings with the city folks to alcohol and prostitution, while she, after carrying on an affair, leaves her family behind and flees to the city with a soldier. On the other hand, the novel offers a more propitious view of modernity in the way it inspires Zaer to implement vital changes in Jofreh, such as building a dam, paved roads, and most of all a school for the children. Worn and frail, in the end, Zaer asks for the "largest bell in the world" for the new school he has managed to build, because he thinks of its sound as "more beautiful than the sound of Azan" calling people to prayer (318). Since he is the village chieftain and one of its elders, Zaer's tireless efforts and his optimism about the new changes in the village point to the possibility of reconciliation between some aspects of modernity and tradition, even in a place like Jofreh. The narrator also informs us that Mah-Jamal's older daughter, Maryam, eventually becomes a physician, and that her mother decides to leave the village and move to the city, so her twin daughters can also get a better education. These reports are also indicative of Ravanipur's favorable view on some form of reconciliation between modernization and traditional values.

III. Time, Space, and Shifting Realities

Continuing with the theme of "strangeness," in this section I seek out thematic and formal excess in Ravanipur's magical realist novels, *Gypsy by the Fire* and *The Drowned* as well as Parsipur's science fiction novel, *Shiva.* My analysis focuses on explaining the strategies these authors use to manipulate temporal and spatial boundaries to create new narrative possibilities and alternative realities in their protagonists' lives.

By virtue of its nature, "strangeness" maintains an excessive quality that refuses to be contained within previously accepted molds; it stands in opposition to the status quo. As such, novels that employ literary genres such as magical realism and science fiction remain, to some extent, shrouded by mystery and out of the full reach of logic and comprehension, and, subsequently, are often considered subversive. While in *Shiva* strangeness manifests thematically—that is to say, in plot and character/s—in Ravanipur's novels, *The Drowned* and *Gypsy by the Fire*, strangeness encroaches on form, hence producing excessive narrative voices. In *The Drowned*, for instance, the narrator's persistent intervention in the story, the way she addresses the reader as well as certain characters, her constant questioning of their choices or the fates that befall them generates what I refer to in this study as formal excess. A case in point is when the narrator's voice echoes that of Mah-Jamal's unborn son alerting the people of Jofreh to the arrival of the "blonde-haired thieves" from inside his mother's womb. While it renders these fantastical elements in Ravanipur's novel more compelling, this ongoing back-and-forth between the narrator and the characters also speaks to her "bold experimentation in narrative voice and technique" (Satan's Stones vii).

In *Gypsy by the Fire* this strategy reaches its height, when the narrator engages in long dialogues with the novel's protagonist, Ayeneh. As its title indicates, the novel depicts the life of a beautiful gypsy girl in post-revolutionary Iran. An alluring dancer, Ayeneh falls in love with one of her admirers, a young writer from the city. She carries on a brief love affair with the man she refers to as Monis[32]. But they are soon found out, and after being beaten savagely for days, Ayeneh is forced to leave her nomadic tribe behind. When her search for her lover comes to no avail in the city of Shiraz, she becomes homeless living a transitory life. Oddly enough, wherever she sojourns, a person—often an old woman—warns her about the fate she would suffer if she were to stay there. Ravanipur concocts certain characters—probably as surrogates for herself—and places them on Ayeneh's path to deter her from or compel her to make different choices. In *From Dirt to Ashes*, Hasanali-zadeh alludes to the symbolic meaning of the characters Ayeneh encounters along her journey. According to Hasanali-zadeh, each of these characters, starting with Ayeneh's own mother, serves as a cautionary tale: "With every new choice, a change in the direction of her life takes place, and next to each choice an old woman, who represents her potential wretched life, cautioning her against the evils of staying put" (translations mine unless noted) (142). When she begins to work in a cherry orchard, an old woman who has worked there all her life tells Ayeneh of her own loss: "I was the same age as you when I first came here […] if you stay three summers, every year the blooms come here for your youth […] you give it to them to get it back at first, but, in the end, you just sit and watch it" (120). Later on, Ayeneh has a similar encounter with another old woman while working in a factory. As she weighs the

[32] It means "guest" in their dialect.

possibility of staying there against the option of moving on, the old woman tells her that she was among the first people employed by the factory many years ago and that she only chose to stay to save money. Worn and decrepit, the old woman likens the factory to a "stingy man" who only pays you daily and "the more you pay attention to him […] the more cruel he becomes taking your youth little by little only to spit you out later and take a younger and fresher wife" (From Dirt to Ashes 143).

Every woman who crosses path with Ayeneh signifies a potentially lost opportunity for a better life. *Gypsy by the Fire* underlines the perils of stagnation in women's lives. Its formal excess (embodied in an intrusive narrator) promotes mobility and alerts Ayeneh to what she may suffer as a result of undue caution and complacence. At the same time, Ayeneh's ongoing back and forth with the narrator underlines her refusal to accept the destiny she devises for her. Strangely, to defy this ready-made fate, Ayeneh escapes and hides from the narrator on multiple occasions, and, at one point, even attempts suicide to break out of the confines of the story. While recovering at the hospital, she explains to a young man that the reason for her extreme act is a certain writer who is penning her life's tale: "[…] She wants to make me someone I am not, you know, I don't exist, they don't let me exist… she only wants me to be the female hero of her story" (172).

At this point, Ravanipur further complicates the narrative's formal excess by including the narrator's internal monologue. Desperate for Ayeneh's cooperation, the narrator reminds herself that "letting her heroine think twice will be a writer's undoing" (43). She then thinks of ways to tame her unruly protagonist: "Do something woman, say something. Your story is nothing without her, look how she is staggering and moving

against the direction you want… if you wait another minute she is gone forever, hurry up, caress her scuffed cheeks, her disheveled hair" (43). When the narrator's efforts to appease Ayeneh are unsuccessful, she tries to reason with her, by describing herself as more of a captive than her: "[…] A female hero can escape the limits of the story, but being alive, I have no escape. My arms and legs are pinned to life… where can one flee from life" (44). Through this sentiment, the narrator alludes to her ability, as the author, to envision new realities in Ayeneh's life, something she cannot do for herself.

Adding yet another valence to the novel's formal complexity, the narrator then informs Ayeneh that she has been writing her story based on the paintings by a female artist by the name of Farzaneh. "I have lost my Monis too," the narrator tells Ayeneh, "I'm writing this book and hoping to publish it so I can find that person. If you stay, the story will conclude, you will go to Tehran and find your Monis… we are each other's savior" (45). When Farzaneh, the artist, enters the story, the narrator insists on seeing her paintings of the cemetery—the same cemetery where Ayeneh met the first old woman—in order to complete her story. Farzaneh then hands the narrator the storage key and asks her to leave her alone. In response to the narrator's question as to why she does not sell her paintings, Farzaneh says, "nobody sells her memories" (84). This comment begs the question of Farzaneh's true identity, since she implies that she has painted the pictures based on memory. The fact that toward the end of the novel Ayeneh becomes a renowned artist whose search for Farzaneh comes to no avail makes matters more suspect. None of the people Ayeneh questions seems to have heard about the artist she describes, so "she hurries back home, searches through her phonebook, flips through the pages of art magazines… No… as though there was never a Farzaneh" (267).

The final pages of *Gypsy by the Fire* further substantiate its non-linear storyline by representing the union of three different personas—the narrator, Ayeneh, and Farzaneh—from potentially three different time frames. Farzaneh, having painted the pictures prior to the creation of the story, sojourns in the past, the narrator/writer dwells in the present, and Ayeneh, as the creation of the writer/narrator, occupies the present as well as the future. The novel's last lines blur the borders between these temporalities by depicting the eventual merging of what seems to be different aspects of a woman's fragmented self, when the narrator "shakes her head and smiles, taking short breaths like a seabird that has just passed through a storm" then puts on Ayeneh's old dress:

> […] She sits motionless in front of the wall mirror, looking […] then rises, opens the old chest and takes out the long burgundy dress! She puts on the dress, fastens her anklets, lets her long tresses cover her shoulders, draws her eyes with kohl, and stands in front of her, asking, 'is it you?'
>
> And she, blissfully smiling, says, 'I am you!'
>
> 'Shall we dance?'
>
> 'So we shall!' (268).

Since her name signifies "mirror" in the Persian language, throughout the novel, Ayeneh functions as a clear surface reflecting the narrator's past. In essence, she enables the narrator to articulate her experiences (to "write" them!). As the lines between three different temporalities collapse, fragmented identities unite to create a whole, and we come to the conclusion that the three women were parts of the same person all along. Ravanipur utilizes two different types of formal excess in her novel. Through temporal distortion, she allows the fragmented aspects of one woman to come together and make a

complete person. Moreover, through her intrusive narrator, Ravanipur makes reality more malleable in order to benefit Ayeneh. Refusing to accept certain destinies the narrator imagines for her, Ayeneh bargains with her on a number of occasions, and ultimately makes the choices that suit her.

Representing a similar relationship between its intrusive narrator and female protagonist, Ravanipur's well-known short story, "Love's Tragic Tale," also involves fragmentation. Rather brief—barely making it to six pages—the story entails a woman's infatuation with a man, who desires her only for her literary craft. As such, their liaison involves what M.R. Ghanoonparvar coins as a "guardian-ward relationship" (Satan's Stones xi). Although the narrator recounts the story initially through an omniscient voice, she soon shifts her narrative voice to first-person, claiming to be a writer too: "I'm writing this story quickly, because I'm afraid someone will come in, sit in that chair next to the window, look at me, and ask: How's your work coming?" (20). Oddly enough, since that is the most frequent question the man asks every time he visits the woman, we are compelled to draw the conclusion that the writer and the narrator are, once again, the same person.

Shortly following this section, the narrator shifts her voice again to the third-person omniscient to describe the way the woman writer develops her literary craft by "breathe[ing] life into [her] words" (21). Although she does this to gain the man's true affection, her efforts come to no avail in the end. By the time the story reaches its final lines, the woman writer concludes her literary opus. And, when the man takes up her manuscript and beholds it, we realize that it bears the same title as the story. It is at this point that the woman writer and narrator turn out to be the same person. Ravanipur's

story represents the woman writer's refusal to accept her fate. When she realizes the man does not return her love, she transforms herself into words:

> The woman wasn't the woman any longer. She was a fossil made of words and the man tapped her shoulder so that he could be sure, and suddenly thousands of words scattered on the ground, and among those thousands of words, the man saw these…
>
> 'You're so handsome… come, be my friend, I'm so lonely' (23).

"Love's Tragic Tale" represents woman's struggle to achieve sensual/sexual fulfillment and literary success in a "man's world" (xii). The story's ending suggests that accomplishing both ambitions for women may not be an easy task. Through her final act of defiance, the woman resists the sort of reality she is faced with. Moreover, she recognizes the uncontainability of her desire within spatial and temporal limits. As a result, she opts for a new version of reality, in the end, one that is of her own making:

> And time for a woman like her, who was after someone to love her, this was the only meaning time had, and she didn't see any difference between one second and one year, and no matter where she was, she drew out the essence of time so that she could reach it, reach that moment when she would see him as a man, see herself as a woman, and see nothing else (21).

Ravanipur's story does not reveal the man's response in the end. Perhaps that is because the woman's final action is the message Ravanipur wants us to garner from this strange story of unrequited love. The woman's radical choice underlines the importance of

pursuing the object of her desire, even though it comes at the price of altering what her self constitutes within the conventional bounds of physical reality.

Although some critics, including Hasanali-zadeh, find Ravanipur's persistent manipulation of reality vertiginous, to say the least, her strategy highlights, among other ideas, the unstable nature of reality as it depends upon notions of time and space. To consider reality as a "changeable," or, more conservatively put, "elastic" concept provides openings for other possibilities (or other potential fates, as it were). With that in mind, I would like to clarify that by notions of "reality" in the context of this particular discussion I mainly refer to current conditions of experiential life inside a cultural and political realm, as opposed to metaphysical and/or philosophical definitions of the concept as they relate to more elusive notions such as "truth." In *Gypsy by the Fire*, Ravanipur persistently unsettles the border between the story (where the character exists) and reality (where the writer exists). She utilizes the subversive energy in excessive literary themes and forms, such as temporal distortion (when the narrator allows Ayeneh to see a potential future) and the intrusive narrator (when the narrator and Ayeneh negotiate about different choices), to highlight the possibility and significance of resistance.

A revealing conversation between the narrator and Ayeneh delineates this overarching message. At one point, she responds to Ayeneh's complaints by telling her that she can take her back to her past if she so chooses, but that she would become the old woman she had previously met in Bushehr, a possibility that terrifies Ayeneh. She then reminds Ayeneh that "sometimes reality is not entirely beneficial to people" by which she implies a "fixed version of reality" (174). Ravanipur's creative "play" with notions of

temporality and spatiality is an indication of her feminist ideals. In both *Gypsy by the Fire* and "Love's Tragic Tale," she pushes the boundaries of story and structure to carve out new spaces for female agency and desire.

As my analysis demonstrates in this chapter, both Ravanipur and Parsipur employ imaginative genres such as magical realism and science fiction to either caution their readers against the "side effects" of modernity, or, promote social and political change through advancements in technology. These genres allow these authors to make use of thematic and formal excess, expressed through strange inventions, magical sea creatures, and intrusive narrators, in order to articulate their particular brand of resistance. *Shiva* envisions the drastic transformation of a traditional sociopolitical system through intellectual collaborations and highly advanced technologies; *The Drowned* depicts a remote village where mermaids and other sea creatures make a pact with strong tribal women to preserve their tradition and fight government control, while *Gypsy by the Fire* portrays a young woman's persistent refusal to accept a ready-made fate. No longer bound by the temporal and spatial rules that govern conventional reality, these imaginative sites, strange as they may be, facilitate resistance and produce conditions where imagined possibilities can become alternative realities.

