Revealing Soliloquy: The Exploration and Effects of Cultural Hybridity in Iranian-American Literature

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Human beings are members of a whole,

In creation of one essence and soul.

If one member is afflicted with pain,

Other members uneasy will remain.

If you have no sympathy for human pain,

The name of human you cannot retain.

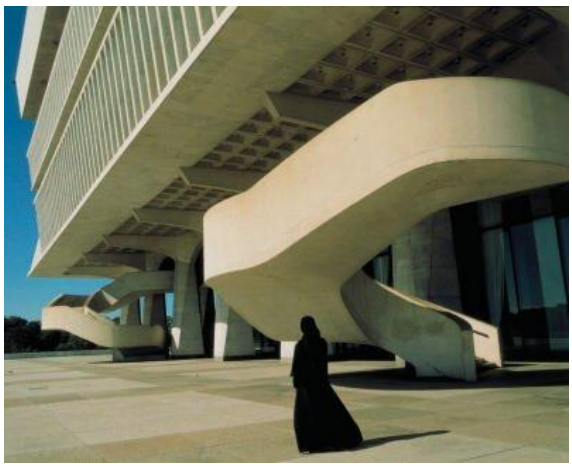
Saadi, *Bani Adam* (translation by M. Aryanpour)

Contents

Introduction

A Visual Introduction to Transnationalism in Iranian-American Literature

1. Shirin Neshat, *Rebellious Silence*, 1994



2. Shirin Neshat, still from video *Soliloquy*, 1999

Iranian-American artist Shirin Neshat (1957) left Iran in 1974 to study abroad in the United States. Because of the 1979 Iranian Revolution, followed by the establishment of the Islamic Republic, it took Neshat nearly twenty years to return to Iran. Her return in 1993 marked the starting point for her early photograph series titled *Unveiled* (1993) and the *Women of Allah* (1993-97). Begum Özden Firat, Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology at the Mimar Sinan Fine Arts University in Istanbul, has described these early works of Neshat as focusing on 'the Islamic Revolution in Iran and particularly on the subject of women in relation to violence and politics' (Firat, 207). *Rebellious Silence* (figure 1), which is part of the *Women of Allah* series shows Neshat using well-known elements such as the gun and the veil to represent the violence and politics that emerged from the Islamic Revolution. According to Firat, these images not only refer to the Iranian context but 'are also generic images for the "Muslim Other"' (Firat, 209). Firat writes: 'On the surface, the images do nothing but reproduce the historically constructed fantasy and fear of the Orient by employing overused signs of

the Orient' (209). The photographs show veiled women that the Western viewer would probably connect to mandatory veiling, Islam and oppression. In a similar way, the text inscribed on the woman's face could be connected to the Koran and the gun could be linked to Islamic fundamentalism. The text, however, which is unreadable for most Western viewers, consists of quotes from famous Iranian feminist poets. Firat argues that this unreadable aspect of Neshat's work signifies the way in which a Western audience is incapable of looking through the stereotypes:

> The viewer who fails to read the image in the absence of a translation interprets it through an Orientalist discourse that defines the Muslim Other by means of historically constructed culturally mediated stereotypes. In fact, this encouraged 'misreading' implicitly whispers to the viewer that rather than the veil concealing the body, it is the Western discourse about the Muslim world that obscures the viewers' eyes. (Firat, 212-213)

At the same time, Neshat's photographs and the unreadable inscriptions encourage its viewers to look beyond the stereotypes, because the impossibility to translate foregrounds the difficulties of cultural translation. As Firat writes:

> The handwritten text on the *Women of Allah* images comments on the possibility of cross-cultural viewing positions at the intersections of the visual and the verbal, of looking and reading, of translation and unreadability, all of which convene on the body of the artist that is inscribed with calligraphy. (Firat, 210)

As Firat and other critics put it, Neshat uses stereotype images to engage the viewer in looking beyond their prejudices. On the website of the Guggenheim museum is written about Neshat's work: 'While these works hint at the restrictive nature of Islamic laws regarding women, they deliberately open onto multiple readings, reaching instead toward universal conditions'. The untranslated Farsi inscriptions confront Western viewers with their incapability to fully interpret the image, pointing out the possibilities and impossibilities of translation.

In Neshat's later works, such as *Soliloquy* (figure 2), the image of the veiled women keeps playing an important part. *Soliloquy* consists of two analogous videos that are

projected on opposite walls. The veiled woman is Neshat herself and the videos show her traveling from a Middle Eastern setting to a Western capital. The Tate Museum describes *Soliloquy* as 'a comment on Neshat's experience of living between two cultures'. *Soliloquy* puts the audience in between two different locations. The viewer stands in the middle of the two projected videos, moving between two cultural images, but incapable of seeing both at the same time. It confronts the audience with the impossibility of seeing the veiled woman in two different places at the same time. However, as Iranian-American woman, Neshat expresses with *Soliloquy* her transnational position of being situated in-between these two cultures. A unique space which she can – literally and metaphorically – project both at the same time. Similar as the *Women of Allah* photography's, *Soliloquy* confronts the viewers with questions about the 'possibility of cross-cultural viewing positions' (Firat, 210).

Neshat's artwork visually represents her transnational identity, yet also illustrates the difficulties and impossibilities of showing her Iranian-American position. Her work is interpreted as "drawing attention to complex questions of cultural translation" (Dadi, 128) but also reflects the limiting situation of the Western viewer, who is neither capable of seeing the complete image or of understanding the Farsi inscriptions. As I will show, these examples of Neshat's artwork offer a visual introduction to the same themes that Iranian-American writers deal with in their literature.

The 1979 Iranian revolution marked an immense political turning point for Iran. The establishment of the Islamic Republic was the beginning of a more complex and conflicted relationship with the West and especially with the United States, which designated Iran as part of the so-called 'axis of evil'. After the revolution, because of the establishment of the Ministry of Cultural and Islamic Guidance, several laws and restrictions were put in place for censoring art and media. Due to strict censorship and widespread arrests, many Iranian authors moved to other countries to pursue their writing and publishing. Therefore, Iranian-American literature came into being as a result of the 1979 revolution, as Persis M. Karim writes in her article 'Reflections on Literature after the 1979 Revolution in Iran and in the Diaspora' (2009):

> Both inside and outside Iran, writers have taken the opportunity to reflect on and write about the changes and tensions that have shaped Iran's post-revolutionary society and, for those who chose to leave Iran for other parts of the world, about the challenges of remaking their lives elsewhere. (151)

Karim also observes that contemporary Iranian-American literature is 'a literature that begs the question what it means to move beyond any particular national category' (154). Iranian-American writers inhabit the same transnational position as artist Neshat, of being in-between two cultures. Their literature reflects this intermediate space between two divergent nations. Bearing Neshat's work in mind, I want to approach several Iranian-American works of literature in terms of this 'cultural translation' and try to answer the following question:

How does the literature of Iranian-American writers reflect their position between two cultures?

To answer my research question I want to analyze a corpus of Iranian-American literature. Iranian-American writers express their transnational positions by narrating their life stories, in the same way Neshat portrayed herself in *Soliloquy*. Karim writes: 'One of the most obvious phenomena of Iranian diaspora literature has been the explosion of women's memoirs' (153). In the same way that Neshat's *Women of Allah* reflects the limits of linguistical and cultural translation by the Western viewer, Iranian-American authors have to explain many cultural differences when writing for a Western reading public.[1] I have chosen to start my analysis with Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2004) and Fatemeh Keshavarz's critical reaction of Nafisi's memoir, *Jasmine an Stars: Reading More Than Lolita in Tehran* (2009). Iranian-American authors not only

[1] Although I focus exclusively on Iranian-American literature, I am aware that this is only a small part of all sorts of migration literature that deal with the explanation of cultural differences and the expression of hybrid identities.

write about their transnational position, but they also use literary strategies to explain their culture of origin to a Western reading public. To analyze the literary strategies that construct a 'cultural translation' I will use two other memoirs, namely Tara Bahrampour's *To See and See Again* (2000) and Azedeh Moaveni's *Lipstick Jihad* (2006). While first-person women's memoirs continue to form a significant part of Iranian-American literature, Karim explains in her new publication *Tremors: New fiction by Iranian-American Writers* (2013), a shift can be observed in Iranian-American literature, from autobiographical narrations towards works of fiction, Karim writes: 'It is perhaps no surprise that as Iranian-American writers have come of age, they have branched out into the genre of fiction, allowing their imagination to delve into thousands of years of Iranian culture, politics, and history' (ix). Moving along with Karim's observations of Iranian-American literature, I want to discuss Shahriar Mandanipour's *Censoring an Iranian Love Story* (2009). This corpus, consisting of women's memoirs and Mandanipour's work of fiction, offers the possibility of analyzing the transnational position of the writers, but also the way they use literary strategies to make cultural translation possible.

