

Persian Diasporic Novels
An Analysis of Farnoosh Moshiri's *Against Gravity*

Judith Jongenelen

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Supervisor: Dr. A.A. Seyed Gohrab

Second reader: Dr. G.R. van den Berg

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INTRODUCTION

Introducing his book on exiles and émigrés in 1970, Terry Eagleton wrote: “If it is agreed that the seven most significant writers of twentieth-century English literature have been a Pole, three Americans, two Irishmen and an Englishman, then it might be agreed that the paradox is odd enough to warrant analysis.”¹ This paradox is as relevant today as it was then as an ever increasing part of the world’s population is in exile. History has shown that exile and immigration are powerful sources of inspiration for cultural production. Sharing Eagleton’s interest in the presence and influence of foreign writers in the literature of a society, I focus my research on Iranian writers contributing to the twenty-first-century’s literature of the United States of America. If literature is as much a “phenomenon transcending linguistic, national, and ideological categories” as a means of reflection on particular social and historical issues, then what can this literature tell us about the society it reflects upon?² Through a thorough analysis of a case study – Farnoosh Moshiri’s novel *Against Gravity* – my research aims to explore a twofold question: how, through its various characters, does this novel approach the notion of ‘home’? And how does this novel relate to a larger framework of Iranian migrant literature, existing mostly of memoirs? Tracing these broad questions through narratological elements of the story I hope to be able to contribute to a better understanding of the fascinating paradox of exilic literature: self and the other, foreign and familiar, outside and inside, home and away.

¹ Terry Eagleton, *Exiles and Émigrés: Studies in Modern Literature* (New York: Schocken Books, 1970), 9.

² Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak, “Iranica heirloom: Persian literature,” *Iranian Studies* 31, no. 3-4 (1998): 531.

Iranian diasporic literature

Persian literature is one of the world's oldest literary traditions and the culture of modern-day Iran is deeply rooted in this literary history. Over the last thirty years many Iranians have left the country – sometimes willingly but many times out of necessity – taking their traditions and culture with them. The reality of living in one country while remaining deeply attached to another to which one is unable or unwilling to return, has shaped the cultural production of the Iranian diaspora, which has grown immensely after the Iranian Revolution of 1979. Both established and neophyte Iranian writers started to write and to articulate their experiences of exile, producing a quickly expanding body of work that touches upon different aspects of living in exile. Their increasing visibility in the cultures of their host countries can for the most part be explained by the 1979 Revolution and the subsequent regime that left little room for opposition – making cultural production such as writing poetry, literature, and plays a dangerous occupation. Increasing numbers of Iranians thus fled the country to settle elsewhere, particularly in Europe and the United States. Many of these ‘first generation’ Iranian émigrés believed that their stay abroad would be temporary, and that they would be able to return home after the removal of the Islamic Republic. It soon became clear that their stay would be much more permanent than expected. As mentioned before, one of the primary ways to process and articulate existence in exile has been to write. For exiled Iranians, writing is a way to reconstruct and “regain their subjectivity by constructing a new sense of home”.³

Post-revolutionary literature and poetry written outside of Iran has proliferated in the last thirty years, creating a vast and diverse body of diasporic literature, largely written in Persian. Perhaps the most well-known example from this group is Bozorg Alavi (1904-1997), who went into exile in Germany and continued to write in Persian. But Iranian diasporic literature also includes work written in languages other than Persian, as “language is not the

³ Sanaz Fotouhi, “Unhomeliness and Transcultural Spaces: The Case of Iranian Writing in English and the Process of Re-Representation,” *Literature & Aesthetics* 20, no. 1 (2010): 83.

sole link to a cultural and literary heritage”.⁴ The use of English by authors of the Iranian diaspora has steadily increased. The production is concentrated mostly in the United States, where the largest number of Iranians outside of Iran currently resides. Some examples of highly successful authors of autobiographical works are Firoozeh Dumas, Azar Nafisi, Azadeh Moaveni, and Farnoosh Moshiri. I will discuss their work in more detail and in relation to Moshiri’s work in chapter one.

Besides North America the Iranian diaspora has also settled in European countries such as France, Germany, the Netherlands, the U.K., and Austria. According to Houra Yavari the contemporary history of authors in Europe writing in another language started in French with Amineh Pakravan (1890-1958), author of biography and fiction such as *Le prince sans histoire* (1948) and *Destinées persanes* (1960).⁵ A more recent and highly successful author is Marjane Satrapi, whose autobiographical graphic novel *Persepolis* was originally published in French in 2000, and has been translated in more than forty languages. An animated film adaptation was released in 2007.⁶ In England London-based singer and writer of autobiographical fiction Shusha Guppy (1935-2008) contributed to the diasporic literature with several works including *The Blindfold Horse* (1988), and *A Girl in Paris* (1991). In the Netherlands Kader Abdolah has been writing in Dutch since 1993, when *De Adelaars* was first published, and has since published numerous novels and short stories. Within this diverse literary expressions of the Iranian diaspora, Farnoosh Moshiri has established herself in the

⁴ Nasrin Rahimieh, “The Quince-Orange Tree, or Iranian Writers in Exile,” *World Literature Today* 66, no. 1 (1992): 40.

⁵ Houra Yavari, in *Encyclopædia Iranica*, s.v. “Fiction by Persians in Non-Persian Languages”, Available at <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/fiction-iif-in-non-persian-languages> (accessed 22 June 2015).

⁶ For an exhaustive study of cultural exchange between France and Iran in general and *Persepolis* in particular, see Laetitia Nanquette’s *Orientalism Versus Occidentalism: Literary and Cultural Imaging Between France and Iran Since the Islamic Revolution* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2012). This study should be seen in light of the tradition of cultural exchange and reflection between France and Iran in which the former tended to use the latter as a “means of social, political, and religious self-criticism”, as expanded upon in J. Duchesne-Guillemin’s entry in *Encyclopædia Iranica*: s.v. “France ix. Image of Persia and Persian Literature Among French Authors”. Available at <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/france-ix> (accessed 10 August 2015).

United States as an author who blurs the line between autobiography and fiction, which subtly distinguishes her from other contemporary authors.

Iranian authors in the U.S.A.

Iranian authors in the United States have gained more commercial and scholarly attention over the years. Although numbers of Iranian émigrés into America vary in different sources, it is telling that a part of Los Angeles has been nicknamed “Tehrangeles” or “Little Persia”.^{7,8} Although the 1979 revolution soon afterwards sparked an ‘unprecedented literary productivity’ inside the borders of Iran, the increase of diasporic literature in the U.S. only really started in the late 1990s and early 2000s.⁹ There was a growing market for this cultural production, especially for the first-person life narratives that proliferated¹⁰, but also for works of fiction (novels, short-stories). One possible explanation for this growing output and interest is the change in Iranian-U.S. relations. In Iran of the 1990s the large youth population began to express more and more “secular behavior and an admiration for Western popular culture”.¹¹ President Rafsanjani (1989-1997) sought to boost Iran’s economy by ending its diplomatic isolation and improving relations with the West.¹² Rafsanjani’s commitments to a more open foreign policy and better integration in the world economy were continued by his successor, President Khatami (1997-2005), who tried to enhance Iranian-U.S. relations by appearing in a

⁷ Payvand mentions numbers as low as 289,465 and as high as 919,168, based on the yearly American Community Survey (ACS) and the Decennial Census. See: Hossein Hosseini, "Iranian-Americans and the 2010 Census: Did We Shrink?" (2012). Available at <http://www.payvand.com/news/12/may/1170.html> (Accessed January 6, 2015); Shirin Hakimzadeh and David Dixon, "Spotlight on the Iranian Foreign Born," <Migrationpolicy.org> (2006). Available at <http://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/spotlight-iranian-foreign-born/> (Accessed January 6, 2015).

⁸ For an humorous and insightful article about “Tehrangeles” see < <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-19751370>>

⁹ Marie Ostby, Review of *Tremors: New Fiction by Iranian American Writers* by Anita Amirrezvani, and Persis M. Karim, eds. *Iranian Studies* 48, no. 2 (2015): 308.

¹⁰ Anita Amirrezvani, and Persis M. Karim, eds. *Tremors: New Fiction by Iranian American Writers* (University of Arkansas Press, 2013), ix.

¹¹ William L. Cleveland, *A History of the Modern Middle East*. 4th ed. (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 2009), 535.

¹² Ibid.

CNN interview, where he voiced the necessity of a dialogue between Iran and the U.S. – arguably an important motive was to lessen the force of the U.S.’s sanctions program.¹³ These developments nuanced the monolithic image of Iran as a hostile country to some extent.

They coincided with a general interest in and popularity of memoirs in North America around the end of the 20th century, fueled by the accessibility of the genre, market demand, and a widespread confessional discourse in mass media.^{14 15} This period is the starting point for what Amardeep Singh calls a “wave of expatriate narratives”, and Persis Karim an “explosion of memoirs”.^{16 17} Among these narratives the so-called ‘life narratives’ have been most popular. I will elaborate on their popularity among women writers in the following section on women and literature, and highlight formal differences between biography, autobiography, and memoir in Chapter One.