In the following chapter, I will investigate Fariba Vafi's contemplative novels in terms of thematic excess, as I consider traumatic memories, excessive interiority, and verbosity as my critical rubric.

3. Hollering Justice While Burning Alive: Traumatic Memories, Excessive Interiority, and Verbosity in Fariba Vafi's *My Bird* and *A Secret in the Alleys*

"[The] crucial factor that determines the repetition of trauma is the presence of mute, unsymbolized, and unintegrated experiences: '[A] sudden and passively endured trauma is relived repeatedly, until a person learns to remember simultaneously the effect and cognition associated with the trauma through access to language'. (166)

Trauma: Explorations in Memory, Cathy Caruth (1995)

I. Taking Possession of the Past: Memory and Excessive Interiority

In Fariba Vafi's meditative novels, *My Bird*[33] (Iran, 2002) and *A Secret in the Alleys* (Iran, 2008), memory and excessive internal monologues[34] help the protagonists to confront their traumatic childhood experiences, and, ultimately, process trauma into a language of resistance. The protagonists' active engagement with the past through memory and internal monologue, in the context of my analysis in this chapter, means more than simply "remembering" traumatic events, rather, it entails their continuous inward self-talks so as to gain clarity about the past and deeper insight into the self.

Bearing witness to the "disturbing remains" of the past, as Vafi's novels demonstrate, contains more rebellion than catharsis, since it means standing face to face with one's history and refusing to accept victimhood or forgetfulness (Kaplan 20).

[33] *My Bird* was translated in English by Syracuse University Press in 2009, and won the Yalda and Golshiri literary awards for best novel.

[34] In the context of this study, I consider the terms "internal monologue" and "interiority" as interchangeable. They both refer to the inward talk of a character with herself, colloquially dubbed as self-talk.

Although it is intertwined with melancholy, this manner of dealing with traumatic memories involves a "hard ethical evaluation of the past," as opposed to romanticized nostalgia, and, in the case of Vafi's female protagonists, it often results in self-development and identity (re)construction (Hinrichsen 212). Taking possession of the past, as Lisa Hinrichsen claims, means "actively working through the past, freeing oneself from persistent patterns of repression and repetition to ultimately find a way of being 'a whole human being' (1).

My Bird and *A Secret* highlight women's active engagement with their traumatic memories not only as a means of survival, but also as a subversive strategy: "a way of achieving a necessary mobility" toward a newly envisioned future (216). They explore the exhaustive mental labor necessary for "processing" past traumas and recuperating the self. In *Trauma Culture,* Ann Kaplan refers to the sense of confusion most trauma survivors experience as the "paradox of trauma," explaining both its silencing effect as well the desire it invokes for comprehension and expression (Kaplan 56). In this section, I begin my analysis with Vafi's novel, *My Bird*, to describe the manner in which its female hero resorts to excessive internal monologue as a way of resisting the silencing and paralyzing effects of her traumatic childhood memories. *My Bird* reveals the process of healing and self-formation, as its protagonist struggles with certain aspects of her personal history: "'what to retain, what to dump, how to hold on to what memory insists upon relinquishing'" (Hinrichsen 1). My argument, therefore, demonstrates that confronting her painful memories through this process allows the protagonist in *My Bird* to put the past—her father's death, her mother's oppression, and her own reticence as a young girl—behind, so she can gain an outward voice and move forward.

My Bird portrays the struggle of a young mother (also the narrator) trying to come to terms with a childhood trauma, while dealing with a husband whose mind is set on moving abroad. As she strives to articulate the horror of hearing her dying father's pleas for help from their basement, when she was a little girl, her husband, Amir, is preoccupied with the idea of living in Canada. "He loves the future. He dislikes the past. Especially […] a past full of whispers, gossip, and women's games, a past that ends in dark basements and closets," she ruminates with evident disappointment, "Amir is not willing to take even one step back with me" (9). Tired of her "ramblings" about the past one night, Amir covers her mouth with his hand in jest and lies down in bed "like a happy man" (10). But for her, troubling memories, which she likens to a "monster" hanging onto her back, remain a daily burden:

> His gesture was charming, but behind his loving tone there was a hint of boredom. I realized that he would not go anywhere with me. I was shocked; loneliness and dismay filled the space between Amir and me like a second wife. Many days had to pass for us in order to leave each other alone and to conjugate the verb 'to go' separately for ourselves (10).

Given her husband's lack of interest in her emotional crisis, she realizes that this will be her quest alone. The fact is that she wants to move forward as much as he does, but before she can do that, she needs to resolve the issues that plague her thoughts. Specifically, she needs to make peace with the knowledge that her mother deliberately let her father die. This issue, evidently, carries a significant degree of pain and guilt for her, since, like her mother, she was awake that night and heard her father's entreaties, although she was only a child.

She not only feels like an accomplice to her father's death, but she also harbors a great deal of anger toward her mother. Her continuous mnemonic retreats to the basement of her childhood home, where her father spent the last months of his life, remind her of his forgetfulness and frailty in old age, as well as his mistreatment of her mother when he was younger. Through her reminiscences and inward self-talks, she tries to understand her parents' actions so she can put the matter to rest and move on. Since her husband is oblivious to what she is going through, she refers to her obsessive engagement with memory and internal monologue as "cheating":

> He doesn't know that I cheat on him a hundred times a day. I leave this life a hundred times a day. Like a terrified woman who has never left home. Gently, slowly, and quietly, even though scared to death, I secretly go to places that Amir cannot even imagine (35).

At the same time, her compulsive retreats to the past and her ongoing reflections about the basement and family secrets reveal her frustration with her own caginess and quietude, traits that were instilled in her at a young age, particularly because she was a girl. As she reflects on her girlhood memories, she bitterly recalls the day her aunt expressed her dislike for "tattletales": "She pressed her hand on my bony chest. 'A woman should learn to keep everything here. Do you understand?' I understood" (28).

Now, as a young wife and mother, she struggles with her lifelong reticence and submissiveness and wishes to be stern and vocal. She does not wish to live a life like that of her mother. Her ongoing inward deliberations about her mother's unhappiness and her daily weeping underline her desire for a better life and a liberated voice:

> After father became housebound, Maman's weeping escalated, as if now it was intentional. It wasn't the sound of crying. It was disgust. It was hatred. It was pain. Her weeping felt like an electric current passing through your body and drying your blood instantaneously (23).

These painful images force the protagonist in *My Bird* to come to terms with her feelings of guilt and shame. She knows she has to overcome her anger and rid herself of the silence, which has been bothering her like "a tight woolen dress in hot weather"(22). In order to make peace with the past, she needs to forgive her mother and make a conscious choice not to follow her example.

In her article, "Reflections on Memory at the Millennium," Susan Suleiman highlights memory as a means of "productive engagement with the past," not involving a "fixated stare at a 'single catastrophe,'" which may emphasize trauma's symptoms—repetition and fragmentation—but that which entails the possibility of "blinking," hence promoting "forgetting, anticipating, erring, revising" (vi). This particular response to trauma is what I strive to underline in this chapter as Vafi's narrative strategy of resisting "the continued domination and haunting of the past" and ultimately achieving self-actualization (Hinrichsen 187). Until she begins to find an outward voice, the protagonist in *My Bird* maintains her obsessive engagement with her inward self-talks, and painful reminiscences afflict her with sporadic bouts of melancholy. For her, these mental activities serve as a space of negotiation, where she can (re)construct her identity as separate from that of her mother. In her study of trauma, Elaine Scarry claims that traumatic pain is bound up with "imaging" because it is inherently resistant to language (187). As such, pain "prompts the self to actively enter into relation with the

“objectifying power of the imagination”” (187). According to Scarry, “[through this relation] pain is transformed from a wholly passive and helpless occurrence into a self-modifying […] one” (164). Scarry’s theorization of traumatic pain renders the persistent internal monologues in *My Bird* crucial to its protagonist’s quest for healing and growth. As a way of resisting the silencing effect of traumatic experiences, the protagonist resorts to interiority so as to articulate her feelings internally, through self-talk and mental images, before she is able to express them through language.

A part of this growth process for the protagonist in *My Bird* is to recognize patterns of oppression and abuse in her childhood home, and to make the choice of not falling victim to them in her own personal life. While as a child, she was plagued by her mother’s submissiveness and her heart wrenching daily cries, as a grown woman, she begins to stand up to her husband, Amir, through subtle yet expressed displays of resistance. For instance, when he threatens to sell their home, she now knows better than to scream back or cry in silence. “One of the benefits of getting older is that I don’t get thrown into a frenzy right away,” she muses contentedly, “I take a few seconds and choose from possible responses. There is no need to get up and scream. I can protect the house while seated” (8). She then enunciates calmly: “You will not sell the house” (8). Feeling wiser and stronger, she enjoys her newfound voice: “I like the sound of my voice. It is neither shaky nor worried. It is confident” (8).

Quite similar to *My Bird*, the protagonist in Vafi’s novel, *A Secret in the Alleys*, who is also a young wife and mother, is haunted by recurring memories of violence and abuse in her childhood home. And, like the protagonist in *My Bird,* she refuses to forget or remain a silent witness to her painful memories. Ultimately, her continuous inward

deliberations enable her to make important decisions in terms of her position in her own marriage. She recognizes that her mother's silence and resignation was her sole weapon against her father's daily insults. At the same time, she harbors a great deal of resentment for both of her parents, especially her mother for taking his abuse and staying quiet all those years. Her displeasure with both of her parents is evident in her desire to address them by their first names. Using this strategy, as she describes his abusive behavior and her lack of verbal response, she seems to want to distance herself from her father's[35] cruelty as well as her mother's[36] meekness:

> Abu knew that Mahrokh had to say something at that moment. Or she would never utter a word again. Become mute forever and have him wait for a single word from her. Abu was willing to do anything to keep this from happening. He would stick his hand in her eye to drive her mad, make her scream and draw her nails all over her face. But Mahrokh didn't say a word. Just lowered her face, and like a beggar who simply accepts the money, she made her way to the room […] didn't look at us either (translations mine unless noted) (139).

As the protagonist (also the narrator) in *A Secret* relates, even when her mother revolts against her father's sadistic taunting, her actions are without words. For instance, Mahrokh reacts when Abu mocks her for wearing lipstick, an activity with which she hardly bothers, likely for her chronic lack of zeal, and for fear of provoking his jealousy. But her rebellion is again devoid of verbal expression. As the protagonist and her siblings

[35] Abu.

[36] Mahrokh.

watch Abu verbally harass her, Mahrokh struggles to keep her composure while hand washing clothes by the small pool in their backyard:

> Mahrokh was dumbfounded. She couldn't find the words. Some ruins, though real, cannot be seen. But you can feel their enormity from the way victims thrash about underneath their weight. Mahrokh was thrashing about from underneath Abu's words but could not make a move (65).

Knowing that "no word could get him away from that place," Mahrokh asks Abu to hand her the hose hoping to distract him (66). But, ignoring her request, Abu sprays the water forcefully in her face. When Mahrokh runs into the house, everyone, including the novel's young protagonist, assumes that she is going to change out of her wet clothes and "crouch in a corner," but she quickly returns to the backyard:

> A mix of fury and obstinacy in her face. She is still wearing her soaked housedress. She holds up the edges of her skirt that is filled with something. She drops them directly in the plastic tub then steps into it noisily and stomps them with her feet. The water turns pink at first then red. The lipsticks' red paste slowly emerges to the surface like dead fish, floating around her white bare legs (66).

By revisiting painful memories of her childhood and processing them inwardly, the protagonist in *A Secret* is able to understand them, forgive her parents, and make different choices than those of her mother. In fact, her reference to her own circumstances, in the final pages of the novel, reveals her satisfactory marriage and career outside of the home.

On their path toward self-discovery and growth, Vafi's protagonists use memory to take a hard look at their parents' relationship—the first model they are presented with

early on in their lives. Their ongoing inward reflections afford them insight into patterns of abuse in their families, as they also open their eyes to inequitable standards within their culture. The protagonists in both *My Bird* and *A Secret* eventually choose different lives than those of their mothers, and, in doing so, they defy traditional gender roles. After a long process of inward self-examination and rumination, the female protagonist in Vafi's recent novel, *Ba'd Az Payan* [After the End][37], also resists traditional standards of domesticity by standing up to her mother and declaring: "I want to accomplish something important in my life. I don't want to wash and cook, marry, and make babies, like you. To lower my head, keep quiet, and repeat what I have been doing sheepishly while they scold and degrade me, only to die in the end without experiencing anything in this world" (22). In a similar fashion, the protagonist in *My Bird* objects to the traditional "roles" that she feels have been "assigned" to her:

> I have so many faults by now. They have been stacking up, one on top of the other, becoming like a heavy blanket that I want to pull over me and stay covered. I am not a mother, not a daughter, and not a wife. I cannot perform any of the roles that have been assigned to me (70).

Vafi's female heroes often question the fairness of the traditional roles expected of them, as they also try to negotiate their freedom and autonomy within the domestic and public spheres. These efforts sometimes entail cross-generational alliances, as mothers actively engage in their daughters' lives and guide them toward different paths. Vafi's novel, *After the End,* provides a telling example when its protagonist recalls her mother's advice

[37] Published in Iran in 2014.

to consider education as a path to liberation, and to follow the example of her coworker instead of her:

> [B]ut Maman told me to appreciate that woman. 'You will learn much from her, but not from me, a blind bird' […] she said, 'I don't even know when and why I got married. I didn't experience anything in my life. I was just happy to have you and your sister' (93).

Following her own epiphany, the protagonist in *My Bird* makes an effort to share her experience with her young daughter, Shadi, so she summons her, and, using her doll, teaches her not to be silent at the face of any kind of abuse:

> I sit Shadi in front of me and give her a little lecture—what Maman should have done with me and never did […]. I grab Shadi's doll, and squeeze her stomach. The doll cries. I say, 'Like this'. I take the battery out of the doll and squeeze it again. I say, 'See, if you don't make a sound, you are as bad as a doll without a battery, without a heart. Then it is possible to hurt you because nobody will even find out' (18).