In order to answer my research question I will start with introducing several paradigms, such as transnationalism and globalization, which generate theories about transnational literary studies. In my first chapter I will introduce the meta-discussion about world literature and conclude with the theory of Emily Apter, Professor of French and Comparative Literature at New York University. Emily Apter's 'translation zone' becomes the center of my analysis, because she offers a theory about the ways literature can or cannot form a transnational zone in-between two nations. Apter takes two essential but divergent theses into account, namely 'everything is translatable' and 'nothing is translatable'. Her emphasis lies on the capacity of literature to offer linguistic and cultural translations, but also on what she calls 'the "Untranslatable" – the realm of those words that are continually retranslated, mistranslated, transferred from language to language, or especially resistant to substitution'.

Chapter 1

World Literature and its Borders

Edward Said's *The World, the Text and the Critic* (1983) starts with his critique of contemporary literary theory for retreating 'into the labyrinth of "textuality"' (3). This textual focus of modern literary theory is in opposition to the worldly position of Said, who writes:

> My position is that texts are worldly, to some degree they are events, and, even when they appear to deny it, they are nevertheless a part of the social world, human life, and of course the historical moments in which they are located and interpreted. (4)

According to Said, modern literary theory should not exclude reality from texts by focusing on 'textuality'. Instead, he argues that literature should be seen as worldly and his approach is to connect texts with 'the existential actualities of human life' (5).

Said's approach inevitably connects literature with 'the circumstances, the events, the physical senses' (4) and the cultural environment in where the writer is positioned, which includes important aspects of culture such as power structures and the notion of 'Orientalism'. He explains the workings of the hierarchical cultural system with the help of the terms filiation and affiliation. Filiation is the way hierarchies are formed by the biological line of descent and affiliation refers to the way social groups are formed by adoption, not passed by inheritance. Said outlines how modern writers often describe a society within their works that is marked by the failure of filiation. Modern society is no longer based on a biological line of descent, but it is formed by 'horizontal affiliation' (18), in other words, the establishment of a cultural system. Said describes this process of filiation and affiliation as a 'passage from nature to culture' (20), to explain that the biological, genealogical order is replaced by the cultural order that entails a new hierarchy. Said explains:

> Thus if a filial relationship was held together by natural bonds and natural forms of authority – involving obedience, fear, love, respect, and instinctual conflict – the new affiliative relationship changes these bonds into what seem to be transpersonal forms – such as guild, consciousness, consensus, collegiality, professional respect, class, and the hegemony of a dominant culture. The filiative scheme belongs to the realms of nature and of "life," whereas affiliation belongs exclusively to culture and society. (20)

Culture has two sides: it is the connection of people and the acceptation of affiliative relationships, on the one hand, and the affirmation of new hierarchies and cultural differences, on the other. Said describes 'our' culture as 'inside, in place, common, belonging, in a word *above*', versus the Other as 'outside, excluded, aberrant, inferior, in a word *below*' (13-14). Said emphasizes these hierarchical aspects of culture with respect to literature, but also the writing, the reading and criticism of literature. The world includes conflicts and inequality; words and text, being worldly, 'are matters having to do with ownership, authority, power and the imposition of force' (48); then criticism too is another aspect of that present' (51). Said's notion of 'Orientalism' refers to the ways in which the West has culturally constructed the Other as its negative opposite.

Said's theory reminds us that literature cannot be seen apart from its worldly context. Moreover, especially in a time of globalization and increasing migration, we have to be aware that literature and its reception takes part in these hierarchical power relations. Literature can express or criticize the existing unequal relations between East and West, but at the same time these power structures always influence the way in which all literature is read.

To approach literature from a socio-political angle, as Said argues, has become more common within literary studies as we can see in the reports of the American Comparative Literature Association (ACLA). ACLA's 1993 report on 'the state of the discipline' (Saussy, 18), titled *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism*, describes this tendency to move from a textual and disciplinary approach (for example

the study of language, genre and period) towards a focus on the interaction between the text and contemporary cultural and social aspects of multiculturalism. The report formulated this new multiculturalist orientation and pointed out the urgency of crossing national boundaries in literary studies, describing comparative literature as 'a field of fields, drawn to boundaries as opportunities for boundary crossing' (Saussy, 18).

A decade later, the ACLA published another report titled *Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalization* (2006). The book states in its introduction that 'in the first decade of the twenty-first century, globalization has emerged as a defining paradigm in nearly every area of human activity'. Most contributors look back on the 1993 report and formulate their present thoughts on the effects of globalization in literary studies.

Alongside the paradigms of migration, transnationalism, and multiculturalism, the notion of world literature emerged in the field of literary studies, primarily in relation to idea of globalization. As Mads Rosendahl Thomson begins his book *Mapping World Literature* (2008):

> The term world literature has received a significant renewed interest in the past decade, perhaps more than anything as the companion to the central keyword of the times, globalization. (1)

The notion of world literature thus forms an important concept in relation to literary studies. Therefore, I will introduce the broader discussion about world literature and criticize the idea through Apter's theory of the 'translation zone'.

Franco Moretti and Pascale Casanova's discussion of the term 'world literature' express the problematic debate of the term. They enter the discussion by referring to Goethe's idea of 'Weltliteratur', 'sketched by Goethe as the dream of "a common world literature transcending national limits".' (Prendergast, 2001, 100). As Christopher Prendergast, editor of the book *Debating World Literature* (2004), puts it in his article 'The World Republic of Letters', it is Goethe's legacy that is still more pressing than ever: 'But for all

its limits, Goethe's example matters a great deal. If we start here, it is at once to acknowledge those limits and then to take from him what is useful for our own times' (3). Goethe imagined a literature that would become a global discourse exceeding national limits. The ideal that Goethe formulated with his 'Weltliteratur' forms an exemplary model for world literature. However, as Moretti, Casanova and Prendergast make clear, world literature rather seems to be a 'field of rivalry' (Prendergast, 2001, 109), 'one and unequal' (Moretti, 55), 'not an object but a 'problem' (Prendergast, 2004, XIII). Two centuries after Goethe introduced the idea of world literature, the notion still forms the center of discussion:

> Yet quite what *Weltliteratur* meant (to Goethe and his age) and what it means (or might mean) to us are still very live issues, if only for the reason that 'globalization', if it exists at all, is not a state but a process, something still in the making. […] By the same token, what we make of it today is necessarily open to indefinitely extended reflection and debate. (Prendergast, 2004, VII-VIII)

This continuous 'extended reflection and debate' about the possibility of a 'Weltliteratur' has moved in different directions. Nowadays, the notion comprises a broad discussion about canon formation, linguistic- and cultural translations, but also about the transnational ability of literature. For instance, David Damrosch's assessment of the ACLA report was the following: 'We've come a fair distance in the decade since the Bernheimer report was published, but we have succumbed too readily to the pressures of time and the attractions of hypercanonical celebrity both within Western literature and beyond' (2006, 52). Damrosch expresses his concerns about the existing hypercanon that is still dominated by the 'old', well-established masterpieces, in a postcanonical age of globalization that demands a canon including more cross-cultural literary works. In a more recent discussion with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Damrosch connects this problem of canon formation to the study of comparative literature. He states: 'the problem today may be that the opening up of the global canon may not in itself have

solved the deeper structural problems long besetting comparative study overall' (2011, 460). He emphasizes the importance of more languages and language study, more collaborative scholarship and a great deal of pluralism (2011, 461-463) for the creation of a more globalized canon in the future. Damrosch represents a very practical position within the current discussion. He acknowledges the difficulties within the debate, but pleads for a practical solution: 'The challenge for us is to forge our divergent approaches into an active relation, in which we reframe comparative study in a global context, using it to spread the study of language and culture and to push back at every possible stage against the vagaries of the global capital market' (2011, 464).

Damrosch's point of view is important to illustrate the extended debate on world literature. He is formulating practical methods to globalize the existing canon, while others are still discussing the possibilities of literature and globalization. In 'Comparative Literature/World Literature: A Discussion with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and David Damrosch' (2012) Spivak responds to Damrosch:

> Our concern is not how to situate the peaks of the literary production of the world on a level playing field but to ask what makes literary cases singular. The singular is always the universalizable, never the universal. The site of reading is to make the singular visible in its ability. (2012, 466)

Spivak argues that although literature should not aim to be universal, the uniqueness of certain literary works helps readers to understand and 'imagine the other' (468). Her position can be further explained by using her book *Death of a Discipline* (2003) in which she pleads for a new comparative literature assigning value to linguistic and cultural diversity. Unlike Damrosch and Moretti, who are trying to establish a more universal literary field, Spivak acknowledges the urgency for literary studies to cross borders, while being aware of the difficulties this entails:

> Literature, the proper study of literature may give us entry to the performativity of cultures as instantiated in narrative. Here we stand outside, but not as anthropologists; we stand rather as readers with imagination ready for the effort of othering, however imperfectly, as an end in itself. (2003, 13)

According to Spivak, the singularity of literature is the untranslatable, or in other words, the impossibility to reach a complete cultural exchange between 'our culture' and the Other.