The growing literary production of the Iranian diaspora is a means to reflect on and write about the changes in Iran and in the lives of those who left the country. Culture becomes very important for exiles and migrants as it is a connection to the homeland: “culture for exiles...is not just a trivial superstructure, it is life itself”.¹⁸ Within this notion of culture, literature can be seen as a means of constructing an individual and collective identity. Over time this identity engages with the dominant culture of the host country, leading to a more covert or internalized sense of life in exile.¹⁹ Persis Karim, a scholar and anthologist of Iranian American literature, has pointed towards an understanding that fiction is, as opposed

¹³ The United States and other countries have imposed comprehensive sanctions on Iran in various degrees since 1979, and new measures were added in 1996 under the Iran Sanctions Act (ISA). See < <http://www.state.gov/e/eb/tfs/spi/iran/index.htm> > for details. Accessed 18 March 2015.

¹⁴ Leigh Gilmore described this as a “memoir boom”. Leigh Gilmore, *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony* (New York: Cornell UP, 2001), 2.

¹⁵ Kathleen Kuiper, *Prose: Literary Terms and Concepts: Britannica Guide to Literary Elements* (New York: Britannica Educational Pub.: 2012), 322.

¹⁶ Persis M. Karim, ed., “Introduction.” In *Let Me Tell You Where I’ve Been: New Writing by Women of the Iranian Diaspora* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2006), xxv.

¹⁷ Amardeep Singh, “Republics of the Imagination,” *The Minnesota Review* 68 (2007): 147.

¹⁸ Hamid Nafici, *The Making of Exile Cultures: Iranian Television in Los Angeles* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 34.

¹⁹ Houra Yavari, “Post-Revolutionary Fiction Abroad,” *Encyclopædia Iranica*, online edition, 2012, available at <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/fiction-iie-post-revolutionary-fiction-abroad> (accessed on 22 June 2015).

to the memoir or life narrative, a more “matured” or “settled” genre – “lending itself more naturally to a community in flux or transition, in search of its own literary bearings.”²⁰ Through writing, Iranian authors in exile add to the existing cultural framework of their host country. By adding to that framework, they change it and it changes them. Both the works of fiction and the life narratives that have been produced by the Iranian diasporic community in the U.S. have proved to be successful in creating a space ‘in-between’, blending Iranian and American cultures and commenting on both from a unique position and perspective. Literature becomes a way to nuance and depoliticize the image of Iranians. Especially for the generation of Iranian-Americans that grew up in America without the lived experience of going into exile, literature is a way to “construct[ing] and perform[ing] an identity removed from the contemporary political scene”.²¹

Women and literature

Among the emerging authors outside Iran in general, and in the United States specifically, women have quickly become the most visible and productive. They have claimed their part of public space in an unprecedented manner, expressing their stories and experiences through poetry, life narratives, and fiction. Before the revolution, women did not have a large role in the Iranian literary tradition.²² This changed, on the one hand, because of the emphasis on “homegrown” Iranian culture, as Karim argues, ridding Iranian culture of Western influence. On the other hand, the changed conditions of women’s lives in exile brought a new attitude towards tradition and old taboos, which opened the door to a multitude of narratives by female authors. These narratives were written in the genre of the memoir and autobiography. These genres are characterized by their supposed truthfulness while offering

²⁰ Ostby, 308.

²¹ Persis M. Karim and Nasrin Rahimieh, “Introduction: Writing Iranian Americans into the American Literature Canon,” *MELUS* 33 no. 2 (2008): 8.

²² Persis M. Karim. “Reflections on Literature after the 1979 Revolution in Iran and in the Diaspora,” *Radical History Review* no. 105 (2009): 151.

insight into the history, memories, and feelings of an individual. These narratives became immensely successful in the U.S., some of the bestselling titles include *Funny in Farsi: A Memoir of Growing Up Iranian in America* by Firoozeh Dumas, *Lipstick Jihad: A Memoir of Growing Up Iranian in America and American in Iran* by Azadeh Moaveni, and of course *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books* by Azar Nafisi.²³ Darznik argues that the success of these narratives are partly due to the voyeuristic aspect embedded in the life narrative. The reader can satisfy their curiosity of ‘the Other’ by peeking into their lives: “Iranian migrant literature has become a popular venue for “lifting the veil”.”²⁴ Arguably the popularity of life narratives has paved the way for other types of literature by women of the Iranian diaspora, to be recognized and published as well.

Concepts and characteristics of migrant literature

Despite the growing numbers of memoirs, autobiographies, and novels by Iranian-American women writers and the increased attention that media and scholars have for them, as of yet literary scholarship on the subject is relatively scarce.²⁵ Over the course of the last century a broad scholarly interest in non-Western cultures had developed, most notably postcolonial theory and criticism, which has resulted in diverse studies focusing on topics such as migrant writing, the status of the subaltern, Caribbean women’s writing, and Indian nationalism. Two concepts formulated in this framework that are relevant for examining migrant literature are ‘in-betweenness’ and ‘transculturalism’. Propagated in postcolonial and subaltern studies, the terms ‘in-between’, transculturated space, and ‘contact-zone’ are characterized by interaction and mutual exchange between cultures. Mary Louise Pratt, a

²³ More examples of Iranian memoirs include Gelareh Asayesh’s *Saffron Sky: A Life Between Iran and America*, Afshineh Latifi’s *Even After All This Time: A Story of Love, Revolution, and Leaving Iran*, Tara Bahrapour’s *To See and See Again: A Life in Iran and America*, and Roya Hakakian’s *Journey from the Land of No: A Girlhood Caught in Revolutionary Iran*.

²⁴ Jasmin Darznik, “Writing outside the veil: Literature by women of the Iranian diaspora,” PhD dissertation, (Princeton University, 2007): 4.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 1.

scholar in Linguistics and Comparative Literature, uses the term ‘transculturated’ in this sense. She notes that the contact zone is a space “where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination”.²⁶ There is a utopian aspect to the concept of transculturalism that is rooted in the hybridity that it advocates. According to Wolfgang Welsch, a German proponent of transculturalism, cultures are no longer so distinctly different from each other that they form separated entities. Instead, “all the determinants of modern cultures have become transcultural”.²⁷ Thus transculturalism also signifies a conception of society and the individual as being culturally mixed, fragmented, and hybrid.

The reality of many cultures is often quite different: migrants, whether they are political refugees, economically motivated, or otherwise, are confronted with societies that seek to label and categorize them, and reduce them to a monolithic and essentialist stereotypes. Mirroring this process, exilic and migrant literature is filled with asymmetrical power relations, which indicates the preoccupation with subjectivity, identity, and power. Both the home and the host country exert influence on the migrant through various discourses. These are primarily communicated through stereotypes in news outlets and other types of media. For example newspapers headlining: ‘migrants stealing our jobs’, or ‘migrants corrupting our culture’ and so on. This reduces a multifaceted group to a monolithic ‘Other’.

An example relevant to Iranian migrants in the United States and elsewhere is the fact that George W. Bush declared Iran to be part of the “axis of evil” following the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in 2001. For exiled Iranians the stigmatization that resulted from these events was detrimental to their sense of belonging and identity. They had fled their country to escape the violent hegemony of the Islamic regime, and now they were being reduced to a monolithic, stereotypical ‘terrorist’ by their host country. This has resulted in so-

²⁶ Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992): 4.

²⁷ Danielle Dumontet and Frank Zipfel, *Écriture Migrante/ Migrant Writing* (Olms: Hildesheim, 2008), 7.

called ‘hypervisibility’, which reduces chances of being seen and represented as individuals. ‘Invisibility’ on the other hand is the other side of the coin and is described by Sanaz Fotouhi as “a prolonged lack of recognition from their host countries, particularly in the face of political tensions between Iran and the West”.²⁸ This, too, can result in a lack of power and recognition.

Features of the Language

Language is another factor of importance in the process of transculturation. Migrants are required to adopt the language of their host country, at least up to a certain degree. To create literature and poetry in English rather than Persian signifies the adoption of English as a mode of expression, not just communication. This also means tapping into the cultural framework that is associated with it. Examples are the use of culturally specific references, metaphors, genre, and conventions. In this way, language becomes a way to take a position as part of the host country. It asserts a ‘sameness’ that allows people to be perceived as more part of ‘us’ than part of ‘them’. As Fotouhi mentions, using the English language as a medium of expression can be an important part of successfully integrating into the host country and it also enables the migrant to “[negotiate] a new space of belonging”.²⁹ This is especially true for writers, as it determines who their audience will be. On the one hand, choosing English over Persian means no longer writing for a Persian-speaking audience alone and exploring a whole new public. On the other hand, it may also explicitly cut the writer off from the homeland. As Rahimieh argues, writers who choose to write in a second language “seem to accept the disruption of exile, recognize their discarded identity, and embark upon creating a new one.” But this disruption can never be absolute, she adds, because “the new persona they

²⁸ Fotouhi, 85.

²⁹ Ibid.

create for themselves is determined by remnants of the old”.³⁰ This creation of a new individual and collective identity through language and literature is always in motion, negotiating and engaging with the dominant culture and becoming more and more intertwined.