If not for their continuous engagement with memory and internal monologues, it seems that Vafi's female heroes would have no way of channeling their emotional scars into a process of healing and transformation. These mental activities enable these women to encounter their traumatic childhood experiences in positive ways. As I demonstrated in this section, the protagonists in *My Bird* and *A Secret* utilize memory and interiority to process traumatic experiences into a language of resistance.

II. Verbosity[38] & Subversion

As in the previous section, my analysis here considers excessive interiority and memory as means of actively engaging with the past. However, whereas in the previous section I demonstrated the manner in which the protagonists in *My Bird* and *A Secret* sought to distance themselves from their submissive maternal role models along their path to self-actualization, here, I focus on the ways in which memory and interiority ultimately compel the protagonist in *A Secret* to emulate her outspoken and rebellious friend. By presenting examples and drawing comparisons between different female characters in the novel, I argue that *A Secret* promotes verbosity as a subversive strategy. Furthermore, I use examples from Vafi's other works, including *My Bird*, to explain other (less obvious) forms of resistance, such as walking.

In general, outspoken female characters are rare in Vafi's novels. Although she relates most of her stories through the first-person narrative voice, Vafi's protagonists are, for the most part, genuine introverts. They tend to be introspective women who struggle through a lengthy process of soul-searching, but their exhaustive inward deliberations eventually enable them to gain a renewed sense of self and a voice. As Hinrichsen argues, in the context of traumatic memory, "strategic silences" can be as propitious as speaking up publicly, when it comes to identity (re)construction (28). It takes a while for the protagonist in *My Bird* to find the root of her lifelong caginess and quietude. She recognizes the significance of having an assertive female role model at home, so she blames her mother for her reticence and for always praising her chronic

[38] In the context of this work, this term refers to being excessively vocal.

silence as a child: "[…] But even with years of practice, my inside dialogue was never completely revealed to the outside world. I am still considered a quiet person. Maman says, "Bless his soul, you take after him. Your father would hardly say two words"" (21). In a similar fashion, Vafi's novel, *After the End,* depicts its young protagonist's frustration with her inability to command a conversation. And when she finally overcomes this deficiency, she feels as though she has grown even physically: "[…] I had become bold and I liked my boldness. I was just beginning to find out that audacity makes a person taller and breathing easier" (38).

Outspoken female characters are not only scarce but they often take on marginal roles such as family members and friends of the protagonists in Vafi's novels. In *A Secret,* Azar represents one of these rare personas. Best friend of the novel's young protagonist, Azar characterizes her opposite in that she is carefree, brave, and garrulous. Azar is unafraid to express her likes and dislikes to others, including her parents and her tyrannical older brother, Gholamali. As the protagonist describes her, Azar has a voracious appetite. She laughs heartily and shamelessly, goes out into the alley and talks to boys, and climbs walls and trees like a cat, in spite of being told not to. Not entirely resembling that of child, her demeanor, viewed as excessive by others—even other women, including the protagonist—situates Azar at the peripheries of culture. She is "a figure of female transgression that is both threatening and vulnerable" to ridicule and reprimand (Rowe 209). Though the narrator (also the protagonist) does not reveal Azar's size, her allusion to Azar's desire to eat underscore how for women "body size and bearing are governed by especially far-reaching standards of normalization and aestheticization which forbid looseness and fatness" (Rowe 62). Such standards reveal

the male fear of the female appetite not just for food, but also for power. Outward expressions of female desire tend to challenge the "proper boundaries" of male authority in both the private and pubic spheres. As Kathleen Rowe argues, "Femininity is gauged by how little space women take up; women who are too fat or move too loosely appropriate too much space, obtruding upon proper boundaries" (Rowe 63). Azar's inherent excesses—her wild and intrepid nature and her volubility—render her character more animal-like, even fiendish, in the eyes of the dominant culture. Oppositional to the standards of feminine propriety, and, consequently, functioning at the peripheries of culture, Azar represents what Rowe dubs as "creature[s] of the threshold" (Rowe 209).

Although as a child, the protagonist was sometimes annoyed by Azar's brazenness and verbosity, now, as a grown woman, her childhood memories allow her to understand and appreciate her friend's audacity. Her reflections on her friendship with Azar and the impact of her actions in her life culminate in the memory of a specific day in which the two girls go to the bazaar together. On their way back, they cross paths with Gholamali, who admonishes them for running loose in the streets. He threatens the protagonist and slaps Azar, who runs away from him. According to the narrator, Gholamali, puny and nervous, loathes all women, seeing them as either helpless creatures like his mother, or, wild and loose like his sister, who he seems to detest most of all:

> […] Azar's words never appeased him, but instead made him mad. Her sobbing aggravated him even more. He didn't believe her cries, her toothaches, or her laments of loneliness. He would even forget that Azar was a child. In his view, Azar was a woman or was becoming a woman, a woman who was created just to torture him (177).

But this time even the protagonist is aware of the potentially ominous consequences of Gholamali's anger, especially because their parents are not there to defend or protect his sister. Soon enough, everyone in the neighborhood can hear Azar's screams from atop their old walnut tree. "Azar climbed on top of the tree and shouted out Gholamali's secret," the narrator recalls, "[…] Gholamali didn't utter a word. Maybe he was looking for a hole to hide in so that his usual bedwetting ignominy wouldn't see the light of day" (174). Desperate for a solution to silence Azar and force her to climb down, Gholamali finally throws gasoline at the tree and sets it on fire, but Azar continues to expose him, hollering at the top of her lungs, until the blazes rise up catching her dress. Before long, the ensuing frenzy spreads through the entire neighborhood that tries to rescue Azar, but to no avail:

> They pound the door with fists and kicks. Shams claws at the walls of Azar's house. The dreadful meows of the cat issue from their yard. Gholamali opens the door. His face is yellowed. His tiny eyes are wide shut, and he has become mute. I cannot see Azar, only hear her screams. She screams like the mouth of the fire: "I'm burning, mother! I'm burning! (179).

Despite her young age, Azar exhibits a great deal of courage in the way she lives and the manner in which she dies, but her most defining traits are, no doubt, her outspokenness and her lack of fear of men. Azar's mannerisms stand in stark contrast with the silence and submissiveness of the novel's protagonist and her mother, Mahrokh. While her mother reacts to Abu's daily abuse through rare and wordless bursts of anger, the protagonist in *A Secret* never stands up to her abusive father or Azar's tyrannical

brother. In fact, when she initially hears Azar's screams from beyond the walls, she starts to cry, but Mahrokh snaps at her: "See how feisty Azar is!" (164). Through her inside voice, the narrator expresses her desire to be vocal like Azar, and her inability to realize her wish:

> Just *seeing* doesn't make one feisty. At times like this, I disliked Azar. She would stand up straight and push her chest forward as she walked. I would always slouch as though I was told to carry a secret in my chest and take it with me everywhere (164).

Through its comparative perspective on these two young female characters, the novel reflects on (and criticizes) the gendered codes of behavior in their culture. It also draws a parallel between two distinct archetypes and their struggle for authority: Gholamali, a prime example of a traditional Iranian man, and his sister Azar, an outspoken and rebellious young woman. While Gholamali attempts to put Azar in her "proper" place, Azar unsettles his authority as a man, by exposing his secret to the entire neighborhood. In doing so, Azar exceeds the traditional definitions of femininity. As Rowe elucidates, "The unruly woman's rebellion against her proper place not only inverts the hierarchical relation between the sexes but unsettles one of the most fundamental of social distinctions—that between male and female" (43). Given her verbal excesses, the unruly woman deviates from her assigned position, but since the male order doesn't allow her (or because she does not wish) to take a man's place, she occupies an ambivalent space within the symbolic system. As it is evident in Azar's character, her inclinations to speak, laugh, and eat without inhibition put her at odds with the dominant cultural codes. It is not just that she is a female, but also the fact that she is

an intrepid, vocal female that renders her intimidating and unsettling. More than her sexuality, the force of woman's "laughter and speech," as Rowe claims, can be far more threatening to patriarchal norms, because who knows what might happen when "the female mouth and its dangerous emanations" are unleashed upon a world ruled mostly by men (Rowe 43).

Although it may come at a high price, women's transgression of norms germinates new spaces for thought and action. There is no doubt in the lesson Azar's friend garners from the example of her life, even though her rebellion is that of a child. Spectacles of transgression, like Azar's shrill declarations while burning alive, reveal an "inexhaustible compulsion to excess" (Rowe 217). She pushes the limits of her freedom and authority by being fearless and vocal. As Rowe elucidates, "The defiant laughter at authorities inside and outside the house recalls the laughter of Medusa and the Dutch Killers, and of Mrs. Noah, Ursula the Pig Woman, and Miss Piggy […]. It widens behavioral options" (219). In the end, reflecting on her friend's brave and explicit act of rebellion compels the protagonist in *A Secret* to reconsider her own timidity and reticence.

While visiting her dying father at the hospital, she finds an old family photo that reminds her of another significant day in her childhood. The photo takes her back to the day her father took them to the airport to pick up their mother after a brief pilgrimage. *A Secret* juxtaposes the protagonist's memories surrounding Azar's death with her experiences at the airport, as her thoughts vacillate between the two events. This parallelism reveals her deliberations on Azar's verbosity and heroism and her mother's silence and submissiveness. Although she is unable to *see* her friend, Azar, burn to death,

she is privy to her loud protestations and cries of agony and horror. On the contrary, at the airport, she witnesses, once again, her mother's wordless pain at the prospect of coming back to her loveless marriage and demented husband.

The fact that the narrator recalls both events through the mind of a child, who is unable to fully and rationally process their gravity at the time, augments their pathos. We do not hear Mahrokh utter a single word, as we come to understand her fragile emotional state through the narrator's description of her body language. Mahrokh's pause, when she catches sight of her husband and children in the waiting area, is not fleeting. She freezes in one spot for a long time, long enough to spark other travelers' attention and her husband's rage. Fear and regret cloud her glum visage, and red blotches of irritation crop up on her skin as she looks on her family, paralyzed:

> Mahrokh looks at us. There is no light of recognition in her eyes. Maybe she doesn't recognize that the people who are waving at her from this side of the glass wall are her family. She looks around aimlessly but her eyes do not focus on us (181).

At this point, the narrator's reminiscences and her inward self-talk enable her to come to terms with her mother's identity crisis. She recalls her moment of recognition at the airport. While her older brother and sister wave at their mother, she lowers her hand, as she beholds her mother's silent desperation. Her perspective at this point is not that of child, but more so that of grown woman. She is finally able to understand her mother's dilemma, and her reference to "distance" suggests the time between then and now, a time she needed to arrive at this recognition:

> I can finally see something for which I needed this distance. An understanding that like a sneaky traveler walks around and stings my heart. The desire to leave had awakened in Mahrokh's mind and the thought of going back to her previous life devastated her. It was as though she, too, needed this distance so as to look anew at where she was (182).

Engaging with her traumatic memories inwardly allows the narrator to make sense of the past. As she sits next to her dying father at the hospital with her eyes shut, the image of her mother at the airport becomes clearer in her mind's eye. Her thoughts waver between her father's irritation and anger, her mother's agonizing indecision and silence, and her brave friend, Azar. Her thought processes are not just streams of memories taking shape in her mind, rather, they are conversations with herself as a way of gaining clarity about her experiences:

> My eyes are closed over Abu's hand, but Mahrokh's image is clearer than ever. That day, her image got in and out of focus, maybe because my eyes would get teary and stifle my vision. I was trembling from within, and Mahrokh, as though in the water, shook with me. I was remembering Azar and I missed her. I missed Mahrokh too (182).

Through these internal monologues, the narrator in *A Secret* is finally able to understand the patterns of abuse and oppression in her family, and distinguish her own identity from that of her mother. She realizes that her distance from the traumatic event affords her a more lucid view of her mother's circumstances as well as her own marriage. In *Women, Violence, and Testimony*, Diana Miles argues that because of the "latent aspect of trauma," survivors often do not have immediate access to the "psychological

resources necessary to organize and narrate traumatic experiences" (Miles 61). In *A Secret*, the narrator's distance from the initial trauma and her inward deliberations allow her to confront the experience as a grown up, and finally, to be able to "explore alternative modes of existence" (Miles 56). According to Miles, traumatic events create "a rupture" in the individual's perception of herself and the world" (Miles 20). Such a "tear," as Miles claims, "puts an end to the feeling that there are basic, unchangeable truths about one's existence" (Miles 20). Bearing witness to the past and processing traumatic experiences inwardly are crucial tools for recovering from this sort of psychic rupture, if the survivor hopes to "suture" her "torn relationship with the world and re-envision an identity that explains […] [her] survival" (Miles 21).

Utilizing memory and interiority, Vafi's protagonists in *My Bird* and *A Secret* are finally able to transform the repetitiveness and incomprehensibility of trauma into integration and recognition. In addition to their interest in silent self-talks, they display a desire for leaving the domestic sphere and engaging in lengthy walks. Somewhat similar to the liberating walks I discussed at length, in the first chapter of this work, with respect to Parsipur's novels, Vafi's protagonists seem to also benefit from leaving their homes and walking on their own. On their way to reconstructing their identities and finding their voices, their walks seem to facilitate their mental labor. At the same time, their desire to leave the domestic sphere represents a different form of resistance. It signifies the wish to move forward, to learn from the past and change. This, of course, is due to the fact that these walks are not merely "simple strolls on sunny days," but rather, long walks nuanced by ongoing streams of memories and deep reflections. In *A Secret*, for example, the narrator actively engages with the past, as she walks through the streets of her old

neighborhood. Going through her "growing pains" and walking, she considers the people and the place that, in her view, seem to have remained frozen in time:

> But why the neighborhood that is in my head never changes. Its people don't even get old. They look the same as they were so many years ago (67).