A direct and negative response to Spivak's *Death of a Discipline* and the Bernheimer report came from Djelal Kadir. In his article 'Comparative Literature in an Age of Terrorism' he formulates a skeptical position towards the globalization of literature. He argues that the circumstances of our contemporary world 'governed by transcoded terror defined as "full spectrum dominance"' (68), limits any possibility for imagining the other and any chance for world literature to emerge. He explains:

> The multiculturalist 1993 ACLA report continues to resonate in Spivak, and as reaction formation, the cultural studies that so inflected that report continue to be determinative through Spivak's felt need to surmount them.
>
> One would be hard-pressed to find a comparatist who would argue against the supersession of monolingualism, presentism, and narcissism. […] Being in the world, comparative literature may not always be able to discern when and to what degree it is of the world, and other-worldly constructs such as world literature could well be deflective mechanisms for disciplinary equanimity and for keeping the world at a safe distance, albeit never out of reach. (76)

According to Kadir the attempt to cross borders is well-intentioned, yet present political and cultural circumstances generate unbridgeable differences. His extreme point of view actually denies the possibility of a world literature in present times, which he defines as an 'age of terrorism'.

This short introduction shows the problematic discussion about the notion of world literature, which refers to Goethe's ideal of literature that would become a global

discourse. Moreover, recalling Said's approach to literature and its reception from a socio-political angle, I would like to emphasize on the existing borders instead of focusing on a 'world literature transcending national limits' (Prendergast, 2001, 100). Over the course of a decade, the emerging paradigms of transnationalism and globalization have generated questions about the transnational character of literature. Paul Jay, writer of the book *Global Matters: The Transnational Turn in Literary Studies* (2010), emphasizes the influence of transnationalism on literary and cultural studies. His so-called 'transnational turn' began when 'the study of minority, multicultural and postcolonial literatures began to intersect with work done under the auspices of the emerging study of globalization' (2). Transnational literary studies can be defined as a field that has to do with studying literature outside of any definitive national paradigm and towards 'forms of cultural production that take place in the liminal spaces between real and imagined borders' (1).

Emily Apter offers with her book *The Translation Zone* (2006) a model of 'sites that are "in-translation"' (2006, 6). By this she means zones where critical engagement can generate linguistic and cultural exchange. She formulates her concept of translation zone as follows: 'In fastening on the term "zone" as a theoretical mainstay, the intention has been to imagine a broad intellectual topography that is neither the property of a single nation, nor an amorphous condition associated with post-nationalism, but rather a zone of critical engagement that connects the "l" and the "n" of transLation and transNation' (2006, 5). She opens *The Translation Zone* with 'twenty theses on translation', beginning with 'nothing is translatable' to 'everything is translatable'. These two contradictory theses exemplify the two opposite sides of translation studies, namely the possibility and the impossibility of exchange. This dichotomy of translation studies is important for understanding Apter's translation zones. On the one hand, she illustrates how translation leads to linguistic and cultural exchange across national borders and, on the other hand, she emphasizes the 'untranslatability', the awareness of the important limits of translation. In other words, the concept of the translation zone indicates a zone where

linguistic and cultural borders are transcended, and at the same time where 'transmission failure is marked' (2006, 5).

Apter's article 'Global *Translation*: The "Invention" of Comparative Literature, Istanbul, 1933' demonstrates her ideas about the translation zone. The article describes the situation of Leo Spitzer, a German-Jewish literary critic who in 1933 was exiled to Istanbul, where he developed his influential thoughts on transnational literary studies. Apter writes: 'The story of Spitzer's Istanbul seminar, and the model of global translation that it affords, thus has special bearing on comparative literature today' (2004, 83). By using Spitzer, an émigré who is aware of crossing between nations, as an example, Apter emphasizes the way earlier generations of literary scholars dealt with comparative literature and transnationalism.

> My point is that in globalizing literary studies, there is a selective forgetting of ways in which early comparative literature was always and already globalized. Spitzer in Istanbul, before Auerbach, tells the story not just of exilic humanism, but of worldly linguistic exchanges containing the seeds of a transnational humanism or global translation. (2004, 82)

Spitzer's work and his famous quote: 'Any language is human prior to being national: Turkish, French, and German languages first belong to humanity and then to Turkish, French and German peoples', exemplify the anti-nationalism of exiled academics in Istanbul. Apter describes in her article how they were 'transforming German-based philology into a global discipline' (2004, 95). She demonstrates with Spitzer in Istanbul a translation zone where linguistic and cultural exchange was made possible: 'I would like to suggest that comparative literature continues to this day to carry traces of the city in which it took disciplinary form; a site where East-West boundaries were culturally blurry, and where layers of colonial history obfuscated the outlines of indigenous cultures' (2004, 97).

From Istanbul as a translation zone where transnationalism occurred, Apter moves, with part three of her book *The Translation Zone*, to her so-called 'language wars', in which she explains the impossibility of exchange. Apter's translation zone at war marks 'the way in which monolingual nations police their internal linguistic borders' (2006, 129) and her concept is elaborated in her most recent work *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability* (2013). In the chapter 'Checkpoints and Sovereign Borders' from her latest book, Apter discusses several projects by artists that have 'proved crucial to understanding how a translational checkpoint may be mobilized as a kind of "antiborder border"' (2013, 100). In this way, Apter uses the metaphor of the checkpoint to illustrate how translation is stopped along different kinds of borders.

> In each of these projects by artists, architects and writers, we see the translation zone defined not as a porous boundary facilitating supranational comity and regimes of general equivalence but as a threshold of untranslatability and political blockade. In bringing back the checkpoint to undercut the way in which translation studies has flaccidly appropriated metaphors for border-crossing, the aim has been to insist on the persistence of the function of the state police within the field of language politics. It may be a time of waning sovereignty insofar as nation-states are trumped by liquid capital and the global dissemination of non-aligned standing armies, but checkpoints, whether mobile bodies or stationary landmarks, produce a logic of anti-sovereign occupation contoured by walls of non-transitivity and untranslatability. (2013, 114)

The introduction to *Against World Literature* makes clear that the title does not literally describe a standpoint 'against world literature', but emphasizes the first hypothesis formulated in *The Translation Zone*, that 'nothing is translatable' (2006, xi). As Apter explains:

> In addition to giving short shrift to temporality and periodization, translation studies and World Literature ignored problems more internal to their theoretical premises. With translation assumed to be a good thing *en soi* – under the assumption that it is a critical

> praxis enabling communication across languages, cultures, time periods and disciplines – the right to the Untranslatable was blindsided. In a parallel way, at its very core World Literature seemed oblivious to the Untranslatable – as shown by its unqueried inclusion of the word "world". (2013, 8-9)

According to Apter, theories about world literature are approached from one side, namely the possibility of translation. However, Apter's translation zones do not only indicate crossing borders but also the impossibility of translation: 'while translation is deemed essential to the dissemination and preservation of textual inheritance, it is also understood to be an agent of language extinction' (2006, 4). *Against World Literature* creates an awareness of the limits of translation and how this 'untranslatability' is also an important part of critical engagement.

> For in standing the world on its head, it encourages the literatures of the world to mess with World Literature, turning it into a process of translating untranslatably. It beckons one to run the experiment of imagining what a literary studies contoured around untranslatability might be. (2013, 18)

Apter exemplified this kind of untranslatability already in *The Translation Zone* with Spitzer's practice of non-translation. Within Spitzer's work and especially his essay 'Linguistics and Literary History' (1948) 'one hears a cacophony of untranslated languages' (2006, 61). In his work Spitzer used a great deal of quotations in the original foreign language without offering any translation. With the help of this example, Apter explains that not everything has to be or can be translated for exchange to happen. She writes:

> The practice of global *translatio* as Spitzer defined it, is patterned after untranslatable affective gaps, the nub of intractable semantic difference, episodes of violent cultural transference and countertransference, and unexpected love affairs. In retrospect, Spitzer's

> invention of comparative literature in Istanbul transformed philology into something recognizable today as the psychic life of transnational humanism. (2006, 64)

Spitzer's goal was to confront his readers with the original language, causing untranslatable gaps. These gaps illustrate the two sides of Apter's translation zone: nothing is translatable and at the same time everything is translatable. The untranslatable is also capable of linking two cultures into one transnational zone.

Apter's translation zone offers a theory in which transnational literature can be located, 'a zone of critical engagement that connects the "l" and the "n" of transLation and transNation' (2006, 6). Apter illustrates with her theory how the translation zone comprises linguistic and cultural exchange as well as the singular, untranslatable and nonexchangeable aspects of literature. The translation zone is a space of critical engagement where sites are in-translation, (involving the possibility of exchange) but also where sites are at war (involving the impossibility of translation, or untranslatability). However, both sides of the translation zone are contributing to a literature that can cross borders. As Apter writes about her latest work: '*Against World Literature* tests the hypothesis that translation and untranslatability are constitutive of world forms of literature.' (2013, 16).