Background of Narratological Theory

To examine the way *Against Gravity* engages with the working of power relations, discourse, and subjectivity I will employ a set of tools that is known in literary theory and cultural analysis as ‘narratology’. Looking at the roots of this concept, its utility as well as its limitations become visible. Originating in a structuralist approach of language and literature, narratology takes ‘story’ as its object of study and tries to detect recurrent elements that form the structure of ‘story’.³¹ Analyzing and interpreting formal elements of a narrative text such as plot, structure, setting, character, themes, and language can help the reader or critic to detect parallels, echoes, reflections, repetitions, contrasts, and patterns. Taken together, these can be used to say something meaningful about a specific narrative as well as about ‘story’ in a more general sense. While structuralist thinkers see ‘text’ as a closed entity that holds meaning – to be deciphered or unlocked by the critic – the post-structuralist movement emphasizes the plurality of meaning in text: “[i]t is language which speaks in literature, in all its swarming ‘polysemic’ plurality, not the author himself. If there is any place where this seething multiplicity of the text is momentarily focused, it is not the author but the *reader*”.³²

In this discourse, language is a system of signs that does not itself represent meaning, but to

³⁰ Rahimieh, “The Quince-Orange Tree”, 40.

³¹ Structuralism as a discourse emerged in 1950s France. In structuralism the ‘text’ is approached through context, variation, and relation. Literature is a closed system in which certain structures can be recognized. It is connected to the language theory of semiotics that sees language not as the *conveyor* of meaning but as the *producer*. Meaning is arbitrary and therefore differs depending on context. By comparing objects and their contexts, new layers of meaning and significance can be found. Narratology branched from structuralism and studies the nature of ‘story’ as a structure rather than individual narratives, and values study of the process of telling rather than what is told.

³² Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), 120

which meaning is asserted in a contextually and culturally specific manner. For the post-structuralist movement, all notions of a ‘system as a whole’, ‘truth’, or ‘the real’ are suspect because they affirm the existing dominance of a powerful, repressive system.

Deconstructing a text

How should texts be approached, then, if not as systems of meaning or carriers of truth? Post-structuralist thinkers began to focus on examining elements in text that could serve to unmask it as a whole. This practice is called deconstruction: the “critical operation by which [binary] oppositions can be partly undermined, or by which they can be shown partly to undermine each other in the process of textual meaning”.³³ One of the most important post-structuralist thinkers and forces behind the method of deconstruction was the French literary critic Jacques Derrida (1930-2004). Derrida advocated a political practice of deconstruction and sought to “dismantle the logic by which a particular system of thought, and behind that a whole system of political structures and social institutions, maintains its force”.³⁴ It is this notion of engagement with text that I also find important for contemporary literary analysis: a text is not a closed entity but can be read and interpreted depending on the reader. The meaning ascribed to the text is in theory indefinite, but is in practice delimited and framed by existing systems of thought and power. Once we are aware of such a system being at work, we can better see how it ‘works’ and what it ‘does’. The following sentences are focalized by Roya: “In America almost everything is a deal. Even when you’re receiving the kindness of your best friends you should never forget that one day you’ll have to pay this back” (175). The opposition that is evoked here is that of economic systems: the American neoliberal capitalism in which supposedly even friendships are commodified, and a counterpart that values trust above monetary value. Roya is presented as representative of this ‘other’ system, she does not see herself as part of the American value system. By extension it can be argued

³³ Ibid, 115.

³⁴ Eagleton, *Literary Theory*, 128.

that Roya has internalized the self-other binary that underlies most thinking about migrants: she seeks to place herself outside the system but at the same time she is dependent on it. By analyzing text in such a way we can gain insight in the interplay of various discourses that produce meaning and power.

Focalization

Mieke Bal, an influential cultural and literary theorist, defines narratology as “the ensemble of theories of narratives, narrative texts, images, spectacles, events; cultural artifacts that ‘tell a story.’”³⁵ This provides a set of tools, a system of workable definitions of textual description that is able to define elements of a narrative, making it possible to compare and analyze them. Bal distinguishes three concepts concerning narrative text:

A narrative text is a text in which an agent or subject conveys to an addressee a story in a particular medium (...). A *story* is the content of that text, and produces a particular manifestation, inflection, and ‘colouring’ of a *fabula* (...). A *fabula* is a series of logically and chronologically related events that are caused or experienced by actors. (Bal, 5)

The narrative, and thus also the fabula and story, is always mediated and interpreted as it is produced by a particular speaker in a particular place and time. In other words, in the telling of any story a vantage point is necessarily present that ‘filters’ meaning by prioritizing certain elements and omitting others. This concept is called focalization. Michael Toolan, after the French structuralist literary theorist Gérard Genette, defines focalization as the “inescapable adoption of a (limited) perspective in narrative, a viewpoint from which things are seen, felt,

³⁵ Bal, *Narratology*, 3.

understood, assessed”.³⁶ Bal defines focalization as “the relation between the vision and that which is ‘seen’, perceived”.³⁷ The way we perceive things depends on what we already know and have seen and is therefore very subjective. An analysis of focalization in a story can highlight for example dominant discourses, what kind of opinions and outlook are assumed to be normal or marginal, and what is implicitly conveyed to the reader when characters behave in a certain way. Focalization can be done by various agents from an orientation inside or outside a text. A distinction is made between external and internal focalization. The former is located outside the story, meaning that “the orientation is not associable with that of any character within the text”, and the latter is located inside the story and as such is almost always done by a character-focalizer.³⁸ In this example from *Against Gravity* we know from earlier on in the text that Roya is the one who sees and interprets: “I saw him having a warm conversation with his daughter in his car. He was taking her to school, too” (129). Therefore this focalized scene enables us to see that Roya develops a jealousy towards her lover’s daughter in the car because she is wealthy and able to live her life easily and without worries, while Roya is not. This way we learn about her motives and her desires without having to be explained explicitly.

Time and Setting

Besides character and focalization two other elements that are central in narrative analysis are time and setting. It is a natural tendency of readers to construct a spatial and temporal textual reality based on narrative descriptions when reading. Both time and setting shape our perception of the narrative we are reading, and thus about the message it conveys. The duration of scenes can give clues about the significance of a scene, for example by stretching an action or conversation beyond what was to be expected. It can also mislead the reader by

³⁶ Michael Toolan, *Narrative: A Critical Linguistic Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1988), 69.

³⁷ Bal, 145-146.

³⁸ Toolan, *Narrative*, 69.

skipping over crucial information, a well-known technique in detective stories and thrillers. Setting can be just a backdrop for the story to be set and nothing more, but it can also have a more explicit role in the narrative. The reader knows that an abandoned and decrepit house in a horror story almost certainly means danger, while the endless green lawns of the suburbs symbolize the outgrowths of American capitalism.

It is possible for a novel to span decades, but also just a few hours in one day. The way time is represented in text thus has implications for the construction of the fabula. Are the events chronologically ordered or are they cut up using narrative devices such as flashback? Is the time allocated to certain events logical, or is time accelerated, delayed, interrupted? Both repetition and omission of an event in a fabula can point to its significance, as both draw our attention to the fact that the narrative deviates from the temporal reality we had imagined. Narratives that deal with trauma can depict the reality as temporally fragmented using flashbacks and blackouts, effectively immersing the reader in the unbalanced reality of the narrative. In *Against Gravity* the characters' traumatizing histories are introduced in a fragmentary manner, showing the pervasiveness of trauma in how it becomes part in everyday life.

Regarding place or setting Bal argues, after the Russian critic Lotman, that the reader will always imagine a location for the action they read about, whether it is provided or not. This is because of the "predominance of the dimension of space in human imagination". In literature on displacement or exile setting is especially important. The various places that become 'home' for Roya and Tala during their journey in *Against Gravity* are brought up over and over again as if to show the impossibility of letting go any of them. The places they lived in have become a part of their identity as migrants. Narratives of migration and exile often include a notion of an 'imaginary homeland' that exists in the mind of the migrant and can facilitate both a nostalgic romanticizing of the home country as well as act as a reminder that

the host country is truly the new 'home'. "[Migrants] remain 'in-between', living the intersection of histories and memories. Even when it seems the stay may be permanent, the imaginary homeland reminds them of the possible return".³⁹

Against Gravity displays a process of coming to terms with having to establish a new 'home'. There are many places of 'transition' Roya stays in, like the house in the desert town after leaving Iran, the refugee camp in Kabul, and the small apartment in India. These places are not just physical spaces but also acquire symbolic meaning, showing that exile is a process rather than a singular event. In Chapter Two both time and setting will be discussed in more detail.

³⁹ María Cristina Rodríguez, *What Women Lose: Exile and the Construction of Imaginary Homelands in Novels by Caribbean Writers* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2005), 11-12.