Later on, while still walking, she recalls her grandmother's stories about creation and heaven and hell. In her inward self-talk, she criticizes the old woman's lifelong ignorance and associates it with her lack of mobility:

> Aziz told the story of creation. She hadn't walked further than a few streets in this world and yet knew the other world so well. As though she had gone there and come back several times (162).

In a similar fashion, the female hero in *My Bird* leaves her home for a long, contemplative walk. As with her continuous internal monologue throughout the novel, this solitary walk, in the final pages of the novel, is vital in the way of reclaiming her independence. Amid the snow, on a cold winter night, she stumbles, falls, and weeps, hurling pain like "undigested food," but she ultimately rises and forces herself to make a promise (to herself). She makes her way back home, once she has had her epiphany:

> I walk carefully, but I slip and fall. Nobody is in the alley. I have to get up. My back hurts. I clench the snow and tears fill my eyes. Even all of that glow and color couldn't relieve the pain that I am now throwing up like undigested food. Now I understand why I have left the house at this time of the night. I have left the house to be alone and hear myself make a

> promise, a promise never ever to cling again, never again to be dependent.
>
> I get up and start walking toward the house (87).

Vafi's novels often juxtapose their protagonists' melancholic reminiscences and reflections with their gloomy urban setting. This parallelism between the inside and outside suggests the need for transformation both at the individual and social levels. As such, her novels not only shed light on the plight of the individual, but they also offer social commentaries, by depicting conditions not entirely conducive to women's self-expression and authority within the public realm. For instance, in her novel, *After the End*, the shy and reclusive protagonist warns her friend, Manzar, who is visiting from Sweden, not to openly talk to men or go outside without fully observing the Islamic dress code. But her sister Nasrin pacifies her by saying, "If she stays here a bit longer, she won't be able to speak out like this. She will become like everyone else. It is very difficult to be different here" (199). On another occasion, when the young woman alludes to her limited options in terms of social events and activities and her subsequent obsession with reading, she describes the gray and uninviting urban topography she confronts during her usual walks:

> The city was depressing. The walls were filled with political slogans and the colors mostly dark and gray. There was no decent play or film. The bookstore was the only place I visited (171).

Offering an intimate look into Iranian women's lives, Vafi's novels illuminate their troubled relationship with a male-dominated culture that perpetuates conflicting ideologies in terms of their identities, desires and social freedoms, thus producing an excess of thoughts and emotions in dire need of expression. Narratives of trauma invite a

critical debate about the plight of women; they demand a *native* understanding of the structures of injustice and male hegemony. In *Trauma: A Genealogy*, Ruth Leys underlines the importance of remembering trauma not only for the individual, who bears witness to old wounds so as to heal and move on, but also for the benefit of the collective. According to leys, this active engagement with past traumas is “inherently political and collective,” because it seeks to understand and confront trauma (Leys 109). In *Trauma Culture,* Kaplan also alludes to the positive impact of trauma narratives in terms of prevention: “Art that invites us to bear witness to injustice goes beyond moving us to indentify with and help a specific individual, and compels us to work toward preventing future occurrences” (Kaplan 23).

Vafi’s female protagonists confront trauma through memory and interiority, and, in the process, they transform their pain and confusion into awareness and comprehension. As I have sought to demonstrate in this chapter, women’s continuous engagement with their traumatic experiences entails more than just remembering, rather, it involves persistent inward self-talks in order to gain clarity not only with respect to their past but also in terms of envisioning potential futures. This inward process enables the female heroes in *My Bird* and *A Secret* to resist future trauma by transforming their pain into voice.

4. Vicious Cycles, Endless Circles, and Layered Temporalities in the Realist Cinema of Jafar Panahi and Marziyeh Meshkini

"[In 1979] an unjust and deeply corrupt political regime collapsed and gave way to yet another cycle of barbarity and abuse in modern Iranian history. The post-revolutionary Iranian cinema that Makhmalbaf and a handful of other master filmmakers represent is the aesthetic sublimation of these repeated cycles of violence into a visual poetic of hope" (116).

Life and Art: The New Iranian Cinema, Rose Issa and Sheila Whitaker (1999)

I. Life on the Periphery

In *Life and Art: The New Iranian Cinema*, Rose Issa and Sheila Whitaker describe New Iranian cinema as a thriving visual art form, which began to flourish in the 1980s and 1990s, following the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Evolving into a global visual and cultural phenomenon, Iranian cinema took its roots in the first sound films of the mid 1900s, such as Abdolhosein Sepanta's *The Lor Girl* (1934), as well as the New Wave[39] films of the 1960s and 1970s, such as Forough Farrokhzad's documentary-style film, *The House Is Black* (1963) and Dariush Mehrjui's *The Cow* (1969). While recognizing the strong realist dimension of the New Iranian cinema illuminating a wide array of sociopolitical issues in post-revolutionary Iran, Issa and Whitaker also point to its symbolic aspect that results in a rare imbrication of the factual and fantastical. This

[39] Beginning in the 1960s and ending in/about 1979, the first wave of Iranian new wave was a reaction to the Iranian popular cinema (mainly film-Farsi) that did not reflect the realities of life or the artistic sensibilities of Iranian society. The second and third wave—often referred to as New Iranian cinema—which began after the 1979 revolution and continue to the present, include innovative films with highly political and philosophical tones and poetic language by the filmmakers mentioned above and many others including Ebrahim Golestan and Sohrab Shahid-Saless.

“cross-breeding of fact and fantasy,” is the place “where the present and future of Iranian reality is being negotiated” (117). Alluding to Iranian cinema in general, and Mohsen Makhmalbaf’s films in particular, Hamid Dabashi identifies the politically subversive and aspiring nature of this cinema as “a rhetorical negotiation with reality, so that in art one can begin to dream the forbidden thought and perceive the impossible solution” (120). By alluding to optimistic terms such as “dream” and “impossible solution,” Dabashi refers to the emancipatory quality of the New Iranian cinema, as well as its capacity to function as an instrument of social and political change in Iranian society.

Ironically, one of the factors contributing to the realist aspect of the New Iranian cinema has been the new visual code of representation, particularly rules that regulate the representations of women on screen. Rather antithetical to the long established system of representation that the modern Western film tradition “instigated, fabricated, and legitimized” so as to provide its own characterization of reality, Iranian cinema has chosen not to cater to its voyeuristic (and narcissistic) demands by objectifying women through the male gaze (120). A part of my argument in this chapter will attempt to shed light on both the limitations these codes have imposed on women and filmmakers, as well as the possibilities they have afforded this thriving art form in the way of representing realistic images of life in Iran, especially where women are concerned. Barring filmmakers from capturing images closer than medium shots of women’s veiled faces and bodies almost automatically draws the viewers’ attention to many of the constraints women may face under the Islamic Republic. Despite their limitations, however, the new visual codes dominating Iranian cinema today tend to resist “colonially constituted” subjectivities, thus providing new and intimate representations of a vernacular reality:

> What is potential, and at times, has been materialized, in this art is the aesthetic resistance to the active transmutation of the consciously colonized individual into the raw material for the globalization of the economic production of reality (120).

The discussion of a "vernacular reality" is important considering the predominant Western view of veiled women in Iranian cinema as the victimized other. As Lindsey Moore argues in her article, "Women in a Widening Frame: (Cross-)Cultural Projection, Spectatorship, and Iranian Cinema," Iranian women have been engaging with their "complex environment," and they have often asserted "the need to localize the politics of feminism" (15). At the same time, as Moore further points out, "In contemporary Iran, conceptions of gender are constantly changing as a result of internal debate among different factions of the clergy, women's groups, associations and journals, and works produced by Iranian immigrants" (15). In Iran's current sociopolitical landscape, cinema has worked as a means of modifying "official discourses through the metonymical use of 'woman' to signify broader social issues and to transgress the limits of censorship regulations" (Moore 15). Perhaps inadvertently, by imposing Islamic doctrine on cinema, the Islamic Republic brought out into the open and "politicize[d] the Iranian cultural ambivalence toward [hetero]sexual love and women" (Mir-Hosseini 679). As a result, Iranian cinema, as Ziba Mir-Hosseini declares, has become "a medium in which artists, clerics, and the general public can renegotiate their ideas about Islam and modernity through the time-honored themes of women and love" (Mir-Hosseini 679).

While addressing issues such as female desire, agency, and subversion, I refrain from considering and/or defining Iranian women as "images of 'other' [and/or] cultural

victims" (Moore 15). Given the predominant "simplistic and stereotypical representations" of Muslim women in general and Iranian women in particular—not all Iranian women are Muslim—easily read by Western audiences, it is imperative that a critical study of women in contemporary Iranian cinema, however brief, makes a point of examining this demographic as "historical subjects" rather than "ethnographic objects" (Moore 20). Iranian cinema, it seems, has been doing its part to "resist[s] such imposed meanings by actively engaging with ideas of perception and representation" (Moore 26). As Moore observes, "It [Iranian cinema] consistently grounds its thematics in the local and makes few allowances in terms of cultural explication; there is a tendency to refuse conventional narrative closure and to manipulate spectator response" (Moore 26). These strategies challenge the idea that the Western viewers are "'the privileged decoders and ultimate interpreters of meaning'" (Moore 26).

Focusing on the representations of Iranian women in Jafar Panahi's film, *The Circle* (2000), and Marzieh Meshkini's film debut, *The Day I Became a Woman* (2000), in this chapter, I examine both thematic and formal excess, which manifest in themes and images that evoke the concept of "circle," and, in "circular" narrative forms. In Panahi's film rampant public scrutiny and an overall lack of social freedoms and professional opportunities for women evoke the sense of confinement and helplessness related to the motif of the circle, while in Meshkini's film the demand for women's strict adherence to the Islamic law and tradition brings to mind the idea of their captivity inside a dogmatic and insular system. In this section, "Life on the Periphery," I examine *The Circle*, and in the next, "On the Path to Becoming: Resistance and *Jouissance*," Meshkini's film, *The Day*, while both sections demonstrate the manner in which excess manifests in women's

perpetual and oppressive circumstances (invoking the concept of circle) and also in women's resistance (their desire to break away from the confines of the circle). As such, my critical interest in both films involves their employment of excess to articulate women's oppressive conditions and their resistance.

Moreover, I contend that formal excess manifests in the circular narrative structure of both films. Taking place in the space of a single day, both films portray women's experiences inside a male-dominated, insular system, and yet both films deconstruct the circularity of women's circumstances by converging all temporalities into the present, in the end, and merging nearly all of their protagonists in one place—a prison cell in *The Circle*, and the beach in *The Day*. As I will explain later in this chapter, I view this strategy as an attempt, on the part of both filmmakers, to subvert the ominous circularity of women's circumstances.

Working through Panahi's film in this section, I analyze his brand of realism, his figurative language and cinematography, and how these elements enable him to convey his social (and political) message. In general terms, *The Circle* juxtaposes women's desire—for social freedom, professional opportunities and financial independence—with a rampant system of surveillance, mostly enforced by men, which dominates nearly all facets of women's existence within the public sphere. In particular, however, *The Circle* follows the lives of seven women—prison inmates and escapees—in the course of a single day. It begins with the disconcerting cries of a woman at childbirth. When her wails subside, a nurse, through a small opening in a door, announces the birth of a baby girl to its veiled grandmother. Evidently distressed, the old woman asks multiple times if the baby is really female and if so why, since, as she intimates to the impatient nurse,

they were told that her daughter would give birth to a boy. When the nurse confirms the news once again, the old woman leaves the room and crosses path with a younger woman in the hallway. They recognize each other and exchange pleasantries, then the old woman instructs her to make a call and summon the new mother's male family members to the hospital for fear of anger and retaliation on the part of her son-in-law and his family.

Image 1. The nurse announcing the birth of the baby girl to its grandmother

Like carrying the baton in a running relay course and handing it to the next person in line, when the initial young woman asks another woman in the street for loose change for the public phone, the camera leaves her right there and follows the other woman, who seems to be having a conversation with her two friends. This narrative strategy repeats throughout the film, not allowing us to settle into a routine and stay with a single protagonist. As such, it accentuates the film's overarching theme of circularity and Panahi's thesis, suggesting that the female experience in Iran, particularly that of the social class depicted in his film, is a slight variation of the same story. Soon enough Ma'edeh, one of the three women, is arrested by the nearby guards, and the two other women, Nargess and Arezoo, decide to evade the authorities and leave the city once they

have procured sufficient funds for their exit tickets. From their evident angst and trepidation and their identical, dark uniforms, we can surmise they are inmates and the building where the first woman gave birth to a baby girl was likely the maternity ward of a women's prison.

Ironic is the fact that Nargess and Arezoo decide to wear black chadors in order to conceal their identities from the police and Islamic guards, though it ultimately underscores their gender, and, as a result, heightens the level of public scrutiny with which they must contend. In fact, they face a multitude of obstacles that directly relate to their gender: a street vendor stops Arezoo from smoking a cigarette in public; she gets into a brief altercation with a man who makes advances to Nargess, and her attempt at selling a gold chain at a pawn shop comes to no avail. As Moore explains, in *The Circle* "women battle a frustrating and contradictory system," (23) where "anonymity is decoupled from agency" (10). As a result, wearing the chador emphasizes the women's gender, therefore augmenting the social constraints they have to face. Even later on, when Arezoo and Nargess realize they cannot leave the city together and, as a result, are forced to part ways, the man at the ticket counter hassles Nargess for a while because she does not have a male escort or student identification card. Panahi's film underlines "authoritarianism and the panoptic exercise of power and control," one of the chief issues addressed in many of the post-revolutionary films (Naficy 550). What is more, *The Circle* portrays men as the enforcers of this pervasive form of public scrutiny, and women as their usual prey.