The current meta-discussion about globalization and literary studies, concerning the notion of world literature, illustrates the diverging ideas about the possibilities of transnational literature. Within this broad discussion I support Apter's theory of the translation zone, because she locates literature in a critical zone that examines the transnational possibilities of linguistic translation and cultural exchange between two nations in literature. Apter's theory offers a way in which literary scholars can analyze transnational literature, namely as a critical zone with respect to global exchange as well as cultural diversity. I think Iranian-American literature can be positioned in Apter's translation zone, because it is a literature that is 'neither the property of a single nation,

nor an amorphous condition associated with post-nationalism'. Iranian-American authors have crossed national borders and express their experience of being in-between two nations. With their literature they not only describe a physical move, but also formulate the differences between two cultures. Locating a corpus of Iranian-American literature within Apter's translation zone means critical engaging with the possibility and impossibility of its textual and cultural translation to a Western reading audience.

Chapter 2

'Hazard the Distances': Iranian-American Women's Memoirs and the Critical Responses

Azar Nafisi is an Iranian-American academic and writer. She was born and raised in Tehran, but she left to study abroad in Europe when she was thirteen years old. She went to the US in 1972, where she studied English Literature at the University of Oklahoma. In 1979 she moved back to Iran and became assistant professor in the English Department at the University of Tehran. After eighteen years, in 1997, she left Tehran again and she is currently a professor at the Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies in Washington. She is a specialist in aesthetics, culture and literature, and teaches courses on the relation between culture and politics. Nafisi has written about her personal experiences during the years in Tehran in her well-known book *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books* (2003). The book became a bestseller; it was translated into 32 languages and won several literary awards.

However, Nafisi's memoir also became the center of discussion when several critics argued that her story expresses a Western-oriented ideology. As Amy DePaul writes in her article 'Re-Reading *Reading Lolita in Tehran*' (2008): 'in a variety of ways, *Reading Lolita* offers a justification for the Bush administration's war on terror and, by extension, its current campaign against Iran' (76). Anne Donadey and Huma Ahmed-Ghosh even conclude in their article 'Why Americans Love Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran'* that when Nafisi's book is 'read solely in a U.S. context the memoir comes dangerously close to confirming a set of stereotypes about Islam' and that the memoir contributes to 'justifying further foreign military intervention and U.S political dominion over the world' (643-644). In *Jasmine and Stars: Reading more than Lolita in Tehran* (2007), Fatemeh Keshavarz interprets *Reading Lolita in Tehran* as a 'New Orientalist narrative'. These critical responses are concerned with the way Nafisi represents Iran in a country in which a stereotyped doctrine of Iran as one of the 'Axis of Evil' prevails. Hamid Dabashi even claims in his book *Iran: A People Interrupted* (2007) that Nafisi's book was published as

mere propaganda: […] soon after the "Axis of Evil" speech, […] Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, in collaboration with his chief Orientalist ideologue Bernard Lewis, helped Azar Nafisi publish and widely disseminate her *Reading Lolita in Tehran* in 2003, and thus set propaganda psyops against Iran into full gear' (238).

Reading Lolita in Tehran and its critical responses reflect the problematic relationship between Iran and America. Iranian-American author Jasmin Darznik writes in her article 'The Perils and Seductions of Home: Return Narratives of the Iranian Diaspora' about the way this criticism 'constitutes a pernicious outcome of contemporary military campaigns in the Middle East' (55), referring to Nafisi's memoir and Dabashi's critical response. Darznik writes that Iranian-American literature and its criticism reflects the current problematic relationship between the two nations:

> I would argue that Iranian-American literature suffers from a shakier and more embattled critical framework than even Arab American literature. And I use the phrase 'embattled' quite purposefully. Instead of textual analysis, we have accusations and insinuations, all served up in the very language of war. (55)

Darznik claims that Iranian-American literature is written and read within the 'embattled' context between the two countries. Darznik's formulation of reading Iranian-American literature 'in the very language of war' recalls Apter's idea of translation zones at war. The criticism of Nafisi's memoir emphasizes the way Iranian-American literature contributes to a further image of Iran as the Other, 'outside, excluded, aberrant, inferior, in a word *below*' (Said, 13-14).

The critical responses to Nafisi's memoir exclude any possibility of cultural exchange by reading *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, because they accuse the book of affirming prevalent stereotyped images of Iran as one of the 'axis of evil'. Other critical responses by Darznik and Karim explain that women's memoirs such as Nafisi's are an important part of Iranian-American literature and that this literature succeed in reflecting the transnational position of the writers. Darznik writes in her conclusion: 'These memoirs

speak finally, and most significantly, to the challenge of telling stories that hazard the distances' (70). Similarly, Karim observes in his article:

> Present in much of the writing by women are the tensions between Western and Iranian culture, between Islamic and, say, American culture and values, and the obvious desire to both maintain connections to Iran and Iranian culture and divorce the country from the prevailing view of the Islamic Republic today. (152)

With my analysis of *Reading Lolita in Tehran* I would like to emphasize on Darznik's and Karim's interpretation that Nafisi's memoir can 'hazard the distances'. By relinquishing from the critical responses, I want to argue that Nafisi's memoir is actually confronting the non-Iranian reader with the existing stereotyped images that exist of Iran in Western society.

Reading Lolita in Tehran tells the story of Nafisi's return to Iran in 1979 and her experiences until the day she left Iran in 1997. She describes this tumultuous period through her fulfillment of a dream, namely to gather seven of her best and committed students to discuss literature once a week. The theme of her class is the relation between fiction and reality: 'we did hope to find a link between the open spaces the novels provided and the closed ones we were confined to' (Nafisi, 19).

The relation between fiction and reality is not just the theme of the gatherings in the story, but the form and subject of the memoir is also about fiction and reality. The memoir itself, which takes the form of life narrative, is neither fiction nor nonfiction. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson write in their book *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narrations* (2001): 'A life narrative is not a novel, although calling life narrative "nonfiction," which is often done, confuses rather than resolves the issue' (7). Smith and Watson argue that there is a clear distinction to be made between life narratives, novels and historical documents. 'The convergence of authorial signature and narrator' (8) marks the difference between a life narration and a work of fiction, and while the narrators are referring to the actual world beyond the text, it also cannot be seen as a historical record. The complex position of life narratives, neither as fiction nor

as nonfiction, reflects the complicated level of truthfulness within the autobiographical pact between life narrator and reader. As Smith and Watson explain: 'autobiographical narrators establish for their readers a different set of expectations, a different pact, than the expectations established in the verisimilitude or suspension of disbelief of the novel or the verifiable evidence of biography and history writing' (12). Smith and Watson emphasize the 'intersubjective exchange' (13) of autobiographical truth and focus on the processes of exchange and understanding between life narrator and reader. They describe how autobiographical acts 'are rhetorical in the broadest sense of the word. That is, they are addressed to an audience/reader; they are engaged in an argument about identity; and they are inevitably fractured by the play of meaning (see Leith and Myerson)' (50). Smith's and Watson's description of the autobiographical act elucidates some rhetorical techniques of the life narrator to make this intersubjective exchange possible.

Nafisi addresses her memoir to a Western reading audience, engaging in an argument about how she struggles with her transnational identity. A passage at the end of the book illustrates this process, when her best friend 'the magician' (a character who's real existence Nafisi leaves aside: 'sometimes I ask myself, Was he ever real?' (341)) says to her:

> You used to talk about writing your next book in Persian. Now all we talk about is what you will be saying at your next conference in the U.S. or in Europe. You are writing for other readers. (283)

Reading Lolita in Tehran is written in America for 'other' readers and Nafisi explains her transnational position with the help of a frame of reference familiar to the Western public, namely well-known global masterpieces of literature. Nafisi links several Western masterpieces to the events she experienced in Iran. Nabokov's *Lolita* and *Invitation to a Beheading* are read as 'the confiscation of one individual's life by another' (33) reflecting Nafisi's experience of living under a totalitarian regime: 'At some point, the truth of

Iran's past became as immaterial to those who appropriated it as the truth of Lolita's is to Humbert' (Nafisi, 37). Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* exemplifies the time of the revolution where fiction, imagination and empathy, are confronted with the reality of the Islamic Regime. James's *Daisy Miller* and *Washington Square* remind Nafisi of Razieh, one of her students who was executed during this time. Finally, with Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* the rights for women and marriage in the Islamic Republic of Iran are discussed: 'The Islamic Republic has taken us back to Jane Austen's times. God bless the arranged marriage! Nowadays, girls marry either because their families force them, or to get green cards, or to secure financial stability, or for sex – they marry for all kinds of reasons, but rarely for love' (Nafisi, 258).