CHAPTER ONE: AUTHOR AND GENRE

Personal Life: Losing and Imagining

The Iranian writer Farnoosh Moshiri was born in 1951 in Tehran, during the turbulent years of the rise of Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddeq (1887-1967) and the subsequent coup d'état of 1953.⁴⁰ Her parents participated in protests to support Mosaddeq and his plans to nationalize the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC). The 1953 coup brought back Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi (1919-1980) as well as a repressive regime that tried its best to silence oppositional voices.⁴¹ Moshiri studied in Tehran and received a BA degree in dramatic literature in 1974. She continued her education in the United States, Iowa between 1977 and 1979 and received an MA degree in drama. In May 1979 she decided to skip her graduation ceremony in order to return to Iran and join the revolution to achieve independence. About this time Moshiri recalls the following event:

[H]undreds of demonstrations and rallies every day by different political organizations, young men and women passing out flyers, old and young carrying on fervent political debates in public places, and an unprecedented solidarity and brotherhood in spite of differences of ideology. People partied on rooftops every night and discussed the future of the revolution (Moshiri, personal essay)⁴²

This quote captures some of the excitement, hope, and plurality that marked the beginning of the Iranian Revolution. Various groups existed simultaneously and tried to achieve the same goal: to depose the Shah. During this time, Moshiri was “involved in many cultural and

⁴⁰ Interview with the author: “her father was a Marxist writer, both of her grandfathers were scholars of Persian poetry, and her uncle was a nationalist poet”. Interview with Laura Wright, *Fiction in Exile: An Interview with Farnoosh Moshiri*, *Minnesota Review* 68 (2007): 67.

⁴¹ Taken from a personal essay written by Moshiri and published on publishers website, <<http://www.beacon.org/The-Bathhouse-P483.aspx>> Accessed 16 March 2015

⁴² Ibid.

political activities” and, in a 2004 interview, describes herself as a feminist with Marxist ideas.⁴³ This position proved untenable a few years after the revolution, when the Islamic Republic of Iran, led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Musavi Khomeini (1902-1989), was established and oppositional voices were marginalized. Moshiri, as a leftist dramaturge, playwright and professor of literature, was labeled an ‘enemy of God’. In March 1983 Moshiri, together with most other professors of the college of Dramatic Arts where she was teaching, was ordered to ‘align herself with the new regime’. This meant, for example, filling out questionnaires on theological knowledge.⁴⁴ After refusing to cooperate, she was fired from her two jobs – her first play was in production at the time, but the arrest of her director and a number of actors “marked the end of [her] career as an Iranian playwright”.⁴⁵

Moshiri’s experiences with the regime are not unique: many other exiled Iranian women share similar stories. Two examples of these narratives by Iranian women writers, that have been very successful, are Azar Nafisi and Marjane Satrapi. Nafisi was a teacher of literature in Tehran who was either fired or resigned from three positions in different universities. She started an all-female book club with students and later wrote a book about it called *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books*, which became an enormous bestseller, first in the U.S. and later worldwide. Satrapi was sent away by her parents from Iran to Vienna to escape the volatile situation in Iran and continue her education. She wrote the immensely successful graphic novel *Persepolis*, an autobiographical account of life during the 1980s in Iran and abroad, seen through the eyes of her younger self. Like Nafisi and Satrapi, Moshiri has embraced culture and literature as ways to resist and undermine the power of the regime, and voice her experiences in a creative way.

⁴³ Interview with Joel Wendland, *Portrait of an Artist in Exile: An Interview with Farnoosh Moshiri. Political Affairs* (2004): np. <http://politicalaffairs.net/portrait-of-an-artist-in-exile-an-interview-with-farnoosh-moshiri/> Accessed 3 December 2014.

⁴⁴ See additional author’s information in *The Bathhouse*: “In March 1983 she was one of a group of actors and playwrights who were ordered to sign an agreement to obey the dictates of the new regime.” Farnoosh Moshiri, *The Bathhouse*. (Seattle: Black Heron Press, 2001), 183. And Moshiri’s personal essay: <<http://www.beacon.org/The-Bathhouse-P483.aspx>> Accessed 16 March 2015.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

In 1983, after many of Moshiri's colleagues and friends were arrested, she went underground and eventually decided to leave the country. Together with her two-year old son she fled Iran: first to Afghanistan, then on to India, and finally to the United States where she applied for and received political asylum. She settled in Houston, Texas where she began teaching English and creative writing at the University of Houston-Downtown (UHD). Since her arrival in the U.S. she has written and published a book of short stories and four novels, worked on an opera, and contributed to numerous anthologies and literary journals.⁴⁶ These biographical facts outline a personal history that is characterized on the one hand by the experience of loss, displacement, a being in-between cultures, and on the other by the process of creating, constructing and imagining.

These contrasting characteristics are also reflected in Moshiri's literary work, for example through language. Her literary works are written in English, and the inadequacy of language to express oneself is a central theme in all of them. Moshiri has made a conscious choice to write her literary works in English. Because she came into contact with the English language quite early on in her life, and had studied in the United States, she felt she could and had to make it work: "I wasn't a tourist here. The bridges were burned behind me and as a writer I needed readers. I didn't want to write for the Iranian community; most of them knew the stories I was telling. I wanted to address the American people".⁴⁷

The novels are mainly set in confined places in which characters lose their sanity, but also find ways to recover. Unlike Nafisi and Satrapi, Moshiri has to date not been hugely successful. Arguably the lack of immediate recognition has to do with the form of her novels, autobiography, memoir, and novel in one, the narrative shifting from the personal to the fictitious realm and blurring the boundaries of the genres in the process. Her work thus resists being easily labelled as a memoir by remaining slightly ambiguous.

⁴⁶ See the author's professional website: <http://farnooshmoshiri.net/#stories> Accessed 3 December 2015.

⁴⁷ Cited from an uncredited interview with the author, published on Beacon Press' website: <http://www.beacon.org/The-Bathhouse-P483.aspx#interview> Accessed 16 March 2015.

Genre: Writing and the Self

What are the main differences between the biography, autobiography, and memoir? And how are they perceived and used? All three genres are considered to be nonfictional, although the degree of factuality can vary. The biography is one of the oldest literary genres and narrates the life of an individual.⁴⁸ Similarly the autobiography, from the Greek words for self, life, and to write, is an account of the life of an individual narrated by the same individual. It is generally organized in a chronological way and can be more or less factual depending on the intention, however the autobiography is expected to be based on truth.⁴⁹ The memoir is closely related to the autobiography and therefore often used interchangeably. The main difference between the two is the focus or scope of the narrative. The memoir often includes “emphasis placed on external events; whereas writers of autobiography are concerned primarily with themselves as subject matter”.⁵⁰ The memoir is sometimes seen as a less serious genre than the (auto)biography because of its personal approach, arguably making it a less trustworthy genre.⁵¹ In Western literary tradition, the autobiography has been employed as a means to establish one’s identity and by extension that of the community.⁵² In light of this tradition autobiographies produced by migrant groups make perfect sense: uprooted from local or national identity, detached from a sense of place and home, writing one’s personal history can offer a sense of permanence and stability. It is therefore not entirely surprising that the autobiography has been the most important mode of expression for first and second generation migrant groups almost everywhere.⁵³ What is surprising is the prevalence of the

⁴⁸ Paul Kendall, “Biography: Narrative Genre,” *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (2013). Accessible online at <http://www.britannica.com/search?query=biography>

⁴⁹ Except for fictionalized autobiographies, a type that exists alongside the thematic, intellectual, and religious autobiographies. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, “Autobiography.” Accessible at <http://www.britannica.com/art/autobiography-literature>.

⁵⁰ *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, “Memoir: Historical Genre”. Accessible at <http://www.britannica.com/topic/memoir-historical-genre>

⁵¹ Julie Rak, “Are Memoirs Autobiography? A Consideration of Genre and Public Identity,” *Duke University Press* (2004): 306.

⁵² F.W. Korsten, *Lessen in Literatuur* (Nijmegen: Uitgeverij Vantilt, 2009) , 283.

⁵³ Darznik, 7.

autobiography even among groups without a prior tradition of the genre – the Iranian community in the United States is a case in point. The fact that the memoir has become much more popular among the Iranian diaspora and among women especially, as discussed before, perhaps means that it is perceived as more accessible and more readily achievable than an autobiography, which can be seen as more formal and exhaustive. The memoir thus offers a more suitable framework to present the episodic narratives of exile. A pitfall of the growing amount of memoirs by Iranian migrant writers is the almost unavoidable one-sidedness. These memoirs generally present one chapter of the life of the migrant, characterized by traumas like migration, violence, torture, and loss. The singularity of the subjects and events treated in the memoirs reinforce the existing discourse of ‘Othering’ the migrant. In other words: proliferation of life narratives may unintentionally serve to confirm a monolithic view of ‘Middle Easterners’ in Europe and North-America. However, already other forms of literary production, such as novels, short stories, poetry, and graphic novels, have been added to the canon of Iranian migrant culture. The following paragraph will elaborate on the similarities and differences in the approach of life narratives by three authors, Azar Nafisi, Marjane Satrapi, and Farnoosh Moshiri.

Different Perspectives on Autobiography – Nafisi, Satrapi, Moshiri

What do life narratives mean to Nafisi, Satrapi, and Moshiri and how do they approach to their ‘otherness’ in their respective works? By giving a comprehensive comparison of the approach or perspective these three authors take, Moshiri’s position as an author and part of the context of Iranian women writers should become a little clearer.