Image 2. Nargess and Arezoo escaping from prison

Indeed, Nargess finally gives up the idea of leaving the city for fear of raising suspicion and getting caught on the bus. We watch her wander through the busy terminal for some time. Once back on the street, she anxiously looks around, as the camera circles her body, thus accentuating the extent of her angst and helplessness. After purchasing the ticket she will not use, she climbs a circular staircase, as the thick metal rods of the railings cover her small frame like prison bars. In fact, the imagery of metal bars repeats in various shots of Panahi's film to underscore the characters' ongoing sense of captivity and isolation. At the top of the stairs, Nargess faces an empty circular corridor with no one in sight save for pigeons who desperately try to escape through a window. Through these images, Panahi's film language conveys the characters' sense of confinement, and the circularity of their conditions. His use of "signs and visions" in conjunction with plotline, dialogue, and camera work highlight a never-ending struggle to break free in a teeming, oblivious city like Tehran (Dabashi 400). As Dabashi argues, Panahi is "fond of using the metaphor of a circle for the human condition, a circle into which he believes we are all trapped by our birth and breeding" (399). One of the most prominent signs of "his visual subconscious," the concept of circularity in Panahi's cinema, as Dabashi explains, "is not merely a narrative device but also a sign of his awareness of spatial alienation"

(399). It is not entirely evident to the viewer that the film's opening scene, depicting the birth of the baby girl, takes place in the maternity ward of a women's prison, given the "tight frames" and "close camera work," and yet, the visual narrative's progression and the film's semiotics, accentuating captivity and alienation, point in that direction (400).

Although it addresses entrenched gender-related issues such as female covering, the liberty to interact with the opposite sex or engage in other male-dominated activities like traveling alone or smoking in public, *The Circle* offers insight beyond the plight of one woman or even seven women. Its overall aim is more humanitarian than feminist. Illuminating the human condition in his country of birth in an unsentimental fashion, "without necessarily overriding political and social messages," (Teo 3) Panahi's realist cinema, as Dabashi contends, is "a creative combination of *actual*, *virtual*, and *parabolic*" realisms (400). Considering women's rights as human rights, Panahi seeks to accentuate "the human dignity of his characters" at the face of scarcities and restrictions, which may seem trifling in the context of Western culture (Teo 3). Interested in interpreting humanitarian issues "in a poetic or artistic way," (3) he refuses to call himself a "political person," by which he seems to suggest being against a specific political regime or ideology:

> I don't like political movies. But I take every opportunity to comment on the social issues[…]. It is important to me to talk about the plight of humanity[…]. I don't want to give a political view, or start a political war. I think that the artist should rise above this. Political movies have limited time (8).

This sort of storytelling that has come to define the particular aesthetic of the Iranian cinema, contrary to what mainstream Hollywood films of the twentieth and twenty-first century have put out, challenges the standard codes of dominant cinema by refusing to create cookie-cutter good guy/bad guy. Rendering his films poignant and poetic rather than ideological, Panahi's strategy to achieve this goal includes his improvisational character development and creative camera work (e.g., the camera revolving around Nargess's face and body to underscore her anxiety and confinement). Since the current codes of modesty only allow Iranian filmmakers to take medium shots of women's faces, *The Circle* abounds in long takes, where the shots capture women's body language and facial expressions so as to represent their emotional state. Panahi is interested in humanizing his characters, even when it comes to ambivalent characters, like the police or Islamic guards. He explains the way he frames the image of a police officer to avoid showing him as simply a bad guy:

> I didn't want to show them [the police] as bad. In the first instance, you are afraid of the police. Because you are looking at them from the point of view of someone who is now in prison. And normally you see him in a long shot, but when they come nearer and you see them in a medium shot, you can see their human faces […]. If I were being political, then I would always show the police as dangerous or bad persons (9).

One of Panahi's strategies to heighten the pathos in the representation of his characters and their circumstances is his use of semi-anonymous characters, individuals who are specific enough in terms of their personae, and yet, can be anyone anywhere facing similar existential conundrums. We are not privy to the personal backgrounds of

the young women whose dilemmas unravel before our eyes in *The Circle*. We infer from certain images and the women's conversations that they are ex-inmates, but we do not know their crimes. We do not know the history of the young mother, Solmaz Gholami, giving birth in prison, or that of Arezoo and Nargess, but that widens the potential scope of their dire circumstances, since their partial anonymity allows them to belong to a larger demographic. In a few instances, the narrative gives us a character's last name in the context of a conversation, as though poking fun at how irrelevant such information may be, given their circumstances. The characters whose lives are portrayed in *The Circle* are full-blooded women whose anguish constantly pecks at our senses and sympathies, but they are also, to some extent, non-specific persons. This narrative technique underlines the film's emphasis on the human condition; it points to fact that in the service of humanitarian ideals, it really does not (and should not) matter that Nargess is an Iranian prostitute, drug-user, or thief, but the fact that like hundreds of other women, she is neglected and abandoned by an ineffective social system that remains unconcerned with or incapable of finding solutions to her problems. In a 2001 interview with Stephen Teo of *Senses of Cinema*, Panahi alluded to his interest in augmenting the magnitude and circularity—its vicious continuity—of the characters' predicaments in *The Circle* through their partial anonymity:

> It's a very delicate point. If I had decided to give them some crime that they were guilty of, like something political or because of drugs, they would become specific persons. But they are not specific persons. You can have anybody there. Then the [human] problem is a much larger problem.

> […]. Because I wanted the audience to think for themselves, I left it open to interpretation (13).

Despite the multitude of stumbling blocks they face, the women in *The Circle* are calm and rational. Their mobility throughout the film is an indication of their resistance and the hope that they should ultimately break free from the circle. Only in their rare heart-to-heart with friends and confidants we grasp some measure of their desperation and despair. Dabashi, in his analysis of Panahi's provocative 2003 film, *Talaye-Sorkh* [Crimson Gold] claims that this sort of quietude and patience underscores the "brutality" of the characters' circumstances, much more than blatant protestation and violence (Dabashi 397). As Dabashi argues, to portray the human condition with such poignant subtlety speaks to Panahi's firsthand experience with it: "It is impossible for a filmmaker to capture the essence of that brutality without having himself felt it over a lifetime of experience" (Dabashi 397). A long shot/long take of Nargess, shortly before the film leaves her to follow its next protagonist, provides a proper example of this; it captures her, as she squats at a street corner with her back next to the metal bars of a gate, contemplating her homelessness. A dark purplish bruise covers the area around her right eye and her glum expression resembles that of a battered middle-aged woman, even though we can tell she is very young. As Dabashi aptly observes, this manner of showing violence has become "a trademark of Panahi's cinema":

> Violence in Panahi's cinema is like a phantom: You see through it, but it lacks a source or physical presence—who has perpetrated it is made intentionally amorphous. The result is a sense of fear and anxiety that

lurks in every frame, but it is a fear without an identifiable referent (Dabashi 396).

Like a number of other shots in *The Circle*, this one carries a great deal of pathos simply because of Nargess's demeanor and the way her internal torment is "subsumed in a fake formality" (Dabashi 397). Far from being a home to these women, Tehran functions as a "destructive force" that imprisons and consumes them. It is a "microcosm of the larger 'system' they're being played by" (Talu). Through its portrayal of its protagonists' dire circumstances, *The Circle* provides a commentary on the "massive hypocrisy of the Islamic revolution for its miserable failure to deliver on its promises," by producing a vast socioeconomic gap between the rich and the poor, much worse than its predecessor had managed to accomplish (Dabashi 397).

Image 3. Nargess after parting ways with Arezoo

The Circle represents its next protagonist, Pari, when her male relatives beat her up and throw her out of their house. Another prison escapee, Pari jumps into a taxi and decides to visit Elham, an old friend from prison, who is now a nurse working at a hospital. It becomes evident from their brief conversation that Pari is pregnant and in dire need of an abortion, but Elham, now married, refuses to help her for fear of her husband's

reaction. As Pari ambles through the hospital corridors, all that she confronts resonates with her desperation and anguish masked by the same reserve and formality: the spiral stairway is crowded with men and women—all veiled and rather somber looking. Men's white shirts stand in stark contrast with women's black chadors, while both augment the gray mood and sense of alienation that overshadow these shots. The EMT rushes in a young woman who appears to have attempted suicide, and from her mother's dreadful wails we can deduce that she has little chance of surviving. Sick people crowd the small waiting area, and nurses, impassive and clad in all encompassing black and white uniforms and veils, occasionally occupy the scene. As Pari walks through the corridor, we hear no sound save for an occasional whisper or cry of pain. Alluding to Panahi's preoccupation with visual details and *mise en scene* to "create a sense of the characters' inner space" (Life and Art 142), in *Masters and Masterpieces of Iranian Cinema*, Dabashi writes: "[Panahi] is relentless, persistent, a visual surgeon of uncompromising precision" (Dabashi 397). Panahi's film portrays women's perpetual struggle in an authoritarian system, symbolized by the motif of the circle. Invisible (to eye) yet palpable in the corollaries it propagates, this system does not seem to provide even a small measure of reprieve for the women who are caught up in it, and Panahi makes sure that we, too, are aware of this material reality in every shot.

Image 4. Pari with Elham at the hospital

By nightfall, Pari, still wandering the streets and not knowing what to do, meets a prostitute who is planning to leave her young daughter near a wedding venue with the hope that a decent family takes her and gives her a better life. Pari's words to dissuade the woman come to no avail, and as she runs away from the authorities, the prostitute remains in the frame. As in the case of the other women in the film, the mother's plan does not materialize, and after watching the guards take her daughter away, she herself is picked up by a passing car. To her dismay, she soon finds out that the driver whom she refers to as Haj-Agha[40] is not only with the authorities, but is also taking her to jail. Her plea to let her go falls on deaf ears, and by the time they arrive at the police station, the film leaves her in the man's car and follows another prostitute who is being questioned.

While she waits for the guards to interrogate the older man who picked her up, the prostitute watches the other woman quietly get out of Haj-Agha's car and disappear in the dark. When the guards ask her why she got on the man's car, the woman responds with a sobering answer: "Would *you* take care of me if I didn't, dear?" The film's penultimate

[40] An Islamic title used for male pilgrims to Mecca.

shot depicts the woman locked up in a dark jail cell with several other women whose identities remain obscure. The film then provides a distant shot of the cell through a small opening in the door, similar to the opening in the film's initial shot. The guard in the adjacent room receives a phone call enquiring about Solmaz Gholami, the same name enunciated in the film's initial shot as the mother of the newly born baby girl. He calls out the name through the opening in the door, but none of the women seem to bear the name. He then goes back to the phone and informs his superior that the inmate has been transferred to Ward 5. He gets off the phone, walks to the door and shuts the small window close.

Although we never directly meet Solmaz and are not privy to her life story or the nature of her crime, *The Circle* begins and ends with her. And because we know that she gave birth in the film's initial shot, and that she was transferred in the end to a different ward, we can assume that she not only gave birth in prison, but that she was also a resident of the same jail cell where the film concludes. Panahi's visual and thematic play with the concept of circle can be read in a variety of ways, all of which represent excess as embodied not only in the women's dire conditions, but also in their persistent efforts to resist them. On one hand, his circular narrative evokes the idea of picking random points on the circumference of a circle, where each point corresponds to a specific individual, in this case, a woman. All, by virtue of their circumstances (first and foremost being a woman), are confined to their particular spot on the margin. Moreover, their correspondence to random points on a circle speaks to the widespread prevalence of their conditions within Iranian society. On any given day, one can find thousands like Arezoo, Nargess, and Pari in Tehran, Panahi seems to remind us.

On the other hand, the film begins with Solmaz, a female inmate giving birth to a girl—an unwanted girl, to be sure—as it also ends with her. *The Circle*, as such, can be interpreted as the life cycle of a typical lower-middle class Iranian woman, who has to deal with a variety of cultural limitations and socioeconomic difficulties inside a system governed mostly by men. In line with this interpretation, circularity translates into the idea that each one of the young women in the film represents a portion of Solmaz's life story/history: lack of family support and professional opportunities, drug use, unwanted pregnancy, forced prostitution, imprisonment and so forth. By the same token, the story of each of the young women portrayed in the film, including that of Solmaz, can potentially become the fate of the baby girl too. This reading implies the repetitiveness of the same conditions in women's lives, which, again, points to its circularity and excessive quality.

In spite of their existence in what seems like an oppressive circle, women in Panahi's film remain resolute. During her brief conversation with Pari, the prostitute complains about the lack of freedom and opportunity for single women. "A guesthouse, whatever, wherever you go, you'll need a passport or an official ID card or police authorization," she furiously reminds Pari, "without a man you can't go anywhere" (The Circle 1:06:19). But contrary to this realization, both women continue to be mobile and defiant. To evade the authorities, Pari flees the scene as she has done before, while the other woman leaves the police car the first chance she gets, even though she has been ordered to stay put. In fact, except for the film's final shot where several women congregate in a dark jail cell, all of the female protagonists in *The Circle* continue to be mobile throughout the film. In his interview with *Senses of Cinema*, Panahi alludes to his

penchant for creating resilient and oppositional characters: "I [myself] don't like to think of a person accepting his or her conditions in life. I prefer that even in a closed circle, they still try to break out of that circle" (Teo 8). If we consider resistance as an aspect of structures of power, then, as Michel Foucault argues, power can really be understood only in the context of resistance (Mohanty 352). As such, resisting the bounds of the circle is imperative because only in so far as women are defined by the dominant ideology as peripheral can the center maintain its privileged position. As Mohanty delineates, "It is not the center that determines the periphery, but the periphery that, in its boundedness, determines the center" (353).