By writing a memoir the pact between writer and reader is based on intersubjective exchange, whereby Nafisi will use rhetorical literary techniques to express her complex experience of feeling at home neither in Iran nor in America. Her memoir describes her struggle with adapting to a country where she has to live under a totalitarian regime, being obliged to wear the veil, and where she cannot buy her favorite books anymore. She had been studying in Europe and America from a young age, thus when she returns to Iran she realizes how much she and her 'home' have changed:

> Not having registered as yet that the home she had left seventeen years before, at the age of thirteen, was not home anymore, she stands alone, filled with emotions wriggling this way and that, ready to burst at the slightest provocation. I try not to see her, not to bump into her, to pass by unnoticed. Yet there is no way I can avoid her. (81)

With her educational background in Western literature to frame her understanding of the events around her during the revolution and its aftermath, she creates a space where she and her students use fiction to cross the cultural and political blockades set by the Islamic regime. When Nafisi returns to America in 1997, she declares that 'I left Iran, but Iran did not leave me':

> I write and teach once again, on the seventh floor of a building in a town without mountains but with amazing falls and springs. I still teach Nabokov, James, Fitzgerald, Conrad as well as Iraj Pezeshkzad, who is responsible for one of my favorite Iranian novels, *My Uncle Napoleon*, and those others whom I have discovered since I arrived in the United States, like Zora Neale Hurston and Orhan Pamuk. And I know now that my world, like Pnin's, will be forever a "portable world." (341)

While Nafisi was in Iran, she gradually realized that she could not adapt to the Islamic regime and, although she now lives in America, she still experiences difficulties in adjusting to her new country. Her world is 'portable', moving between Iran and America. *Reading Lolita in Tehran* affirms her transnational position, writing a story that is first and foremost about finding out that she is at home in neither country, yet, linking together her society of origin and settlement in literature and with the writings of her own memoir. At the end of the memoir it becomes clear just how important literature is for Nafisi:

> To have a whole life, one must have the possibility of publicly shaping and expressing private worlds, dreams, thoughts and desires, of constantly having access to a dialogue between the public and private worlds. How else do we know that we have existed, felt, desired, hated and feared? (339)

This passage expresses the limitations she experiences when living in the Islamic Republic of Iran, where she could never have published such a critical memoir as *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. A work of literature can give rise to intersubjective exchange, which constitutes an understanding between the reader and the writer. Nafisi uses literature to frame her own understanding of the world, and writes her story in order to exist for other readers. She creates a life narrative in which the relation between fiction and reality is blurred on multiple levels, proving to her readers how the world is constantly constructed by fictional stories. Nafisi writes:

> We speak of facts, yet facts exist only partially to us if they are not repeated and re-created through emotions, thoughts and feelings. To me it seemed as if we had not really existed, or only half existed, because we could not imaginatively realize ourselves and communicate to the world, because we had used works of imagination to serve as handmaidens to some political ploy. (339)

In the case of Nafisi's memoir, the author immediately refers to the autobiographical act in the subtitle, 'A Memoir in Books' and to the autobiographical truth in the author's note: 'The facts in this story are true insofar as any memory is ever truthful, but I have made every effort to protect friends and students, baptizing them with new names and disguising them perhaps even from themselves, changing and interchanging facets of their lives so that their secrets are safe'. Both statements are contradictory, pointing at the same time to the level of fictionality and truthfulness of the memoir.

The theme of this indistinct relation between fiction and reality is also present in the following passage, which occurs on the first page of her story:

> She reminded me of a warning I was fond of repeating: *do not*, under *any* circumstances, belittle a work of fiction by trying to turn it into a carbon copy of real life; what we search for in fiction is not so much reality but the epiphany of truth. Yet I suppose that if I were to go against my own recommendation and choose a work of fiction that would most resonate with our lives in the Islamic republic of Iran, it would not be *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* or even *1984* but perhaps Nabokov's *Invitation to a Beheading* or better yet, *Lolita*. (3)

Nafisi begins her story by choosing *Lolita* as a work of fiction that would 'most resonate with our lives in the Islamic Republic of Iran' (3). This opens a referential framework in which Nafisi directly addresses the implied readers to answer their expected questions:

> I have asked you to imagine us, to imagine us in the act of reading *Lolita* in Tehran: a novel about a man who, in order to possess and captivate a twelve year old girl, indirectly

> causes the death of her mother, Charlotte, and keeps her as his little entrapped mistress for two years. Are you bewildered? Why *Lolita*? Why *Lolita* in Tehran? (35)

After this, Nafisi explains how she interprets Nabokov's *Lolita* and how she wants 'to emphasize once more that *we* were *not* Lolita, the Ayatollah was *not* Humbert and this republic was *not* what Humbert called his princedom by the sea. *Lolita* was *not* a critique of the Islamic Republic, but it went against the grain of all totalitarian perspectives' (35). I would like to argue that this passage exemplifies how Nafisi warns the Western readers for posing a 'totalitarian perspective', or an Orientalist framework onto their image of Iran. Nafisi's reading of *Lolita* not only pleads for the freedom to tell your own story, but also make the readers aware of how reality is constructed by fictional narratives:

> At some point, the truth of Iran's past became as immaterial to those who appropriated it as the truth of Lolita's is to Humbert. It became immaterial in the same way that Lolita's truth, her desires and life, must lose color before Humbert's one obsession, his desire to turn a twelve-year-old unruly child into his mistress. (37)

In opposition to the critical responses to *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, Nafisi is actually using the stereotyped doctrine that exists about Iran in the West in order to make a cultural translation possible. Her theme of the blurred relation between fiction and reality, present in every layer of her memoir, shows how perspectives are formed by narratives. Furthermore, she ends her memoir with the following letter she receives of one of her students:

> Five years have passed since the time when the story began in a cloud-lit room where we read *Madame Bovary* and had chocolate from a wine-red dish on Thurday mornings. Hardly anything has changed in the nonstop sameness of our everyday life. But somewhere else I have changed. Each morning with the rising of the routine sun as I wake up and put on my veil before the mirror to go out and become a part of what is called reality, I also know of another "I" that has become naked on the pages of a book: in a fictional world, I have

> become fixed like a Rodin statue. And so I will remain as long as you keep me in your eyes, dear readers. (343)

Nafisi constructs another narrative, one that acknowledges the totalitarian perspectives and power structures of reality in order to create a new imaginative outlook on Iran amongst Western readers. By articulating her own story she expresses an awareness about how Iran is seen through the Orientalist narrative, how 'they become a figment of someone else's dream' (37), and how she and her students need this fictional narrative to become alive through the existing stereotypes: 'Lolita on her own has no meaning; she can only come to life through her prison bars' (37).

Nafisi's memoir has become the center of a public discussion in which this argument is further elaborated. Smith and Watson write: 'Readers "consume" narratives along with other cultural stories. So their interpretations of and their responses to narratives are influenced by other kinds of stories in general circulation—in families, communities, regions, nations, diasporas.' (78). The critical reaction to Nafisi's memoir is a consequence of the stereotyped image about Iran that is caused by the American media. Although some critics dismiss *Reading Lolita in Tehran* of reaching any possible cultural exchange, some critics want to make the true facts about Iran known, and by publicly responding to Nafisi's memoir they enter a debate whereby readers can come to even a broader intersubjective and cultural exchange.

Not only do such memoirs deal with the transnational position of the writers, but the criticism of these memoirs is also an attempt to bridge the differences between Iran and America. Dabashi's *Iran: A People Interrupted* has as its goal to set the record straight: 'In this book I intend to challenge and discard the image that has been presented by people like Azar Nafisi and Fouad Ajami'. Similarly, Keshavarz tries in her critical response *Jasmine and Stars* to do likewise: 'the promise of my own narrative to take the reader more fully into the rich and complex world of the Middle East' (4). As a result of their criticism on Nafisi's memoir, Dabashi and Keshavarz create their own personal work to correct the prevalent stereotyped image of Iran.

Although Keshavarz disapproves of *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, I would like to argue that both works construct a transnational space where Iran and America are linked together. Moreover, they even use the same literary strategies such as narrating their personal experiences and analyzing works of literature. As a counter narrative to Nafisi's memoir, Keshavarz focuses on the 'jasmine and stars' and tries to translate her Iranian experience for a Western reading audience without confirming stereotypes.