In Azar Nafisi’s bestselling memoir *Reading Lolita in Tehran* she narrates her years as a teacher of literature in Tehran. To be able to read and discuss the literature she thinks are important, she establishes a small reading group. With her memoir, the author seeks to

“connect people through books” and to use “literature as a bridge to cultural understanding and tolerance”.⁵⁴ The memoir was first published in the U.S. and is thus explicitly aimed at an American audience. Still it maintains an Iranian context by assuming detailed historical facts to be known and by failing to reframe cultural differences for an American audience. As Donadey and Ahmed-Ghosh have argued, it is precisely because of this lack of reframing that the American audience is “not provided with the historical and political tools to understand the text other than in western terms”.⁵⁵ Nafisi’s life narrative is thus meant as a way to connect cultures, using literature as a universal space for reflection. Although it has sold more than 1.5 million copies worldwide and has gotten many positive reviews, *Reading Lolita in Tehran* has also been criticized for its lack of nuance when dealing with sensitive subjects like the *hijab*, and the position of women in Iran. Perhaps the underlying assumption of the memoir, that Western literature is somehow ‘universal’ and therefore does not need to be embedded in context is what makes the author’s memoir less perceptive of the dangers of uncritical cultural translation than, for instance, Satrapi’s work.

Marjane Satrapi’s graphic novel or ‘graphic memoir’ *Persepolis* has been written from the point of view of a child, allowing her to include a lot of historical and personal background in the story in a ‘natural’ way. This makes it easier for her non-Iranian audience to identify with the characters they read about, lends *Persepolis* an explicitly pedagogical character. The author has stated that her intent has been to clear up misperceptions of Iran, and show people that Iranian cultural experiences can be seen within a more universal framework of growing up and finding your way, instead of a framework of terrorism and oppression. As Malek argues:

⁵⁴ Quotes taken from an interview with The Guardian and Goodreads, respectively. Goodreads. “Interview with Azar Nafisi (2009). Accessible online at http://www.goodreads.com/interviews/show/23.Azar_Nafisi; Viv Groskop, “Azar Nafisi: ‘Books are representative of the most democratic way of living’”. *The Guardian* (2014). Accessible online at <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/oct/26/meet-the-author-azar-nafisi-interview-viv-groskop>.

⁵⁵ Anne Donadey and Huma Ahmed-Ghosh, “Why Americans love Azar Nafisi’s *Reading Lolita in Tehran*”, *Signs* 33, no. 3 (2008): 624.

In order to write a memoir about her own life as well as the experience of her country, Satrapi had to frame her narrative in a way in which she could emphasize both important moments of truth and self-reflection in her life, as well as important moments of national self-reflection in the history of Iran (378)

Self-reflection is an important feature of memoirs as it makes the author's position as a narrator explicit, pointing to the fact that it is not 'the truth' we are reading about but an individual's perception and interpretation of reality. Moshiri has incorporated this self-reflection into her novel by means of the memoir Roya tries to write. By explicitly showing the processes Roya goes through in becoming an author, Moshiri destabilizes her own authority as a writer. In addition she fictionalizes episodes of her own life, blending novel and memoir into one narrative. By doing so she circumvents the 'gaze' of the curious western spectator who wants to see exactly what the 'Other' is like. At the same time the perspective of the migrant lends her the opportunity to explicitly oscillate between an Iranian and an American context.

As we have seen, Nafisi, Satrapi, and Moshiri share several similarities when it comes to the incorporation of cultures in another context and differ when it comes to *how*. While Nafisi trusts that literature will be able to bridge the gap between cultures, Satrapi is aware of the hard work and loneliness that characterize moving between cultures. The same goes for Moshiri, who mirrors the process of becoming someone in a new context by blurring the boundary between reality and fiction, and by destabilizing her own position as an author.

Published Novels: an Overview

With the following overview of Moshiri's published novels up to present time I hope to give insight in the themes that she explores, and the ways in which the narratives employ recognizable historical events and personal experience while maintaining a decidedly fictional character. It will show the recurrence of themes of migration and exile as well as the move towards a literature that engages with the literary developments of the host country.

At the Wall of the Almighty

At the Wall of the Almighty was published in 2000. Moshiri had finished her debut novel four years earlier, in 1996, but did not succeed in getting it published earlier.⁵⁶ The difficulties Moshiri encountered when trying to get her novel published are characteristic of the publishing climate of the 1980s and 1990s. Iranian migrant literature was a niche genre then: not read by a large public, not very visible, and therefore hard to successfully publish. The next decade would bring a change, however, when Iranian literature increased in numbers and visibility.⁵⁷ *At the Wall of the Almighty* was eventually published by Interlink Books and has received mostly positive, albeit very little, attention since its publication in 2000.^{58, 59} The novel explores themes that will prove recurrent in novels to follow, such as the power of storytelling, effects of creating and forgetting memories, and dealing with trauma and questions of 'self' by means of storytelling and memory.

⁵⁶ Wright, *Fiction in Exile*, 69.

⁵⁷ Iranian author Gina Nahai (*Cry of the Peacock, Moonlight on the Avenue of Faith*) notes that "[a] search on Amazon ("Iran, Memoirs, Novels") yields nearly 600 results. Most of these books were published in 2000 or later. Most were written by Iranian women. Most are memoirs." <<http://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/columns-and-blogs/soapbox/article/4048-so-what-s-with-all-the-iranian-memoirs.html> accessed> Accessed 18 March 2015.

⁵⁸ Interlink Books is one of five imprints of Interlink Publishing, founded in 1987. It specializes among others in world travel, world literature, and world history and politics. According to Moshiri, in a 2007 interview with Laura Wright, her debut novel was "murdered" (69) by this publisher, listing the international customer base as one of the reasons. A scattered audience can indeed mean less publicity inside the U.S.

⁵⁹ See for example Faridoun Farrokh, Review of *At the Wall of the Almighty* by Farnoosh Moshiri, *Iranian Studies* 33, no. 3/4 (2000): 466-470; and W.I. Hanaway, Review of *At the Wall of the Almighty* by Farnoosh Moshiri, *World Literature Today* 74, no. 2 (2000): 454-454.

The novel portrays an unnamed protagonist in the prison of El-Deen who has forgotten who he is. He tries to survive his harsh life inside the prison by telling stories, or perhaps recounting memories, to his guard, “loony Kamal”.⁶⁰ The book’s back flap connects this process of ‘narrating-to-survive’ to the famous stories of *One Thousand and One Nights*, in which Scheherazade tells her husband one story every night, ending with a cliff-hanger until the next night in order to keep his attention– the only way to keep him from having her killed the next day.⁶¹ Like Scheherazade, the unnamed protagonist depends on a listener for the performance of narrating the stories to be effective. It is striking that both narrator and listener are not entirely sane: it destabilizes the framework of the narrative, making the strange appear normal and the imaginary seem real. In Moshiri’s subsequent novels we will see this tension between narrator and listener again.

The Bathhouse

Moshiri’s second novel, *The Bathhouse*, was published in 2001. This novel is also set in prison, but the approach to the subject matter is quite different from the first novel. Looking at style and form, what attracts attention is that *At the Wall of the Almighty* is voluminous and employs various genres to structure the multitude of narratives, magical realism being the most notable. *The Bathhouse* however employs simple, straightforward language throughout the book, which is made up of very short chapters and is quite compact – almost fragmentary. The simplicity of the language serves to support the image that is outlined in the novel: that of an innocent and oblivious protagonist, who doesn’t know what has landed her in prison: she is “not political” according to her sister-in-law (15). The protagonist is a nameless teenaged girl

⁶⁰ The fictional El-Deen prison is most likely modeled on the notorious Evin prison, outside Tehran, which is notorious for its wing detaining political prisoners and torture. For details and more information, see an interview with former inmates here: <<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=12091966>>. And see Moshiri’s personal essay for her own indirect experiences (through interviews) with life in this prison. The name of this fictional prison contains the word ‘din’, meaning ‘faith’, and the article ‘el’, thus perhaps referring to ‘the religion’: a dogmatic and definite concept of religion.

⁶¹ “As if he were a latter-day Sheherazade, our hero fights for his life by retreating into a world of stories (...).”

who is arrested by the Revolutionary Guards and imprisoned in a bathhouse that is transformed into a makeshift prison. Her brother and pregnant sister-in-law have most likely been involved in protests and have also been arrested and imprisoned in the same building. The girl, even though she knows nothing of these activities and has not been involved in them, is roughed up a bit and reprimanded for having written diaries – however childlike they are in content: she has written stories about her “handsome doctor husband” and poems about her “moods, or trees in the yard” (14). Her diaries do not mention the only event that, up until then, has had major impact on her life: the death of both her parents in a car accident. Ironically it is mostly the lack of substance that mainly angers the Guards about the diaries.

The novel relies heavily on dialogue and on the perceptions of the main character. Reflection upon what she perceives and experiences remains almost absent. This gives the protagonist a very distant position as a narrator, which contributes to the fragmentary nature of the novel. This fragmentary nature in turn contributes to the dystopian reality of the narrative. The novel manages to invoke a haunting reality where violence and torture is used systematically in order to demoralize the prisoners and eventually break their will. The only way to reverse their sentence is to ‘confess’ or ‘repent’, which means they would have to publicly confess to sins or crimes, irrespective of their truth. This happens either directly in front of an audience or on television. These forced confessions are known to have been used by SAVAK, under Mohammad Reza Shah’s rule, after which they transformed into a widely used instrument of power after the 1970s.⁶² These forced confessions are a recurring subject in *The Bathhouse*. For instance when the prisoners talk about a rumor saying that the face of the Supreme Leader is supposed to be visible on the surface of the moon for true believers, and when it becomes clear that the protagonists’ brother, Hamid, will be executed if he does

⁶² Iran’s national intelligence and security organization, Sāzmān-e Eṭṭelā’āt wa Amnīyat-e Kešvar, commonly known as SAVAK. It operated from 1957 to 1979. See “Intelligence/ International relations/ Iran”. *Encyclopaedia Britannica Online*, accessed on 22 June 2015. < <http://www.britannica.com/topic/intelligence-international-relations/Iran#ref796186> >

not repent.⁶³ This illustrates the harrowing and bleak reality that the prisoners are suddenly caught in and from which escape seems impossible.