Although they occupy the center in the sense that they hold positions of power, male characters in *The Circle* are more anonymous than the women. In contrast to the women, they hold jobs, often as enforcers of law and Islamic rule, and, as a result, they carry titles (as opposed to specific names), but their personas remain nebulous at best throughout the film. In a number of instances, the camera captures the guards through long shots when they scrutinize or arrest women, while at other times, in shot/reverse shots, they are captured through the eyes of the women who try to evade them. In a few instances, the film captures close shots of men, as in the case of the old street vendor, who tells Arezoo not to smoke in the street for she is a woman and it is not appropriate for a woman to engage in such an activity in public. But ironically so, the fact that the old man could be Arezoo's father or even grandfather renders his comment more troubling and the subsequent limitation that it imposes on Arezoo more entrenched. In fact, I argue that every time Panahi opts for a close shot of a male character, he has the intention of highlighting the social and cultural hierarchies that set men and women apart in Iranian

society. In one of the film's final shots, we see Pari get into a phone booth and dial someone's number, while two guards, patrolling the street, approach her and one of them asks her to dial a number for him. She obediently agrees then extends the receiver to the guard, but he tells her to ask for a woman by the name of Zahra. With Pari still in the frame, the viewer hears his conversation with Zahra who, as we come to understand, is married and carrying on an affair with the young guard. He insists on seeing the woman, and as Pari walks hopelessly into the lobby of a nearby hotel, we see the guard, who by now is off the phone, book a room in the same hotel. Pari knows full well, as we do too by now, that she cannot get a room in a hotel as a single woman without a male guardian, and yet Panahi's persistent camera chooses to capture this event to underscore this double standard in terms of the two sexes. While showing the extent of men's authority within the public sphere and women's subsequent lack of freedom and independence there, *The Circle* challenges male power through men's obscure identities and fragmented presence on screen.

Although, to a large extent, *The Circle* depicts the plight of lower-middle and middle class women within the Islamic Republic, particularly those whom the system neglects and incarcerates for a variety of reasons, its central theme includes subversion of norms and the enduring hope to find peace, liberty, and fulfillment. Several shots in the film speak to this theme but one of the most poignant captures Nargess catching sight of a copy of Van Gogh's painting at street corner, depicting a lush wheat field with cypresses beneath a multi-hued blue sky. She stops Arezoo and shows her the painting telling her that the landscape illustrates her hometown, Raziliqh, in the province of Azerbaijan. Perhaps she knows, as we do too, that the picture is not exactly the town she likely grew

up in, but from the earnest, gleeful manner she describes the picture to her friend, we are compelled to believe the place she longs for resembles Van Gogh's masterpiece, because she does. And perhaps that is why *The Circle* leaves the ultimate fate of its female protagonists open-ended. Panahi himself points to the spaciousness of hope and desire in this particular scene: "I chose it [the painting] because it was not a specific geographic place. It could be anywhere in the world but it was inspired by an actual panting by Van Gogh. I wanted to say that where you want to be could be anywhere in the world" (Teo 12).

II. On the Path to Becoming: Resistance & *Jouissance*[41]

In her film debut, *The Day I Became a Woman*, Marzieh Meshkini highlights a number of vital issues that have become the subject of literary and political debate within the contemporary Iranian society, issues such as the veil, gender socialization, female sexuality (including pleasure/*jouissance*), and subversion. Because it symbolizes a panoply of meanings and cultural values, the figure of woman—as mother, angel-in-the-house, man's honor/property, homeland, emblem of chastity and purity, and symbol of transgression and sin—in post-revolutionary Iranian cinema has been the site of ongoing contestation between a "metaphysics of concealment and an esthetics of revelation" (Dabashi 361). Inevitably so, the discussion of the veil—as a means of separation and

[41] "[…] *Jouissance* is often left untranslated since enjoyment—the closest English equivalent—is not as multifaceted as the French word […]. It is certainly a mix of pleasure and pain […]. *Jouissance* refers to this paradoxical enjoyment, which means loving something to death" (Erfani 134).

alienation, or, modesty and empowerment—has further complicated the debate regarding women's freedom and autonomy.

Through its telling title and especially its emphasis on the term, "becoming," Meshkini's film alludes to two opposing value systems that impact this process for Iranian women. The first system represents the behavioral codes (such as observing the Islamic dress code and the veil), ideals, and standards that the traditional/patriarchal culture considers as "becoming woman," and, consequently, demands those of women. The second, on the other hand, involves the needs, desires, and goals that women themselves consider as part of "becoming woman." Meshkini's film represents this "opposition" by way of three distinct stories, as each story highlights not only women's headstrong pursuit of their desires, but also their resistance, when patriarchy (or religion) gets in their way. Leaving each story open ended, *The Day* underscores women's subversion of the norms, with the implicit understanding that it may not lead to propitious results, thus bringing to mind a revealing sentiment by Simin Daneshvar, the pioneering Iranian novelist: "'No sheep has ever devoured a wolf; the point is how long one can resist'" (Milani 189). The most significant lesson *The Day* offers through each woman's quest for fulfillment is to never stop desiring. Resistance, as the film implies, is simply another part of the process of becoming, particularly in the cultural milieu it depicts.

Working through Meshkini's film in this section, I argue that not only the protagonists' willful pursuit of pleasure and fulfillment embody an excessive quality, but also their efforts to resist the system that stifles their pursuit. My analysis in this section will illuminate common themes in *The Circle* and *The Day* as well as different strategies each film utilizes to highlight women's struggle and their efforts to subvert the circle of

oppression. Shedding light on elements that evoke the motif of the circle, my analysis also involves an examination of the film's narrative structure in terms of circularity and temporality so as to explain the manner in which Meshkini formulates a language of resistance through "layered" temporalities, as well as temporal (and spatial) distortion.

The Day follows the life of three women at different points in their lives—childhood, middle age, and old age—in the course of a single day, thus tempting us to draw the simplistic (and linear) conclusion that it entails the life cycle of one woman. But, as I argue later in this section, Meshkini's aim at weaving different temporalities together may be more complicated, given the film's circular form and the fact that nearly all of the protagonists of these successive stories come together in the end. Through an "episodic" style of representation, each woman's story in *The Day* begins with her name appearing on the screen. The film reveals Meshkini's artistic wit and feminist sensibilities through her choice of her first protagonist's name as Hava, the Persian equivalent to Eve in English, and the first woman in both the Quran and the Bible. Dark featured (as with nearly all of the inhabitants of the southern regions of Iran) and rather pretty, Hava wakes up late (around 11 a.m.) on the morning of her ninth birthday, the day that according to Islamic law she is considered a woman and should begin observing the Islamic dress code, including the veil. Eager to see and play with her best friend, Hassan, Hava bargains with her mother and grandmother to allow her a brief outing before noon. Her grandmother finally relents reminding her that when the shadow of a stick she places in the ground disappears, she should return home.

The narrative introduces Ahoo's story, in a similar fashion, when Hava's evanescent hour with Hassan comes to a close, and her mother comes to the beach to

collect and cover her with a black chador she has made for her. The initial shots of this episode capture a male rider calling out for “Ahoo,” who is participating in an all-women cycling race, in spite of her husband and other male guardians’ permission. Before depicting extreme long shots of the female cyclers in black veils, the narrative evinces a small and peaceful herd of gazelles that quickly flees behind bushes once they hear the man’s screams, thus highlighting the sense of urgency and rage in his pursuit of a woman whose name means gazelle in Persian. But Ahoo will not flee, as she seems determined to finish and win the race. One by one, her male relatives, even the mullah who performed her marriage ceremony, pursue her on horseback and command her to stop. Once she ignores her husband’s final plea and agrees to divorce him, Ahoo’s brothers threaten and stop her on her track. The film leaves Ahoo, as she appears to be caught up in an argument with the men, and it introduces us to Hoora’s tale, its third and final episode.

Having just landed on the island of Kish, Hoora, in a wheelchair carried by local young boys, asks to be taken to the nearby shopping mall, where she purchases a variety of furniture, appliances, and many other items including a wedding dress. She intimates to the boys and the young women she later meets on the beach that the items are what she longed to have and could not afford to buy when she was young. Hoora’s story concludes, as we, along with Hava and two young women from the cycling race, watch her, sitting on a makeshift raft, float away on the open sea.

Through its three protagonists, *The Day* not only represents an excessive desire for fulfillment and pleasure, but also an “undercurrent of discontent” with the status quo (Holden 1). In the way of resisting their lot, the women make an effort to push back pervasive cultural boundaries, what in the previous section and in the context of Panahi’s

film I referred to as “the circle.” Hava, for instance, is willing to do anything so that her grandmother allows her to spend one last hour with her friend Hassan. She is rather scrupulous about the makeshift sundial and its diminishing shadow as though trying to bargain with Time itself. Ahoo forgoes her reputation and is willing to leave her marriage and family so as to achieve her ambitions and be mobile, while Hoora, too old to even walk, chooses to fulfill her lifelong craving for material possessions. In his philosophical study of Iranian cinema, “Stolen *Jouissance*: Lacan, Feminism, and Meshkini’s *The Day I Became a Woman*,” Farhang Erfani utilizes Lacan’s theories of female desire and *jouissance* while working through Meshkini’s film. As Erfani points out, Lacanian theory is useful in showing that any human being, to a large extent, is subject to the rules of the symbolic, but that “no society is ever successful in reaching full domination,” and the Islamic Republic is no exception (116). Indeed, each of the stories in *The Day* depicts the fulfillment of its protagonist’s needs and wishes at the face of various cultural restrictions, as each woman manages to “squeeze one last […] pleasure out of her life” (119).

The first protagonist in *The Day* is a child on the threshold of womanhood, yet carries the name of the bearer of the original sin of desiring the forbidden. Hava’s particular brand of desire translates into intimacy and friendship with the opposite sex. By the time Hava manages to visit Hassan, his mother has forbidden him from leaving his room on account of having to finish his homework. While waiting for him anxiously, Hava watches neighborhood boys building a float on the beach. They ask her to trade her small black scarf for a toy fish. She quietly agrees, and as the boys use her veil as a sail for their makeshift boat, Hava lays the fish in the water and lets it float away. Capturing

this simple exchange and her choice to forgo of her veil, *The Day* associates female covering with concepts such as captivity and limitation, as well as liberty and mobility. As such, it alludes to the contradictory nature of the cultural and political meanings attached to the concept of female covering, by depicting the transformation of Hava's veil into an object that facilitates movement, a sail.

Recognizing the brevity of her allotted time, Hava is determined to enjoy Hassan's company the best way she can, so she takes some money from him, rushes to the store then returns with a lollipop for them to share. Capturing occasional medium shots of Hassan's visage from behind the barred window of his room, the film frames Hava's gleeful face as she quickly sucks the lollipop then extends it to Hassan. Though we do not directly see him taking the lollipop in his mouth, the "exaggerated close-miked sucking noises we hear on the sound track" make us believe that that is the case (Langford 12). What is more, these sounds, "in their uncanny resemblance to a kiss" bridge the cinematic (and conventional) gap between Hava and Hassan's body (Langford 12). Despite its innocence, as Hava and Hassan are both considered children, these shots exude an excessive desire for pleasure and a heightened sense of eroticism, especially when Hava rubs the lollipop on her lips, sucks it heartily then offers it to Hassan. Viewing Hava's childish pleasure as "the last opportunity for this girl to do with her body and face as she wishes," Anna Dempsey also points to Meshkini's deliberate defiance of the Islamic censor as well as the Hollywood codes of visuality in these shots:

> […]It signals the director's defiance of the Iranian proscription of images that elicit the scopophilic gaze […]. At the same time, she also challenges the repressive nature of Euro-American film codes—specifically the

conflation of sensuality with sexuality and of childhood pleasure as a catalyst for adult desire" (Dempsey 383).

Image 5. Hava with Hassan

Image 6. Hassan with Hava

Even though Hava's home is a matriarchal abode in that it inhabits three generations of women and no male figure—we are not privy to the fate of her father—her elders seem complicit in making sure she abides by the rule of tradition. "Hava's mother treats her daughter more gently, but there is little to no affection in the house," Erfani writes, "Living two disadvantages at once—being poor and being female, the older women seem resigned to their difficult fate" (Erfani 119). In the case of Hava, her

grandmother serves the role of an other, who "bears the message of the Big Other" and implements the symbolic law (118). Underlining the cycle of womanhood in the traditional Iranian home, *The Day* alludes to the Beauvoirian sentiment about the socialization of gender—"One is not born a woman. One becomes one" (Beauvoir, 1974)—through Hava's submission to the symbolic and conforming to the demands of the Other. Hava's simple and short lived pleasure comes to an end when her mother calls her name—thus "signifying" her—then places the chador over her head and body, essentially "pinning her down as woman" (129). Somberly, Hava picks up the stick from the ground, and turns to her friend saying, "Goodbye Hassan. The shadow is gone" (129). By showing the dependency of her pleasure on the length of a shadow, *The Day* highlights the vulnerability of female desire inside a dogmatic and traditional system. At the same time, capturing a long take of Hassan's face watching, from behind the bars of his room, his best friend walk away, the shot highlights his deprivation and captivity within this system as well as hers. More to the point, Islamic doctrine in general, and the veil, in particular, appear to restrict not just Hava's pleasure and liberty but Hassan's too.

Likely in her twenties or thirties, Ahoo is more willful than Hava. While Hava's tale concludes with her mother "calling" her, Ahoo's story begins with her husband calling out her name. The small herd of gazelles running away from him suggests the predatory nature of the man's pursuit as well as his masculine claim on Ahoo as his property. By calling her name repeatedly, he tries to pin her down and put her in her proper place within the symbolic order. In turn, Ahoo's refusal to obey or even look at him, and her pedaling faster so as to outrun him point to her headstrong pursuit of her own *jouissance*. As the only episode in *The Day* with "adult male presence," Ahoo's

story, as Erfani concurs, does not "invite identification with his [the husband's] gaze" (135). Similar to the portrayal of men in *The Circle*, *The Day* seems to deliberately keep us from identifying with the male characters. In addition to the fact that we will not know his name or those of the other men who pursue Ahoo, *The Day* shows her husband as "erratic," "veering off" and "switching paths" constantly (136). The camera work in these shots not only unsettles male identity and authority, but it also works against the traditional cinematic convention of inviting the audience to indentify with the male perspective. Instead, it is intent on capturing alternate medium and long shots of Ahoo through long takes so as to reveal her facial expressions and body language, thus inviting us to identify with *her,* even though she speaks only a few words throughout the entire episode.