Keshavarz's *Jasmine and Stars* is also a memoir about the transnational experience of being an Iranian-American. Keshavarz was born and raised in Shiraz and completed her studies in London. She moved in 1987 to America and became professor of Persian and comparative literature at Washington University in St. Louis. In 2007 she published *Jasmine and Stars: Reading More Than Lolita in Tehran*, which contains a critical analysis of *Reading Lolita in Tehran* while also attempting to construct a bridge between the West and Iran by giving a more complete image herself. With her book, Keshavarz wants to convince the Western reader that Nafisi's perspective does not construct a realistic image of Iran:

> This is what I am setting out to do. In *Jasmine and Stars*, I carefully and painstakingly weave a multihued tapestry of human voice and experience […] It is designed to be a meaningful excursion into modern-day Iran: a culture as charming, creative, humorous, and humane as any. A culture that has much to offer the world. (6)

In response to Nafisi, Keshavarz creates her own memoir and writes about her childhood in Iran. She uses rhetorical techniques to give a much more positive image of Iran. As she admits she wants focus on 'the good things':

> Too many good things fall through the cracks in many books written about the country of my birth and the people who nurtured me. So I have decided to write one that focuses on the good things, one that gives voice to what has previously been silenced or overlooked. (15-16)

After this, Keshavarz also explains the reason for her urge to write about her positive memories of Iran:

> Ideally, it should be easy to point to the stars or give you a handful of my jasmine so next time you think of Iran, you will remember things other than grasshoppers. But in fact it is not easy. The prevailing perceptions make it very hard for me to give you my gifts. It is as if a voice in the background, a master narrative, has told us how to imagine each other. That narrative has seeped into the fabric of our daily thoughts and the simplest of our interactions. To empower both of us to break out of that narrative is my challenge. (16)

This passage exemplifies the way Keshavarz writes for a Western readership, sharing her personal experiences of living in the United States as an Iranian-American. She argues how the existing stereotyped image of Iran, 'a master narrative', influences Western readers in their way of constructing Iran. By publishing a memoir and thus appealing to the rhetorical possibilities of autobiographical truth, her communicative exchange is based on convincing the reader of the beautiful aspects of Iran. Retelling experiences from her youth and analyzing an Iranian example of great literature (*Women Without Men* by Shahrnush Parsipur) are strategies to break down stereotyped blockades between America and Iran.

> The stories are my personal gift to you (and in some ways to me). Telling them in English, and celebrating the joyful memories they contain with you, transforms these anecdotes. You could say I remake them into little two-way bridges that keep my Iranian and American selves connected. In their new linguistic habitat, these memories will mingle and live side by side with other stories of my life forever. And who will deny that bridge building is the thing to do in this age of transnationalism fractured by the fear of terrorist acts and erroneous perceptions of each other? (109-110)

Jasmine and Stars exceeds its critical purpose and becomes a memoir of the same experience Nafisi describes, expressing the transnational position of an Iranian-American. Keshavarz even achieves a consensus with Nafisi about the 'transforming power of literature' (137):

> There was something I could praise RLT for: its attention to the rich tapestry of world literature. It had made an attempt to understand the human experience that transcends religious, social, and cultural boundaries. (22)

Nafisi's technique of using the referential framework of Western literature is appreciated by Keshavarz, since she too is a professor of literature and interested in using literature for transcending boundaries. Nafisi's memoir and Keshavarz's critical response contribute to a common goal, namely, to express their transnational perspectives and create a more complete image about Iran. Not only are women's memoirs an important part of transnational practice, their criticism also becomes part of building a social field in which the cultural borders between Iran and America are crossed.

Chapter 3

'Feel Out of Place': Cultural and Linguistic Hybridity in Iranian-American Return Narratives

Tara Bahrampour's *To See and See Again: A Life in Iran and America* (1999) and Azedeh Moaveni's *Lipstick Jihad: A Memoir of Growing Up Iranian in America and American in Iran* (2005) are similar in many aspects. Both memoirs are written by Iranian-American journalists and tell the story of their return to Iran. Darznik depicts these memoirs as 'return narratives' in her article 'The Perils and Seductions of Home: Return Narratives of the Iranian Diaspora' and she describes their parallel plots as following:

> Returning to Iran after an absence of years, these women must learn to navigate not only their own ambivalence toward traditional Iranian culture and the Islamic regime but also the hostilities and suspicions of "native" or "real" Iranians. Driven by the desire to fashion a coherent narrative of belonging by means of a physical return to Iran, the authors oscillate between tourist and native identities, never quite settling into either position, despite repeated attempts to do so. (57)

The so-called 'return-narratives' are written from an American point of view and deal with the difficulties of their experience of feeling an outsider in Iran, a perspective that is easier to follow for the Western reader.

Bahrampour's memoir recounts her experiences of moving between America and Iran from a very young age. She has a multicultural background, having an American mother and an Iranian father. She was born in Los Angeles and moved to Tehran when she was three years old. Shortly before the Iranian revolution in 1979, when Bahrampour was twelve years old, her family fled to America. She decided to return to Iran fifteen years later, as she declares in her memoir: 'I began to feel I was missing something that could only be found outside the United States' (205). However, her stay in Iran eventually leads to her return to America, as she writes:

> If I were to stay here I would probably be only partly satisfied. I would always feel I belonged; I would always feel glad to run into those old ladies who remembered the child my father was. But being away from America, I might also start to feel more American, more trapped. (342)

She concludes *To See and See Again* by describing herself and her family as neither 'as expats in Iran' (354) nor 'immigrants to America' (356). She is neither expat nor immigrant because there is no single place that is home for her.

Azedeh Moaveni's memoir *Lipstick Jihad* also expresses an identity of not belonging in either America or Iran. Moaveni was born in California and grew up in an Iranian diaspora community. Her grandparents moved to the United Stated for medical reasons in the mid-1970's. As she describes her parents' motive for subsequently coming to America, it becomes clear how her childhood was formed by the transnational activities of her family:

> In 1976, my parents married and came to the United States, with no fixed idea of staying forever, but a passing wish to be near my grandparents, lonely in their medical exile. The rest of the family, all their brothers and sisters, remained in Iran, intending to lead international lives traveling back and forth between Iran and the West, the twin poles of modernity and home. (7)

As Moaveni explains, although she grew up in America, her 'Iranian sense of self remained intact' (vii) and after graduating as a journalist she felt the urge to move to Iran: 'Soon I came to assume, with reckless confidence, that since I was Iranian, I would feel at home in the one place I was meant to belong – Iran' (28). However, Moaveni ends her memoir in the same way as Bahrampour: 'that the search for home, for Iran, had taken me not to a place but back to myself' (245). This self is, just like Bahrampour's identity, 'fated to be at home nowhere' (246).

Because these memoirs are recounting Bahrampour's and Moaveni's experienced feeling of strangeness during their return to Iran, the non-Iranian readers can also

slowly accustom themselves along with the narrators. Barhrampour's *To See and See Again* starts with narrating memories from a young age and is thus written from a child's perspective. This perspective makes it possible to explain very simple Iranian customs and symbols to the non-Iranian readers:

> "*Mashallah*," echoes the gold-tooth old lady.
>
> *Mashallah*. People always say it, and I used to think it just meant "good for you." But Baba told me it also means "may God not do it." May God not take this child away, or make him sick or weak; may God not leave him prey to the jinns who want to replace him with his twin, a jinn child who looks and sounds just like him but never gets any bigger, and dies before he can grow up. […] Whenever we speak or smile or wear new clothes – anything that is good – we get a *mashallah* and fingers laid on us to make sure the evil eye does not swoop down to take our goodness away. (44-45)

Such passages occur constantly during the first part of Bahrampour's memoir and help the reader grow along with the young narrator, learning about Iranian culture.

Moaveni's return to Iran takes place when she is much older, but also narrates her difficulty to understand certain differences:

> I lay awake at night, my old ideas about Iran shattered, with no new framework to understand any better what might happen. The society I had stepped into was precarious, that much was clear. One day, perhaps very near or very far, its current reality would collapse. But how would this happen, barring the bang of revolution? The uncertainty was transfixing, and I spend hours talking until I was hoarse, filling pages with notes, trying to understand. (37)

The main reason for Moaveni to return to Iran is to 'witness history' (35) being a journalist. The first tumultuous confrontation with Iran and her inability to fully understand the socio-political situation in Iran, becomes the main theme of her memoir. Gradually she realizes how, from an Iranian-American perspective, she fails to get used to Iran:

> But for me, new to all of this, spinning in outrage, there was nothing I needed more than to talk it all through, to release the anger in English, so that it did not stay welled up inside me. It was part of a building awareness that I had stepped into this Iran partly as Iranian, reading the grinds of coffee cups, burning *esfand* to ward away the evil eye, but also as an American, constricted by the absence of horizons (of so many sorts), genuinely shocked by the grim ordinariness of violence and lies. (88)

Moaveni is partly American and she formulates her impossibility to get adjusted to the cultural differences in Iran.

Bahrampour and Moaveni are not only reflecting their hybrid identities by telling stories about crossing geographical borders and explaining cultural differences, but also by allowing the actual translation to play an important role in their memoirs. A striking similarity between the two memoirs is the use of Farsi words in an English text. *Lipstick Jihad* begins with the sentence: 'It was so cool and quiet up in the *toot* (mulberry) tree that I never wanted to come down' (3). Similarly, numerous italicized Farsi words appear in the two memoirs. Using the same Farsi words multiple times, the English reader learns to understand the meaning of the original word and translation becomes unnecessary. This kind of 'nontranslation' was also present in the work of Spitzer, who wanted the reader to be confronted with linguistic strangeness to become aware of his 'profound respect for the foreignness of a foreign language – of foreignness as the sign of that which is beyond assimilation within language itself' (Apter, 2006, 62). Bahrampour's and Moaveni's 'untranslations' reflect their transnational position and exemplify how they are stuck in-between two languages themselves and their incapacity to transfer certain words from one language to another. Bahrampour writes about this inability to translate in *To See and See Again*:

> My Farsi life swims darkly below my English life. It surfaces whenever I talk to anyone who is not from my school or my immediate family. The more I speak it, the more I notice I've

> picked up words I don't remember having learned. In fact, there are some words I only know in Farsi, words my family uses no matter which language we are speaking. (50)

What follows is an enumeration of these 'untranslatable' Farsi words, such as *khash-khash*, *toot*, *joob*, *ghallian* and *taryak* (Bahrampour, 50). Bahrampour and Moaveni are not only using the original Farsi words to exemplify their own feeling of foreignness therefore, but also use the impossibility of translation as an important theme to express their position of 'feeling out of place everywhere' (Moaveni, 202).