This reality is evoked by concise sentences that together form a powerful and dark image of a reality in which all certainties are gone. At the same time the reader is kept at a distance of this image throughout the book: we do not gain full access to the described events. The protagonist's dream-like thoughts about life and life in prison often conceal explicit events. Instead traumatic events are only implied, or mentioned elsewhere as a kind of afterthought. This style of writing conveys that the events are as incomprehensible for the protagonist as they are for the reader. The fact that the novel stays so close to the character and her point of view means that there is not much room for reflection and distance. Instead the narrative is characterized by experience and immediacy.

In short, the narrative of *The Bathhouse* foregrounds experience and reality in prison. Spatial and temporal distance are needed to reflect upon the 'why' of that horrific prison-reality, but the characters and narrator do not get a chance to ask that question. Although the novel is not based on Moshiri's personal experiences but on interviews with detainees, as she was not imprisoned herself, the novel can be seen as an attempt to process these traumatic events while at the same time making them known to a public that is unknowing of them. The novel has a kind of urgency that is strengthened by the straightforward and detached language. It 'shows' a piece of a very violent part of Iran's recent history, but does not contextualize it, which further strengthens the sense of urgency of the narrative: everything happens in the 'here and now'. Moshiri's first and second novel thus seem to fulfill a role as 'literary witnesses' of the aftermath of the Iranian Revolution.⁶⁴ Both are centered on the

⁶³ He says: "(...) I can't repent. I believe in my ideas. It's a war. You see? A war of ideas. They've won and they have the power. Had we won, we would have done the same thing to them." Moshiri, *The Bathhouse*, 123.

⁶⁴ Darznik. "Writing outside the veil", 74.

violent period following the Islamic Revolution. With her next novel Moshiri takes a few steps back, ‘zooms out’ as it were, and lets that center function as a starting point instead.

Against Gravity

As Moshiri’s third novel, *Against Gravity*, is the subject of this research as a whole, it suffices here to point out a few of the most important topics that clarify the place and function the novel has within her oeuvre. *Against Gravity* was published in 2005 by Penguin Books, and is set in Texas, one of the most southern states of the U.S.A. The narrative contains overt autobiographical elements from the author’s life, as we will see when briefly looking at the second part of the novel which is narrated by the Iranian refugee Roya. Roya has escaped Iran in the beginning of the 1980s together with her young child in reaction to the growing violence of the newly established regime. She seeks asylum in the United States, after having stayed in Afghanistan and India, where she works hard to build a new life in Houston, Texas. She struggles with cultural differences, economic hardship, and overall uncertainty about herself and her now teenaged daughter. Moshiri’s own experience as a refugee led her down the same path as Roya to Houston, Texas via Afghanistan and India, together with her young child. As these experiences are evidently Moshiri’s own, *Against Gravity* crosses and blurs the line between fiction and reality. This is particularly interesting in light of the argument, touched upon in the introduction, that life narratives are particularly well suited to communities ‘in transition’, while fiction represents a more stable and ‘rooted’ community. This leads me to suggest that, as this novel is the first instance in which Moshiri explicitly incorporates her personal experiences into her work, it tries to bridge the gap between Iranian and American literature, as it is in some ways representative of Iranian and in other ways of American culture.

In *Against Gravity* the author experiments with style. The novel is divided into three parts: each is narrated and focalized by a different protagonist. This stylistic intervention has the effect of suggesting distance as it presents multiple points-of-view to consider. Furthermore the spatial reality relates to American readers: because the narrative is set in the United States instead of Iran, which makes the inclusion of American culture necessary, for example institutions, expectations, and social conventions,. The back cover remarks: “from Tehran to Texas, from madness to revenge, from survival to love – all against gravity”. I think the novel does not seek to contrast these elements as the cover suggests, but rather wants to show their interplay and interconnectedness.

The Drum Tower

Moshiri’s most recent novel *The Drum Tower* was published in 2014, by Black Heron Press in the U.S. and Sandstone Press in the U.K. It has been received positively and seems to receive more attention and media coverage than the preceding novels, and is featured prominently on the first page of both publisher’s websites.^{65, 66} *The Drum Tower* tells the story of young girl Talkhoon, who lives with her sister Taara, her grandparents, and uncle in a large house, located in Iran, commonly known as ‘the drum tower’. This can refer to both an Asian and European type of building: respectively an actual tower for signal drums, and a type of round tower found on the exterior walls of castles. It might be informative to use these different meanings of the literal drum towers to look at the novel. On the one hand, the novel’s title signifies an open structure, meant to resonate the sound of warning or war drums to its exterior. On the other hand it signifies the closed and thick-walled structures used to protect the people inside, keeping others out. The narrative of *The Drum Tower* can be seen in

⁶⁵ Based on reviews found online, for example on websites such Publishers Weekly (<http://www.publishersweekly.com/>), Foreword Reviews (<https://www.forewordreviews.com/>), and Financial Times (<http://www.ft.com/>), all accessed 1 April 2015.

⁶⁶ Sandstone Press, <http://sandstonepress.com/>, and Black Heron Press, <http://blackheronpress.com/> accessed 1 April 2015.

the same inside-outside opposition. To illustrate this I think it is interesting to look at the motto's that precede each chapter, or 'book'. Book I is called 'The Bird of Knowledge' and its motto is from the Austrian poet Rainer Maria Rilke: "I sense the oncoming winds through which I must survive". Book II is called 'Circular Flights' and its motto is from Mexican writer/ poet Octavio Paz: "I am where I was: Within the indecisive walls of that same patio of words". Book III is called 'The Last Circle' and its motto is taken from the Old Testament, Ecclesiastes: "The wind blows to the South / and goes round to the north / round and round goes the wind / and on its circuits the wind returns". These mottos show a preoccupation with binary oppositions: being enclosed and being free, staying put in one place and going with the wind. They represent an analogy to the chaotic early days of the revolution it chronicles.

Themes: Freedom and Limitations

This overview of Moshiri's works of fiction shows that they all in one way or another investigate the meaning of freedom, as well as the various ways it can be lost and regained. Characters in the novels are not only physically imprisoned but also by their own limitations, and expectations of others to think or act a certain way. For example: the young protagonist of *The Bathhouse* is so afraid to stand out and be accused of rebelling that as a reaction she becomes completely silent and passive. This way to cope with life in prison almost gets her killed when she is accidentally selected to be executed: she fails to mention that there has been a mistake and sheepishly follows orders until someone recognizes her and speaks up, saving her life. Within this context of investigating 'freedom' and its limits the characters search for ways to establish who they are and what they want, while knowing that they are limited by powers bigger than themselves and therefore can never be fully 'free'.

This mirrors the experience of Iranian exiles and migrants in a broader sense. By leaving Iran they have lost an important link with or part of their lives and identity. The necessity of

exploring ‘freedom’ and finding new ways to express themselves within limitations set by systems of nation, culture, and language becomes much more acute when forced to settle into another. Moshiri’s work is decidedly fictional although there is little doubt that she uses her own experience, too. She has a recognizable voice that can be traced throughout her novels: she creates female characters who tend to be a bit fatalistic but are at the same time determined to persevere and to better their lives. To do this they need to face their past in order to grow as an individual, and transcend victimization, stereotypes, and powerlessness.

In the next chapter I will examine how Moshiri has voiced these themes and how they relate to the wider context of Iranian migrant literature. By employing literary analysis based on narratology I hope to gain insight in the structure of the text and be able to draw meaningful conclusions about the position Moshiri’s novel takes in the context of Iranian migrant literature.

CHAPTER TWO: NARRATIVE ANALYSIS

Character Analysis

Narrative analysis can focus on different elements of a story to highlight various interplays of power, discourse, and viewpoints. Focusing on the narrator in a text enables the researcher to lay bare the subtle ways in which the author presents reality in a story. By analyzing the type of language the narrator uses to describe certain places or people the tension between narrator and narrative can be shown. For instance when the narrator is very subjective but insists it is objective. Another way of looking at a text is through analysis of its characters, for instance focusing on their language, their interaction, their function in the narrative as a whole. In the analysis of *Against Gravity* I have chosen to focus on character and, by extension, on time and setting rather than on narrator. The reason for this focus is because I think the interplay between the characters and their surroundings highlights the themes Moshiri engages with in her novel, such as relationships, passion and drive, and sanity and madness.