The Day treats the sea, the shore, the road, and the sandy desert-like landscape as characters, devoting several shots and long takes to exploring them. This technique gives the episode a meditative mood that alternates with an exhilarating feel, augmented by a "rhythmic twanging" background tune, when the film frames Ahoo through medium and long shots, as she pedals fast to catch up with her competitors (Langford 31). While the riders try to persuade Ahoo to quit the race and go back with them, the sea, the land, and the open road also seem to confer with her, perhaps inviting her to follow a different course of action, to break out of her husband's control—"the circle," as it were. As such, these visual elements—the sea, the land, and the road—represent openness and possibility, whereas the male riders signify opposing values such as limitation and captivity. The film's overall emphasis, in this episode, on nature and landscape tends to

unsettle the men's authority. What is more, an excess of female desire overwhelms the male desire.

In her analysis of Meshkini's film, Dempsey views the sandy landscape as a space of flux and ambivalence, "a heterotopic space where these women seem to be in the process of metaphorically transforming themselves" (385). While I agree with Dempsey's idea of the desert in this episode as a transformative space, I also perceive it as a place where historical and ideological sensibilities clash. That is to say, I tend to side with Langford's perspective and regard the contrasting elements in this episode as a representation of "many tensions between tradition and modernity that have run through Iran's history since the early twentieth century" (30). The contrast between shirtless male-riders and women cyclists in black chador points to the excessive quality of this shot, its evident peculiarity. As if Meshkini is drawing our attention to a mythic period in Iranian history, when men rode horses through uncultivated, pristine landscapes among herds of gazelles, and asking us if it makes sense to place a woman like Ahoo, who seeks mobility and independence at the cusp of the twenty-first century, in a place such as that.

Image 7. Ahoo being pursued by male riders

In one of the final shots of this episode, Ahoo's husband, along with the mullah who performed their marriage ceremony, verbally divorce her. In a few words that are almost imperceptible to the viewer, she consents to the divorce as does her husband. The two men soon retreat, and the camera frames a long shot of Ahoo riding by the sea. Her competitors are no longer in the frame; she is ahead of them, by herself, on the open road. The film offers a wide view of the dynamic waves breaking against the rocks and retreating back to the sea, then frames Ahoo's face and upper torso. Her facial expressions change almost immediately: the shadow of angst and uncertainty fades away from her visage; she leans back on the seat and takes a deep breath of the sea air, slows down her pace and takes a contented glance at the sea. She does not look over her shoulder any more nor does she attempt to fix the chador on her head. As the voice of a woman singing what sounds like a poignant folk song mutes her fast breathing, she comes to a sign displaying a map of the island and her position on it: "You are here," it reads, suggesting the choices that are before her. Ahoo's peace and solitude are evanescent though, and before long, several male riders, including her father, catch up with her again. The camera frames a close-up of the thumping of the horses' hooves, and the female singer's voice is overtaken by male voices resounding an imposing chant. Before long, the men stop her on her track, and her image slowly fades in the distance.

Because the visual codes of modesty do not permit Meshkini to depict a close-up of Ahoo's face, she opts to place the camera right in front of her head, in essence, allowing us to stare directly into her face. This technique allows the viewer to see the fear and regret that nuance Ahoo's features, as well as the sense of confinement and helplessness she feels when the riders return. Even Meshkini's choice of Kish Island as

the setting for her film speaks to her subversive directorial tone and method. Giving the film "an idyllic or mythic character," Kish, located at the southern tip of the country and initially developed by the Shah, seems to be the farthest point from the influence of Iran's "political and cultural center" (Erfani 118). As Erfani elucidates, Meshkini's choice also speaks to her feminist sensibilities in terms of women's marginal position under the Islamic Republic:

> Kish is an oddity of sorts. It is a free-trade zone, a resort destination, a consumer and tourist attraction. Yet it embodies some of the most extreme contradictions of the Iranian political narrative. […] [Its] local population, in contrast, is quite poor, and includes many 'Iranians' who have much darker skin. Though race does not play a direct role in the plot of Meshkini's film, it contributes to the overall zoom of her camera on marginalization (118).

Given its distance from the political (and ideological) center, Kish occupies an ambivalent space in the collective Iranian psyche. It is a place not conducive to a fixed identity. Inviting flux and possibility, it represent what Michel Foucault coins as heterotopia. Kish also presents a site, where woman can subvert the norms and pursue her desire. Dempsey alludes to the "'allegorical use of gendered tropes, in particular the (in)visibility and (im)mobility of women in social space'" in New Wave Iranian cinema, and the way filmmakers such as Panahi, Sadr Ameli and Meshkini use liminal spaces to underscore women's "marginalized, ephemeral, but tangible presence—a presence that is nonetheless invisible to those who reside in the 'center'" (Dempsey 375). Accommodating the disenfranchised and disempowered, heterotopias, as Foucault writes,

can function as "counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites […] are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted" (Dempsey 354).

Although Ahoo displays the strongest form of resistance, Kish provides a "counter-site" for all of the three female protagonists in *The Day*. Since Hava is but a nine-years-old child and Hoora is elderly and wheelchair bound, Ahoo seems the most capable character in terms of resistance. In fact, Ahoo's transgression of norms to achieve her goal suggests that perhaps not in childhood or old age but the time period that falls in between one must work with the utmost determination toward fulfilling one's ambitions. That is not to say that Hava and Hoora's stories are of less importance, but that each story serves a particular purpose in terms of female desire and resistance. While we sense the need for pleasure in Hoora's pursuit, we may also take her story as a cautionary tale. In addition to her desire for material objects, Hoora covets having a child. Since she expresses interest in adopting one of the local boys, it is likely that she also longs for intimacy with the opposite sex, although she knows that it has become too late for her to satisfy both of those needs.

In a 2000 interview, Meshkini described Hoora's existential crisis a result of "having gone through her frustrating childhood and youth," which forces her to take "refuge in her dreams" in old age (Erfani 129). Hoora's hunger for material possessions may also be a substitute for the type of satisfaction she knows she can no longer get. Having become forgetful, her guide for the items she needs to buy are colorful bands of fabric she has tied to her fingers. But when she buys all the items she wants according to their corresponding band, she is still left with one band, which she does not remember what particular item it corresponds to. We see her struggling for a ray of remembrance,

but ultimately to no avail. Standing for a lost object, the band signifies what Erfani dubs as "her stolen pleasure, *jouissance*" (143). Using Lacan's deliberations on desire, Erfani argues that the little band left on Hoora's finger is a reminder (or remainder?) of a lost object of desire, which she will never find except through fantasy, and which directly relates to "the impossibility of overcoming the lack" (144). The lost object is that which desire seeks so as to find pleasure—*jouissance*—but in Hoora's case, it is lost forever. Erfani further clarifies this point:

> It [the last band] is the one remainder for which she [Hoora] can find no substitute. she has purchased every object she desired but something is still left over, something that she thinks is still owed to her (145).

According to Lacan, fantasy, almost unavoidable in this case, is the necessary mechanism to cope with the realization of the lack, even though it is a "vicious circle" because it only provides an "illusion of satisfaction" and never the real one (145). So the band remains on Hoora's finger, symbolizing her loss of pleasure/*jouissance*. Hoora's excessive desire for material possessions, things she purchases but will probably never use, is an indication of her need to fill this void.

Since it blurs the lines between fantasy and reality, Hoora's story becomes almost surreal, thus, to some extent, freeing her from the hold of the symbolic. This quality gives her a certain degree of liberty, but it also renders her story strange. Once the boys carry her items to the beach so they can be transferred to the nearby ship, they—Hoora and the boys—engage in what Dempsey refers to as "'playing' house" (389). Essentially arranging "a virtual household on the sand," the boys use Hoora's appliances on the beach as though in a real home with actual electricity, while she rests on the sofa asking

them to make her tea (Simon 27). Her fussing over the "nakedness" of a transparent glass teapot takes her and the boy back to the mall to return it, as it draws the viewer's attention, once again, to the narrative's preoccupation with the veil and its implications. With Hoora gone, the boys not only use the appliances as they would in a real house—they vacuum the sandy beach, use the washer to wash their clothes, and take fruits and drinks from the fully stocked refrigerator—they put on the clothes she bought, including the wedding dress, and use her make up on their faces. While blurring the lines between fantasy and reality, these shots unsettle gender as well as racial boundaries, particularly when dark skinned boys use Hoora's lipstick and foundation to whiten their skin.

Image 8. Hoora's virtual home on the beach

Bordering on hilarious and magical, the film's final shots depict Hoora roosting on her new bed fastened to a large raft, next to a flotilla of smaller rafts carrying her new belongings. It is not entirely clear how all of these items will be transferred to the nearby ship, and why Hoora chooses this mode of transport over any other. At the same time, Meshkini's highly imaginative approach compels us to take this bizarre scene as what it signifies metaphorically. Referring to the way metaphor "condenses experience," Erfani

claims that, by producing meaning from something that may elude meaning, Meshkini's work "dismantles metanarratives, the symbolic par excellence" (151). As Renata Salecl argues, women's "excluded relationship with the symbolic," the fact that they "cannot be adequately defined through language," affords them a "more 'direct' access to the Real […] what is symbolized, but what also escapes symbolization"" (Salecl 133). As such, women's exclusion from the "symbolic fabric" allows them to speak from a place "that has not been articulated," a place that defies "the established meaning (Erfani 152). The surreal quality of Hoora's story in the end expands the realm of female desire, as it also reveals the potential incomprehensibility of female desire when perceived through the lens of the masculine logic.

Given its surreal imagery, Hoora's story, is the most subversive episode in Meshkini's film. While "Hava's pleasures are stolen and Ahoo's desires are forbidden," Hoora, as Erfani explains, "affirms herself, her desires, but at the cost of detaching herself from the fabric of society and floating away to 'no-where'. Her irrational act matters because she still demands *jouissance*, which includes enjoying rights. What she gets is nothing, but it is hers and it is still more than what was given" (Erfani 151). Since Hoora's fate does not offer much in the way of freedom and fulfillment, we may take the last band left on her finger as a sign of her confinement within "the circle," the symbolic, as it were, and her inability to break free completely.

Except for Ahoo, nearly all of the female characters in *The Day* gather together on the beach, in the film's final shots. The two young women from the cycling race as well as Hava, now clad in her chador, watch Hoora drift away at sea. In other words, all of the three episodes in *The Day* seem to merge together in its final shots. In fact, the film's last

shot involves a long take of Hava's somber face gazing at the surreal image of Hoora and her things gently sashaying with the waves. Blurring the boundaries between the real and the virtual, Meshkini not only exposes the "artificiality of the cinematic narrative"—a prominent feature of Abbas Kiarostami's visual and thematic aesthetics, as in *Through the Olive Trees*—but she also "creates an imaginary space," where her characters (and viewers) can see how the choices they make can shape potential futures (Dempsey 389). It is rather telling that, among the three protagonists in her film, Meshkini should leave Ahoo out of its final scene with the two other cyclists engaging in a debate over whether or not she finished the race and won, or, that her male relatives managed to stop her once and for all. Ironically, because Meshkini leaves Ahoo's story open ended, we sense her emphasis on Ahoo's plight and her fate. It is as though she reminds us of the magnitude of choice and resistance in shaping one's destiny. We may be confined to the circle—religion, patriarchy—but, to some extent, we make our fate too, Meshkini seems to imply.

Image 9. Hava with her mother watching Hoora

Meshkini's narrative style renders her realism highly figurative. In order to better understand her aesthetics, Dabashi compares it with its two "immediate neighbors: the actual realism of Kiarostami and the virtual realism of Makhmalbaf " (Masters and Masterpieces 373). According to Dabashi, the "thematic parameters" of Meshkini's realism "borrow from a factual documentation of truth-claims and reality narratives and yet sublimate them into fable-like representations" (373). Laying bare the often tedious and mundane lives of her characters, Meshkini's "particular cinematic vision is never revealed to the naked eye," rather, "it is evenly spread and thus hidden within the texture" of her films (373). As Dabashi describes: "She traces the factual evidence of life back to some elemental parable" (373). In her discussion of allegorical cinema, Langford alludes to the subversive potential of this style in Iranian cinema, in general, and in Meshkini's *The Day,* in particular:

> Just as allegory may be used by the powerful to build nations and spread ideologies, as a mode of hidden or 'veiled' discourse, allegory caries with it an enormous critical, even subversive potential (3).

While I agree with Dabashi's analysis in many respects, I believe it is somewhat reductive to dub Meshkini's complex employment of realism in *The Day* as merely "fable-like" and "parabolic." Dabashi's designation also begs the question why must Meshkini's brand of realism be dubbed "parabolic" and that of Kiarostami "factual," while both filmmakers depict the realities of life in Iran, albeit through different stories. It is true that a large part of the New Iranian cinema, including Meshkini's film, centers on the vernacular—by this, I mean grounded in her native culture and language, not "plain"

or “parochial”—representation of the daily struggles of Iranians, not all such representations should be viewed as solely “parabolic,” as Dabashi claims, unless the designation refers to a poetic/figurative aesthetics that, to some extent, shapes realism in the New Iranian cinema. This kind of deduction, in my view, may lead to the bifurcation between political and/or artistic, hence significant (or serious) cinema, as opposed to allegorical/parabolic, thus simple narratives and heartfelt cinema. Instead, I prefer to adopt the more unequivocal observation that Meshkini’s works are *not* apolitical but that “her aesthetics are [thus] her politics and not the other way around” (Dabashi 373). Dabashi offers further clarification to this point:

> […] [F]ilmmakers like Meshkini have come up with ingenious ideas that make reality speak beyond the metaphysically dissipated and ideologically enforced, constrictions that have left women out of the cosmic order of culture and allowed them only a backdoor entry. Artists like Meshkini oppose and seek to end that constitutional injustice not via an ideology that posits an alternative vision of reality, but by holding reality accountable to a better account of itself (Dabashi 388).