To See and See Again, or '*deed-o-baz-deed*' in Farsi as the readers learn during the story, narrates Bahrampour's bilingual experiences from a very young age. Even Bahrampour's first name reflects the multicultural background of her parents and their future life in both Iran and America: 'But Mama said I should have a name that Americans could pronounce. Mama says I can be Taraneh in Iran and Tara in America and never feel strange in either place' (30). Bahrampour was three years old when she and her family moved to Tehran and already an English-speaker. She remembers the difficulties of learning a new language and writes about her first time in Farsi class: 'The teacher talks on, and soon I can't see her or anyone else because my eyes are brimming with tears' (49). Her acquisition of Farsi goes slowly and she explains how she and her brother are more aware of the sounds than the meaning of words:

> But I am even better at fake Farsi. Ali and I can make ourselves sound just like the Iranian TV broadcasters who string together unending chains of complicated words to announce the news. Deciphering them is impossible; instead, we make up Farsi-sounding sentences, keeping all the same pauses and inflections. (57)

The 'fake Farsi' of Bahrampour and her brother illustrate their encounter with a new language and their experience of its foreignness. Not yet capable of translating the words, they laugh about the unknown, funny sounds the Iranian broadcasters produce.

The notions of language and foreignness begin to change during Bahrampour's stay in Iran; likewise, there is a gradual shift in her conception of home. She describes her first encounter on the airport of Tehran as following: 'But I feel strange at this airport with the screaming women. I am tired and want to go back to my room in Brooklyn' (30). However, when she returns to America nine years later, Iran has become her home: 'I strained to look past the airport building at the gray swath of smog hanging below the charcoal sky – another day beginning over Tehran. This was my home' (116). In between this shifting conception of home, Bahrampour gradually describes her cultural hybrid identity. The turning point is marked by her story about the *Big Blue Marble*, a television show about children around the world. The show connects American children with foreign children by calling on them to write letters. She signs-up for a pen pal, in the hope of receiving a message from abroad: 'Walking home, I imagine the letters I will soon be getting, with strange, colorful stamps of their own' (70). It soon becomes apparent that her assigned pen pal is from America. She realizes that she is no longer considered American herself: 'And then it hits me. They think I am the exotic one' (71). After this, the narrating voice switches from an American identity to an Iranian self as she suddenly observes 'plenty of Americans just by walking around Tehran' (71).

In the next part of the memoir, Bahrampour becomes unsure whether her identity is American or Iranian. She illustrates this with the word '*gharb-zadeh* – "West-struck" – as if it is literally a Westernizing blow that strikes a person in the head and makes him forget who he is' (195). She declares herself to have been 'too Western to ever be called West-struck' but she states that lately she is maybe 'Iranian-struck' and she decides to return to Iran. When she arrives in Tehran, however, she has trouble entering the country because she has no Iranian passport and her bad Farsi affirms her foreignness. Again she is confronted with her level of Farsi: '"Why is her Farsi so bad?" the man in the booth asks suspiciously. He hands me another form that my neighbor fills out in an impossible scribble' (215). This passage illustrates once more the way Bahrampour connects language to her problematic self, a dislocated identity in between two nations and languages.

These kind of situations, that reveal the writers' sense of being 'out of place' through the use of language, are elaborated even further in *Lipstick Jihad*. Moaveni decides to go to Iran for journalistic reasons: 'the electric, bold debates in Iran, and the open battle for the country's future, were dream stories for a young journalist' (41). Because she is working as a journalist for *Time* in Iran, she is frequently interrogated by two agents she calls Mr. X and Mr. Sleepy. The first questioning ends with Moaveni's awareness of how her change of language expresses the fluidity of her national identity. During the interrogation she used 'we' to express herself as Iranian, but that evening during a conversation in English she used 'we' to express her American identity. She formulates her realization as following:

> In truth, the language I was speaking directed my reference points, invoking a set of experiences and accompanying beliefs particular to an American or an Iranian context. In Farsi, the kitchen-table politics of my childhood rumbled quietly in the back of my mind; in English, the countless tracts of philosophy and political science I had absorbed as a student. Depending on what I did on a given evening, the company I kept and what I ate for dinner, I could spend the night dreaming in either language. (52)

Moaveni was born in America but raised in an Iranian community, thus moving between two nations, contexts or languages seems to be uncomplicated. However, despite her transnational background, she will realize that she feels 'out of place everywhere' and during the memoir she encounters several difficulties trying to adapt to Iranian society. At the beginning of her stay in Iran, she expresses how much she want to be considered Iranian: 'If I felt alienated in America – considered to be from an imagined land of veils, harems, suicide bombers, and wrathful ayatollahs – the only fair compensation was that somewhere else I would be ordinary, just like everyone else' (108). Her stay in Iran makes her increasingly aware of her identity being in between two nations, not fully Iranian and also not fully American:

> As my sense of Iranianness simultaneously diminished and altered, my American consciousness grew – not in proportion to anything, or larger than before, but in my awareness of its existence. The more I tried to superimpose my Iranian identity on Iran, on the distresses and contours of my life there, the more I saw that it did not match up. In unguarded moments, the knowledge worked its way into me, until finally it became shiningly obvious: Of course I was partly American. (136)

Language becomes a part of her alternating identity when she describes her experiences with the difficulty of translation. She notices her struggles with Farsi and her incapacity to translate everything from English to Farsi: 'In the course of these halting monologues, I realized that some of my most integral parts resisted translation. It was only in not being able to transport them into another language that I saw how much they mattered' (68). The same applies when she tries to translate certain words of Persian poetry, 'but they stubbornly refused to be led into English' (241). At the end of *Lipstick Jihad* she explains her sense of national estrangement by using the example of this impossibility of translation:

> The urge to translate, this preoccupation with language I had dragged around with me, had been a resistance to the sense of foreignness I felt everywhere – a distraction from the restlessness that followed me into each hemisphere. If I could only have conquered words, purged from my Farsi any trace of accent, imported the imagery of Persian verse into English prose, I had thought, then the feeling of displacement would go away. Just as I didn't like to admit, even to myself, that the *shirini* here tasted better than in Tehran, I didn't want to accept that displacement was an inescapable reality of a life between two worlds. (243)

The main theme of Moaveni's memoir is this engrossment with translation; her attempt to become fully at home in Iran. However, her identity is formed by her transnational background and by experiencing the impossibility of translation she comes to terms with her displaced position.

Chapter 4

'A Love Story': Cultural and Linguistical Hybridity in Shahriar Mandanipour's *Censoring an Iranian Love Story*

In the last two chapters I have focused on Iranian-American women's memoirs because these autobiographical works form an important part of the Iranian-American literature. Karim writes in her recently published anthology *Tremors: New Fiction by Iranian-American Writers*: 'Iranian-Americans first made a major impact on the publishing world in the late 1990s with first-person memoirs, which documented their experiences in the United States and reflected the larger cultural and historical circumstances from which they came' (ix). However, while memoirs continue to be important, Karim has observed a shift from these autobiographical novels towards works of fiction: 'We believe the contributions of these Iranian-American writers suggest the charting of a new trajectory that pays homage to the past but also draw on new voices, new experiences, new languages, and a new sensibility that finds its most powerful expression in fiction' (ix). In light of this, I want to analyze Shahriar Mandanipour's *Censoring an Iranian Love Story* (2009), a fictional story about the writing of fiction.

Mandanipour was born in Shiraz in 1957 and moved in 2006 to the United States as fellow of the International Writers Project at Brown University. This project provides fellowships for authors who are unable to publish their works in their homeland because of political constraints. Mandanipour published his first story in Iran when he was only fourteen years old, but later experienced difficulties in publishing his work under the Islamic republic of Iran: between 1992 and 1998 he was unable to publish any work at all. His experience as writer in the Islamic republic is the main theme of his book *Censoring an Iranian Love Story*.