The story features three primary characters: Madison Kirby, Roya Saraabi, and Ricardo (Ric) Cardinal. Three secondary characters can be distinguished: Marlina Haas, Bobby Palomo, and Tala Saraabi. They are given short ‘interlude’ chapters that intersect the main three parts. To examine themes of displacement and transculturalism in *Against Gravity* I propose a character analysis based on a structuralist approach. This entails determining factors that are attributed to each primary, and to a lesser extent the secondary characters.⁶⁷ This analysis, combined with an examination of the character’s actions will form the basis of an interpretation of the story. In gathering information about the characteristics of characters in the text we can distinguish between qualification, information about a character given

⁶⁷ This approach is taken from Bal’s *Narratology* in which she, rightly, both questions and defends the structuralist principle of “the selection of relevant semantic axes”, or “pairs of contrary meanings” as a tool for the classification of a character’s relevant characteristics. It remains a subjective and perhaps sometimes arbitrary undertaking, but it does hold true that “most readers tend to ‘do’ semantic categorization” this way (127).

directly by a character, and information deduced from character's actions.⁶⁸ Qualification can be done inside the fabula by a character about itself or about another character as well as outside, by the narrator.⁶⁹ A character might describe himself or herself as being a certain way, but act in a completely opposite way. The discrepancy between thought and action points to ambivalence of meaning, and therefore presents a starting point to begin deconstructing and analyzing the text.

Madison Kirby

Descriptions of Madison's character consist mostly of words alluding to physical decay and psychological emptiness. For example: pain, death, lunatic, disease, destruction, sprite, madness, doom, fate, lonely, sadness, alone, confused, delusional, paranoid, and being pushed or kicked out of life. Madison's perception of his surroundings is filtered and shaped by physical and mental disease. He attributes these conditions to a higher being, which can passiveness, but also religiosity. His outlook on life is deterministic, necessarily moving towards a predetermined end. Most of these qualifications are done through self-analysis by Madison himself: the character thinks about and talks to himself a lot. This is done in terms of absence, lack, or negation: "I'm a bag of infections, rotting with diseases", "I was all poison" (12), "I've never enjoyed my life", "I'm being pushed out" (13). This particular way of looking at himself and his surroundings is attributed to the influence of his father, a professor, whose personality and dedication to his profession have led to Madison's decision to pursue an academic career of his own. He studies philosophy but never finishes writing his dissertation, titled "Being There and Being Pushed into Nothingness: A Study of Martin Heidegger's Existentialism".

⁶⁸ This distinction is made in accordance to Bal, p. 131.

⁶⁹ The term, taken from *Narratology*, is differentiated from 'story' and 'narrative text' and is defined as "a series of logically and chronologically related events that are caused or experienced by actors" (5).

Madison's studies provide a framework for his behavior, which is motivated by self-centeredness and self-destruction – in line with the way he, after Heidegger, understands people to be 'beings-towards-death'. Madison's interest in literature and philosophy is due to his father's continuous stimulation of his son's intellect, starting at an early age. As a boy Madison patiently waits in his father's office, and after his return from lectures he "reads to please him" (5). As an adult Madison is acutely aware of the loneliness he experienced as a child, but he also remembers the intense parental love of his father. Madison articulates on several occasions, either to himself or in conversation with other characters, that he sees the death of his father as the starting point of his own demise. In other words, the death of his father is the event that Madison uses to legitimize his own self-destruction. The reader learns about his childhood through various flashbacks, focalized by Madison. What stands out are the asymmetrical relationships between the family members: 'Father' is a powerful presence, an authoritative figure depicted as an austere man who does not care much for his wife. Examples are sentences like "Father didn't speak with Mother" (6), "Mother and Father did not sleep in the same bed" (7). His son is his little assistant, someone to talk to and show off with. He expects Madison to grow up fast or at least to act like he has. In a way, this hampers Madison's ability to grow into a 'normal' adult as he is raised to be his father's mirror image and not his own person. 'Mother' on the other hand is a quiet woman whose existence is subservient to her husband's. Madison is a precocious and lonely child whose existence is built around the authority of his father.

The way the story of Madison's past is constructed already gives clues about the role his character has in the story. The following two paragraphs will illustrate this point by showing the link between past and present. In the past the adoration of 'Father' turns into a destructive hate after Madison sees him fall from the pedestal he was on for so long. In the present this cycle of adoration and hate repeats itself but now with Roya. In fact, the first

cycle serves to legitimize the second or the past serves to legitimize and motivate the present. At age twenty-five, Madison is a diligent academic, working on his dissertation. His father dies suddenly in a car crash together with the underage girl he apparently had an affair with. The following part captures the turning point in Madison's life, after which he runs from his life and his responsibilities in the U.S. and tries to escape to a life of sex and drugs in 'the East':

I imagined him raising his eyes from behind his lenses and creasing his forehead, as was his habit, and nodding with a faint smile. This nod was life for me and I didn't desire more. Then he died. (Moshiri, 74)

The approval of his father combined with the wish to surpass his intellect motivated Madison to pursue his academic career. Now that this motivational force has ceased to exist, Madison is unable to go through with it. He starts to 'drift', he 'escapes'. He is unable to form a healthy relationship with his mother even now his father has gone. Instead he directs all his energy towards his own self-destruction. In line with the need for external factors to put blame on, instead of on himself, Madison blames his mother for his insanity: "had she gone mad, I would have remained sane and loved her still" (89). In the present, Roya appears as a possible substitute for both his father and mother: someone to take control and bring his life 'back on track' and simultaneously offering him the intense love he thinks he needs to recover from his illness. The image of Roya constantly appears in his dreams and visions, and he appropriates her with 'heavenly' and 'angelic' qualities.

I turned my back to the window, closed my eyes, and before falling asleep saw the image of my father. But I woke after ten minutes and sat up. I thought that if the Persian had come for me, if she was here to save me, I'd

call Mother and give her the news – news of the approaching end and of my happiness before the final departure. (Moshiri, 76)

Immediately after meeting Roya, Madison casts her in the role of his savior, and makes his well-being, his happiness, and his future dependent on her. His adoration is replaced by hate when Roya rejects him. Madison's thoughts, behavior, and actions are structured along lines of binary oppositions: he is either a diligent academic or a drug abusing 'bum', he adores or he hates, he embraces life or death. This polarity has a prominent part in the development of the story: Roya reacts to Madison's obsession with her by being the stronger one. In opposing Madison she finds a way to break away from her own position of passivity. This difference between the two characters is highlighted through Madison's downward spiral: *he* is unable to break the cycle but *she* might still be able to save herself.

Roya Saraabi

Roya Saarabi's character is introduced to the reader mainly through the narrative of her past. That story is repeated throughout the book and thus becomes an effective way of focusing our attention on its function for story development and character building. It acts as a center around which the story on the whole gravitates and at the same time introduces 'narrative' as a connecting factor of past, present, and characters. It is introduced as a bedtime story to soothe her daughter Tala, who has burning nightly fevers since coming to America. These fevers can be read as a physical translation of emotional turmoil. The story of their life is framed as a fairy tale, starting with the trope of the starting sentence "once upon a time...". But it is its uniqueness that makes it the one thing that can put Tala at ease: "she didn't like fairy tales or stories from books. She wanted the tale of our own life" (99). This embedded story gains importance through repetition.

The recurrent foregrounding of Roya's economic problems is symptomatic of her experience of displacement and of that of migrants in general. The prominence of this theme illuminates a side of immigration that is not often foregrounded in literature of the Iranian diaspora.⁷⁰ Because Roya is constantly struggling to sustain herself and her daughter, she cannot afford to lose herself in longing for her home country, or to think about the people and places she has lost. Instead she must focus on the present. Eventually her quest for economic security and her quest for authorship become interwoven and mutually dependent: she cannot write her story without money and she cannot earn money without her story. Besides the monetary value attached to the telling of her story, it also becomes important in constructing her identity sense of self. One of the reasons she seeks to establish herself as a writer is to become a 'fully developed' person. As Darznik writes: "the formlessness of Roya's identity corresponds to her inability to create a coherent life narrative".⁷¹ The convergence of writing and selfhood is a well-known phenomenon in literature. The idea that you can put something of yourself on paper for others to discover, or that you can learn about your 'true' self through writing can be traced throughout literary history. If this was not the case, what would we hope to find in autobiographies, memoirs, and diaries, other than intimate knowledge of a person's private and internal self? The fact that Moshiri, the author, has written a novel while Roya, the character, writes a memoir is interesting. Even though the author has voiced her disappointment with the popularity of the genre of memoir, it does become a way of redemption and self-discovery for the character in the story.⁷² Paradoxically Roya at one point wonders if it is not the constant repetition of her story but rather the forgetting of her past that will eventually allow her to become 'someone', and to form a solid identity:

⁷⁰ Darznik, 86.

⁷¹ Ibid, 87.

⁷² Moshiri says in an interview with Laura Wright that the market is aimed at memoirs, not fiction. Indeed there has been an newly sparked interest in autobiographical texts around the 1990s, but this should not obscure the fact that memoirs has been an important form of writing throughout history. See also: Amy Malek, "Memoir as Iranian Exile Cultural Production: A Case Study of Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* Series," *Iranian Studies* 39, no. 3 (2006): 360 and Nancy Miller, "But enough about me, what do you think of my memoir?" *Yale Journal of Criticism* 13, no. 2 (2000).