Image 10. Hava and his mother, the cyclists, and Hoora

Because of its “rugged and robust roots in reality” revealing the predicament of the disempowered and disenfrenchized, Meshkini’s film refuses to be appropriated by “bourgeois feminism” and its notions of global sisterhood and Eurocentric perceptions of the world (372). Where one perspective may view her narrative as “allegorical,” another may read it as it does Panahi’s: a deliberate articulation of reality without prescribing a particular brand of morality or politics, making a universal claim, or offering a dramatic panacea to resolve the human condition. As Erfani puts it: […] [T]here is no point in seeking utopian fantasies, even on the strange island of Kish. The chips are dealt in Iran—and many other places—in such a way that someone like Hoora cannot achieve any more satisfaction than Meshkini’s film allows” (148). Erfani then points to another important issue, reverberating Gayatri Spivak’s proverbial question with respect to Meshkini’s female characters in *The Day*: can the “subaltern” speak (or be heard)? Of course, we are not privy to what becomes of Ahoo in the end, as she remains almost completely silent throughout the episode Meshkini devotes to her. While Hoora, having

lost her *jouissance*, ultimately departs to a destination that is enigmatic at best, Hava seems to be the only character voicing her desire and making an effort to negotiate her freedom rights, but come noontime, she is silenced as well. Inviting a different reading of Meshkini's film, Erfani claims that the voice of the subaltern can be heard in *The Day*, if we consider Meshkini as the fourth character. As Erfani explains, Meshkini has the last word, but given her marginal location within the symbolic, her speech has to be metaphoric:

> In this case, Hoora did not have the last word; Meshkini did. The appreciation of feminine agency, even within its structural limitations, requires us to think of Meshkini as the fourth woman of the story. She does speak, but her speech, as in the case of anyone alienated, is metaphoric (Erfani 148).

It seems that Meshkini completes her "metaphoric speech" when all temporalities of past, present, and future merge together, as the characters from all three episodes unite in the final shots of *The Day*. Viewing the film as a series of episodes on a horizontal line evokes a grand narrative of the three stages of a woman's life. Whereas the first episode involves a childish quest for freedom and pleasure, the second, laden with a sense of urgency, represents an astonishing drive for mobility and personal achievement, while the third evinces rare sparks of joy alongside a growing sense of resignation, which comes with old age. This reading sounds plausible enough, however, as I indicated at the beginning of this section, a deeper look into the conclusion of the film reveals that through temporal and spatial distortion, Meshkini seeks to destabilize what the viewer is inclined to see as the characters' destinies. By gathering nearly all of the characters in one

place and at the same time, she forces “the circle” to collapse. As such, she deconstructs the film’s circular structure. This subversive strategy, as I mentioned previously, allows the younger women, including Hava, to watch Hoora’s end as a lesson to be learned.

In her article, “Allegory and the Aesthetics of Becoming-Woman in Marziyeh Meshkini’s *The Day I Became a Woman*,” Langford alludes to a more complex level of meaning in the film that can be accessed along a “vertical axis” (21). To do so, as Langford claims, we must view the film “as a layering of the ‘ages’ of a woman’s life, rather than as a progression from one stage to another” (26). Taking cues from Walter Benjamin’s theory of allegory and its “ability to capture conflicting temporal states or processes” in a single image,” Langford writes: “Benjamin conceived the notion of dialectical images as a way of understanding history not as a succession of events in time, but rather as fleeting constellations of past and present” (27). Inviting us to explore how the film operates along a “vertical axis,” Langford considers each image in Meshkini’s film affecting the other, “when placed one over the other in layers or sheets that may touch” (Langford 26). “Then,” according to Langford, “we are faced with a very different film, a film pulsating with traces of allegorical temporality and becoming-woman,” where each layer converges with the other (Langford 26).

As it represents “becoming,” *The Day* develops a vertical movement that allows us to see “hidden meanings” and experience characters and events across multiple planes and beyond chronological boundaries. Emphasizing “processes” of becoming rather than (linear) “stages” of being, Langford writes, “The term *woman* in the phrase *becoming-woman* does not refer to a specifically feminine or female biological or psychological subject, but rather to a process that displaces or disorients any kind of fixed subject

position" (24). While on the surface it depicts three different permutations of womanhood, through its figurative play with time and space, Meshkini's film offers us a view into the processes that constitute layers of becoming without being bound to fixed temporalities or forced to accept predetermined identities. Meshkini's employment of layered temporalities destabilizes the *circularity* of her protagonists' conditions by replacing it with *simultaneity*; it seeks to set them free, or, more aptly put, it encourages the viewers not to perceive/think of them as fixed subjects.

While, at times, it gives the impression of a continuum—encompassing the life story of one woman from beginning to end—Meshkini's film, *The Day,* entrusts us with the tales of multiple generations of women. By the same token, Panahi's film, *The Circle,* portrays more than the plight of its protagonists, but, potentially, that of hundreds of women like them, repressed and neglected by an autocratic system like the Islamic Republic. While the circular narrative structure is more literal in Panahi's film, Meshkini's tri-part narrative also follows a circular form, particularly in the end, when nearly all of its protagonists merge on the beach. As such, both films underscore the vicious circularity of women's circumstances, but they also draw our attention to those parts of women's natures and temperaments that exceed, making their identities less than stable or constant and allowing them to resist norms and enforced ideologies. Both *The Day* and *The Circle* portray an expansive hope that ultimately holds the promise of freedom and fulfillment for their protagonists.

While both films remain grounded in the realities of their native culture, *The Circle* has the impression of a documentary film, because of its particular filming style and fragmented narrative. In lieu of a single story, it follows a number of protagonists,

who face similar problems. Bringing three separate tales together, Meshkini's film, on the other hand, resembles Shahrnush Parsipur's stories in that it "begins innocently, inconspicuously, and with perfect realist cadence, and then gradually metamorphose[s] into surreal dimensions" (Dabashi 379). Regardless of their specific narrative style, inherent in both Panahi's and Mashkini's cinema is a courageous disclosure of the roots of oppression and cultural maladies of a people. Meshkini, as Dabashi explains, "excavates gold in dirty mines—just like Forough Farrokhzad, Zahra Khanlari, and Ghazaleh Alizadeh did before her […] her characters are all earthly, believable—they seem to have just stepped off a bus, waved goodbye to a friend, walked home, greeted a relative, sat down to have a cup of tea" (Dabashi 389).

As part of a new generation of Iranian filmmakers carrying on the artistic legacy of pioneering *auteurs* such as Kimiai and Kiarostami, Meshkini and Panahi present to the viewers across the globe their particular brand of visual aesthetic and diverse images of Iran. "Extracting life out of the brutalities of a national trauma," Iranian cinema of the last half century has brought to fruition what Dabashi coins as "pararealism" (Dabashi 444). According to Dabashi, pararealism "goes above, beyond, beside and around reality […] to frame and force it to yield its hidden alternatives, its undelivered promises" (444). Neither neorealism nor surrealism, pararealism "remains constitutionally bound by its awareness of reality; and yet it takes reality too seriously to take it too seriously" (Dabashi 444). Conversant with master practitioners of their trade, the realist cinema of Panahi and Meshkini has an "immediate social context," and is "integral to a succession of other literary, poetic, and artistic movements" (Dabashi 444). Both Panahi and Meshkini avoid melodramatic representations of life in Iran, and yet, their films depict

the agonizing circularity of women's conditions through images that are artless as they are sobering. Ultimately, what drew my critical attention to these specific films was the same appeal I found in the novels of Parsipur, Ravanipur, and Vafi. Even though my analyses in the present study expand across multiple authors' literary oeuvres, they follow a basic premise: in what form does excess manifest in a certain work, and how that permutation of excess translates into resistance. I shall conclude this section, at this point, and provide my closing remarks in the conclusion that follows.

Conclusion

As the final chapter of this study explores the motif of the circle and circular narrative forms, it seems ironic that the overall structure of my investigation of figures of excess throughout this work should also take on a circular path. I began this study with an exploration of Parsipur's defiant female protagonists and I concluded my analysis of Panahi and Meshkini's realist cinema in its final chapter through an examination of their rebellious and resilient female characters in both *The Circle* and *The Day*. This interesting spin goes to show the common thread in all of the previous chapters regardless of the particular brand of excess they explore. My overarching thesis here has been to shed light on the plight and rebellion of excessive woman subjects and the ways in which their transgression of cultural norms ultimately liberates them and allows them to have more fulfilling lives.

The choice to begin this work with a study of Parsipur's novels was not a difficult one. I enjoyed and admired Parsipur's works, and her employment of magical realism enabled her to create extraordinary female heroes who often displayed the type of excessive subjectivity I sought. I began my chapter with her novella, *Women without Men*, and I expanded my examination of her excessive female heroes into her other works, including *Touba and the Meaning of Night*, *The Dog and the Long Winter*, and *Blue Logos,* in order to illuminate not only the common theme of feminine subversion in each novel, but to also explain how various forms of self-expression translated into a language of resistance in the case of each female protagonist.

While in the first section of this chapter, "The Conflict in the Self," I explored the inner conflicts that give rise to the protagonists' opposition to tradition and cultural standards, in the second section, "Knowledge and Power," I centered my analysis on the manner in which women's countering of cultural standards (such as leaving their homes and families and leading an itinerant existence) allows them to gain experience, agency, and voice. Using theories of French feminists and Persian scholars, such as Judith Butler, Luce Irigaray, Fatemeh Keshavarz, and Farzaneh Milani, I argued that even though their marginality renders Parsipur's protagonists as outcasts (and border-crossers), they afford them liminal spaces of action and enunciation on the peripheries of the male-dominated culture. In the last section, "Death, Rebirth, and Nature," I claimed that Parsipur's use of magical realism enables her protagonists to overcome the futility/finality of death and to use it as a pathway to spiritual and intellectual revival.

In the second chapter, I engaged in a comparative study of Parsipur's soft science fiction novel, *Shiva*, and Ravanipur's magical realist novel, *The Drowned,* in terms of excessive spaces. As I contended, in Parsipur's science fiction novel, *Shiva,* strangeness (and therefore excess) manifests in highly advanced technologies and extraordinary inventions, which pave the way for a fast-paced social, political and economic progress in post-revolutionary Iran. In the second section of this chapter, I used Moniru Ravanipur's magical realist novel, *The Drowned*, to highlight another form of excess, embodied in the people of Jofreh and their strange beliefs and lifestyles. In contrast to Parsipur's thesis in *Shiva*, Ravanipur's *The Drowned* used "strangeness" to promote the preservation of long standing lore, in lieu of modernity. Juxtaposing both Parsipur's and Ravanipur's disparate politics, I explained how strangeness enables each author to convey her message. Similar

to the first chapter, here, the genres of magical realism and science fiction enable both authors to expand the limits of reality and use fantastical elements to materialize the outcomes they desire.

In the third chapter, I examined Vafi's meditative novels in terms of excessive verbal and non-verbal acts, which not only allow her protagonists to cope with traumatic experiences, but to also rebuild their identities and regain their voices. In the second section of this chapter, "Verbosity and Subversion," I drew comparisons between the characters' non-verbal ways of encountering trauma and finding their voices, and others' verbal opposition to oppression and male domination. Even though one is inward and the other explicit, I argued that both acts constitute resistance because they reveal women's refusal to be silent and submissive victims of trauma. In essence, through its investigation of verbosity and internal monologue as feminine subversive strategies, this chapter brought the discussions of excessive subjects and spaces together.

In the fourth chapter of this work, I engaged with Panahi's film, *The Circle* and Meshkini's film debut, *The Day*. I sought excess in the films' employment of the motif of the circle, and in their circular narrative forms. I argued that in both films thematic excess manifests in images and ideas that invoke the theme of the circle, while formal excess took shape in the films' circular narrative structures. I maintained that both women's captivity within an autocratic system and their efforts to subvert the circle of oppression embody excess. Moreover, I argued that while both films reveal women's perpetual struggle, they also deconstruct their circular structure by collapsing all temporalities into the present and merging nearly all of their protagonists in one place in the end. So, as we

see in *The Day*, for example, Hava, the youngest protagonist in the film can see Hoora's end as a lesson to be learned and not necessarily as her own fate.

Since both films centered on Iranian women's struggle and their resistance, I felt I had returned to a novel study of excessive woman subjects. While in the first chapter, I examined loftier forms of female desire (and resistance), such as Mahdokht's wish to become a tree in order to gain freedom and experience, in this chapter, I focused my analysis on women's simpler (but not less significant) wants, like taking a trip alone, smoking in public, sharing a lollipop with a friend, and wining a cycling race. My investigation ultimately brought me to the optimistic conclusion that despite their representation of women's perpetual struggle, both *The Circle* and *The Day* underscore women's relentless efforts toward freedom and fulfillment. In fact, both films represent strong and resilient women, who refuse to accept victimhood or succumb to their fates. Similar to Munis, Zarrinkolah, Touba, and Vafi's nameless female heroes, Panahi and Meshkini's female characters, Nargess, Pari, Hava and Ahoo, continuously subvert the circle of oppression with the enduring hope to break free. Their oppositional nature often puts them at odds with the dominant culture and tradition, and yet, they become figures of hope and inspiration for thousands of other women who learn about their stories.

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