Censoring an Iranian Love Story is first and foremost a story about the writer Mandanipour, the first-person narrator, who is writing a love story. He explains the difficulties of being a writer in Iran: 'My dilemma is that I want to publish my love story

in my homeland … Unlike in many countries around the world, writing and publishing a love story in my beloved Iran are not easy tasks' (6). The narrator forms only one layer of the multi-leveled *Censoring an Iranian Love Story*. The actual love story the first-person author is writing, distinguished by the bold typography, is the diegetic level. Some sentences in the love story are crossed out, because the narrator has to adjust his story to the standards of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance to receive a publishing permit. Mandanipour continuously shifts his story from diegetic- to metadiegetic level, in order for the narrator to explain his writings for the non-Iranian audience. The following passage illustrates this alternation, but also the way the narrator jumps in to clarify his writings for the Western reading public:

> **"Oh! It's been a while since a bride this beautiful walked into my shop … what style are you looking for?"**
>
> **She puts an English-language catalogue in front of Sara. ~~All the bare-body parts of the models, including arms, legs and hair, have been obscured by a black Magic Marker.~~**
>
> I don't like to interrupt the progress of my story constantly to offer explanations. But it seems I have no choice. Some things, certain actions in Iran are so strange and outlandish that without explaining them it is impossible for an Iranian story to be well understood by non-Iranians. (183)

Implying that its readers will be 'non-Iranians' *Censoring an Iranian Love Story* thus informs those readers about the censorship and constraining laws of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The crossed-out sentences literally exemplify how an Iranian writer has to self-censor his work. Besides this explicit technique, Mandanipour describes numerous experiences of how censorship in Iran works. For example, he writes about his confrontation with the man responsible for checking literary works before they receive a publishing permit, 'a man with the alias Porfiry Petrovich (yes, the detective in charge of

solving Raskolnikov's murders)' (7). Or he writes about the 'person responsible for issuing screening permits', who 'was that famed blind censor' (89). It appears that the Islamic republic of Iran does not only censor literature and movies, but even the names that people give to their children. Mandanipour writes about Sinbad, the man who made a list of 'beautiful, meaningful Islamic names' (45), so that parents could only name their children properly according to this list.

The fictional multi-layered story provides space for the writer to offer direct explanations, in order to explain the history, culture and contemporary Islamic republic of Iran to the Western reader. *Censoring an Iranian Love Story* is written for a non-Iranian reading public, but the narrator is writing 'a love story' to be published in Iran. In this way, the real writer Mandanipour can use different kinds of references, symbols and metaphors throughout his book, because he is writing his love story for the Iranian reading public, creating self-censored passages with Iranian symbols and metaphors. With his multi-leveled story, Mandanipour creates a transnational reading experience, because the non-Iranian reader perceives a love story written to be published in Iran, while learning some Iranian symbols and references explained by the interrupting first-person narrator. At one point, the narrator addresses his readers:

> Now ask me how I hope to write and publish a love story, so that I can explain:
>
> I think because I am an experienced writer, I may be able to write my story in such a way that it survives the blade of censorship. In my life as a writer, I have come to learn Iranian and Islamic symbols and metaphors very well. I have also plenty of other tricks up my sleeve that I will not divulge. (9)

While reading *Censoring an Iranian Love Story* the non-Iranian reader is being introduced to the Iranian revolution of 1979, its sociopolitical consequences, Islamic propaganda and censorship, famous Persian mystical poems such as *Khosrow and Shirin*, and symbols like pomegranates. Non-Iranian readers become familiar for example, with the changes and propaganda arising from the Iranian revolution of 1979 when the first-

person narrator names his main characters of the love story, Sara and Dara. Their names are a reference to two characters in first-year Iranian schoolbooks that were metamorphosed into Islamic characters after the revolution:

> Well, a few years after the revolution the revolution's victory, in first-year reading books, there was a headscarf covering Sara's black hair and a long black coverall hiding her colorful clothes. Dara was not old enough to grow a beard, therefore only his father had one. According to our religious teachings, a Muslim man must have a beard and must not shave his face with a razor lest he look like a woman. (11)

These characters are well-known to an Iranian reading audience, but Mandanipour explains these symbols thoroughly to the non-Iranian reading public.

By explaining these Iranian stories he appeals to the reader's imagination by mixing Iranian references with well-known Western references, for example when he is retelling the story of Khosrow and Shirin:

> By nightfall, completely drunk, he waits for Shirin to walk through the doors of the nuptial chamber bathed, made-up, perfumed and wearing a negligee that the trend setting Victoria's Secret has yet to dream up … Imagine the nuptial chamber, not with your own strong and scientific imagination, but with the unscientific and idiotic imagination of a film such as Oliver Stone's *Alexander*. (22)

The first-person narrator Mandanipour is constantly making these kinds of comparisons that contribute to the ironic and paradoxical tone of story. Mandanipour is writing an Iranian love story while censoring it in order to get it published in Iran and, offering critical comments to his non-Iranian readers.

Although *Censoring an Iranian Love Story* could never be published in Iran and immediately translated into English by Sara Khalili, the original story is written in Farsi, which contributes furthermore to the paradoxical theme of the novel. The real writer Mandanipour left Iran because he could not get his work published. He writes *Censoring*

an Iranian Love Story in Farsi, although he is clearly writing for a non-Iranian audience. The original text is thus unavailable for a non-Iranian reader. Mandanipour thematizes linguistic and cultural translatability by the paradoxical use of language and the ironic comparisons of the first-person narrator. The use of these paradoxical literary techniques can be exemplified by the following passage:

> **The perpiration of *vessāl*** (union, realization, attainment) **has yet to seep from the pores of their bodies'imagination . . .**
>
> The word *vessāl*, in the ages-old Iranian literature, has many explicit and implicit religious, mystic, amorous and sexual connotations and hence is not translatable. A Sufi, after much self-discipline and worship can "attain", or *vessāl*, with God. A lover who has suffered can after years "unite", or *vessāl*, with his beloved. A story writer too can "achieve", or *vessāl*, a good story. I therefore don't think Mr Petrovich will be too exacting when it comes to this word. Though I suspect that the words "perspiration" and "pores" will likely make our readers sweat, and the word "imagination" will direct them to other implicit suggestions. (57)

It is a very strange experience to read this passage when knowing the original story has been written in Farsi. It analyzes the meaning of an original 'untranslatable' word in Farsi, while the other words are being translated in English without a problem. *Censoring an Iranian Love Story* makes the reader realize how cultural translations are being complicated, not only by the use of another language, but also by the writers way of explaining all these cultural differences to a non-Iranian reader.

With his novel *Censoring an Iranian Love Story*, Mandanipour creates a transnational experience for the reader. While Mandanipour makes a lot of cultural and political aspects of Iran understandable for a non-Iranian reader, he paradoxically writes his story in Farsi which is thus not accessible for his reading public. Together with his ironic and critical tone, Mandanipour confronts the reader both with the limits and the possibilities of linguistic and cultural translation in his novel.

Conclusion

'In the Translation Zone'

I began my thesis with a visual introduction to Iranian-American literature, giving examples of photographs made by the Iranian-American artist Shirin Neshat. Her artwork exemplified her transnational position, but also reflected the limited position of the audience, who are not capable of seeing the complete image or of understanding the Farsi inscriptions of her work. These two conflicting sides of Neshat's artwork are also present in the corpus of Iranian American literature. Nafisi's memoir and its criticism illustrates how a personal story of transnational identity evolves into a public debate about the possibility of translation within an already stereotyped Western context. The return narratives of Bahrampour and Moaveni show how language plays an important part in the forming of a transnational identity. Mandanipour thematizes translation and untranslatability in his paradoxical story about the writing of fiction. All these works of literature give expression to the transnational position of the writers, but also reflect the difficulties of writing for a non-Iranian reading audience. The writers use literary techniques to let the reader understand their experience of being in-between two nations.

According to my analysis, the corpus of Iranian-American literature can be defined as being situated into Apter's 'translation zone'. This literature creates a zone that is 'neither the property of one nation', because it expresses the transnational position of the writers, 'nor an amorphous condition associated with post-nationalism', because the authors are also expressing a deep connection with these two particular nations.

In my analysis I have discussed first and foremost the expression of the writer's transnational position, but also the literary techniques used to create an understanding of their transnational experience on the part of non-Iranian readers. For example, Nafisi and Mandanipour use a familiar Western framework to explain several Iranian references to the readers. However, the writers also uses untranslatability to remind the reader of

the unbridgeable differences between America and Iran. For instance Bahrampour, Moaveni and Mandanipour uses Farsi as literary technique to reflect untranslatability. According to Apter, using the original language contributes to the readers' confrontation with 'linguistic strangeness' (2006,61). It enhances their understanding of the impossibility of complete translation, according to Apter's: 'nothing is translatable'.

The writers' attempts to translate and their difficulties in doing so leads to my main point. The corpus of Iranian-American literature, seen in Apter's model of the 'translation zone', can occupy a unique position within the meta discussion of world literature and transnational literary studies. The particular position of this literature forms a zone in-between two nations, where translation is made possible by the expression of the transnational position of the writers. It confronts readers with personal experiences, translation and non-translations, creating an intersubjective exchange about a transnational experience. Their transnational position is expressed in works that give readers access to a space in which experiences and identities are moving across two nations. Iranian-American literature forms a new zone, in which stories contribute to world literature because it is positioned between real and imagined borders.

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