Wasn't I finally acquiring an identity by forgetting who I'd been? This was my new self – a fast-paced, hard-working immigrant who came with a child and empty pocket and made it. I was a cliché now, a repetition of millions of other identities. That's the way it is in America. What happened to my memoir? (Moshiri, 169)

If her past as a refugee from Iran marked her too much as 'different', now her attempt at assimilation with American society and cultural values eradicates that difference and robs her of that which made her who she is: her past and her memories. The fragility that is characteristic of Roya's position as an immigrant is reflected in her outward appearance: her physique is almost invariably described in terms of size and youth. To Madison she looks small, shy, innocent, lost. She describes herself as being alone and resembling a little girl, and to Ric she is 'the small Persian woman'. The image emerges from these descriptions is that of a woman who in some ways is still like, or wants desperately to be like, a child – carefree and without real responsibilities. She is caught between childhood and adulthood but knows neither part well enough to play it convincingly: "my real self in real life was a vulnerable girl-woman who had never grown up" (161).

Being displaced and uprooted from the past effects the formation of identity, as it requires a re-imagining of self and others: who am I without my past? Who should I be and who can I become? *Against Gravity* analyzes these questions mostly through Roya's character. Identity for her is almost tangible, like a physical object to be had or lost, something that can be 'complete' as if it is a static stage to be reached.⁷³ There are various

⁷³ Amel El-Rayis approaches identity through the self-narratives of Iranian-American women and sees them as outward and inward journeys, a means of discovering and reuniting their 'core selves' to attain 'wholeness': "a journey to the different selves that have developed through the years of living in-between these cultures". In contrast, the view on identity that *Against Gravity* expresses is more linear than cyclic, pointing to the impossibility of 'retrieving' or even discovering one's "undiscovered self". Amel El-Rayis, "Wholeness through Memoir Writing: A Study of Three Texts by Iranian-American Women," MA dissertation, University of Alexandria (2014): 3.

instances in which this notion of identity emerges in the text. For instance when Roya compares herself to other Iranian refugees who have just arrived in Camp One she thinks: “I felt that I was uprooted and misplaced from home before I’d had a chance to form a solid identity” (113); or after she tells the story of her journey to Ric for the first time, she thinks: “I felt that I had never grown up after I’d been released from prison” (148). And when her cousin and his American wife suggest ways to improve her situation as an immigrant in America she thinks angrily to herself that “[t]hey acted as if I had no identity and had to obtain one” (154). Looking at these quotes, we can see that the formation of identity is coupled to a notion of ‘home’. In other words, Roya needs a place to call home in order to be able to develop her identity fully. Due to the placelessness and in-betweenness that characterizes her life, this is Roya’s biggest struggle. After leaving Iran she more or less drifts from one place to the other without planning ahead and asking help, simply stating that “we had to find a country” (105).

Moreover, once more or less settled in one place – however miserable or difficult life becomes – she needs to be pushed to get moving again. This can be illustrated by looking at Roya’s time in India. She chose to go there because it is relatively close to Iran, in case they could go back soon. Over time it becomes obvious that this will not be possible, and that their life as exiles will be much more permanent than initially expected. Without family or friends, a reliable job or suitable housing, Roya remains in New Delhi until she is completely out of money, and eventually turns to the Red Cross: “The officials were surprised that we were still in India. I should have found a sponsor and a country long ago, they said. I should have moved out of India” (132) . It is indecision that characterizes Roya’s character more than anything else: *Against Gravity* does not romanticize her experience as an immigrant but instead tries to convey the hardship it entails. Roya begins to realize how she can deal with her uprooted existence after meeting an old professor in the refugee camp in Kabul. Her

‘literary partner’ encourages her to write about her memories about prison: “Now I knew what I wanted in my life and how I could achieve it” (120). Knowing that she needs to write about her trauma she is overcome by anxiety and begins to question everything about her plans: “The whole thing seemed absurd. Who was I writing for? Who would publish this book?” (124). And yet she perseveres, she begins writing in English and recognizes the importance of the story in order to become rooted once more, to “heal and build a house for myself. Only when I found a home would I be able to make a list of things I still possessed” (143). This clearly shows the connection between writing and survival: she feels and recognizes the need to “create a coherent family narrative out of a succession of jarring and frequently violent geographical displacements”.⁷⁴ Writing is thus an extremely private task, connected to survival and memory, while at the same time it should be addressed to an audience in order to have any meaning at all.

Ric Cardinal

In the story, the character of Ricardo Cardinal is positioned diametrically opposite of Madison Kirby’s character. They occupy opposite ends on a scale of ‘good’ and ‘bad’, which makes both characters oddly superficial as there is not much space for nuance in tropes of sinners and saints. Ric is so determined to be part of the ‘revolution of the worker’ that he drops out of University to join the working force instead of going into academia. He sacrifices his personal life, his chances to make a decent living, and his relationships with women for the greater good of helping the less fortunate. On the one hand Ric recognizes his inability to change the order of the world and is content with every individual he *can* help. On the other hand he does not forgive himself for failing to do more in the first place. This attitude shows the immense influence that systems of power seem to have in the story, and the relative

⁷⁴ Darznik, 88.

helplessness of the characters in opposing them and negotiating a space for themselves. Ric's character in the narrative seems to be aware of the limits of what can be achieved much more than the others, but at the same time he keeps trying to push those limits. This makes him a well suitable partner for Roya, whom he helps to realize that trying and failing is better than just giving up.

A Central Motif in the Novel

Having examined the main characters of the story, some recurrent elements have become visible. Together these elements form the narrative's motif, which can be a pattern of assumptions, a certain outlook, a common goal, and so on. The motif of *Against Gravity* is that of a powerful center versus a powerless periphery, and can be traced throughout the novel. It is articulated by all major characters in relation to their own troubles, but should be seen as an overarching theme that expresses the essence of the novel. Some examples are "I'm being pushed out" (13), which is repeated by Madison on several occasions, "life wrote a scenario for me" (114), as said by Roya, and "I was only a puppet and someone pulled my strings from above" (259), said by Ric. This perpetual struggle between taking control of your own life and being controlled is already signified in the title. *Against Gravity* refers to the idea that living life is like pushing against gravity, struggling against all these forces around you that try to weigh you down. When connected to the larger framework of literature on migration and exile, the motif shows that a migrant's life is far from malleable and the trauma of being exiled becomes part of a migrant's identity. Because 'home' is not only a physical but also an emotional space tied to memories, relations, and stories, to become uprooted and placeless means having to reconnect to who you are in order to be able to reconnect with your surroundings, and trying to become rooted again.

Analysis of Time and Setting

Time and setting were discussed briefly in the Introduction in relation to Mieke Bal's *Narratology* and Michael Toolan's *Narrative*. Here I also include Gerald Prince's *Narratology: The Form and Functioning of Narrative*. I will now take a closer look at the terms in the next section to get a clearer idea of the functioning of time and setting in literature, how these concepts are connected, and how they influence the narrative and its characters.

The organization of time in text often escapes our attention if not disrupted excessively. This indicates that we perceive the passing of time as something natural, a process that just happens without us having or being able to control it. However, we must not forget that time in text is just as much subject to conventions and artificial interventions as style and form, for instance. When talking about 'story time' and 'text time' we are actually referring to the "linear verbal *representation* of temporality".⁷⁵ How we perceive the structuring of this temporality is subject to our pre-existing knowledge of other texts, our previous reading experiences, our familiarity with situations that we read about, and so on. While Toolan mostly emphasizes the formal aspects of structuring story and text time – based on Gérard Genette's subdivision of text time in order, duration, and frequency – Bal uses to the complexity of how time is experienced in reality as a backdrop for her examination of technical narratological devices. This approach is especially useful in relation to migrant literature, as it allows us to examine how narratives produce the experience described for the reader. An example given in *Narratology* is very instructive and worth quoting here:

This produces a kind of social schizophrenias, which makes the migrant always hasty and always stagnating at the same time; and always in a different experience of time from the residents of the host country (...) People in such

⁷⁵ Toolan, *Narrative*, 49. Emphasis in original.

situations are condemned to live in the present. As a consequence, the memories of their past that should sustain them are in fact put on ice. (Bal, 78)

This constant incongruence between ‘inner time’ and ‘outer time’ can be represented in text through the anachronological ordering of time, such as flashbacks and flashforwards, or through the uneven distribution of time, e.g. when only a couple of lines are devoted to an action or event that is crucial in the narrative, thereby frustrating the reader’s expectation of the situation.⁷⁶ Before continuing with an examination of the organization of time in *Against Gravity*, I will first turn to the importance of setting in text.

The importance of setting in a narrative text varies according to genre, but in most contemporary literature it is often significant. To quote Toolan: “Setting [in many modern novels] may be much more than backcloth; it may be instrumental – like another character – in leading a character to act in a certain way”.⁷⁷ This is similar to the way Bal interprets the content and function of space in text. She argues that space can remain in the background, but is often thematized and thus becomes “an object of presentation itself, for its own sake (...) an acting place rather than the place of action”.⁷⁸ However there are also narratives where no specific place is mentioned, just as there are narratives in which places are mentioned excessively but play no role whatsoever or are simply not significant. Prince argues that in narratives such as diaries, and thus arguably life narratives as well, “the place of narration sometimes functions thematically, structurally, or as a characterization device.”⁷⁹ If a narrative takes place on the countryside, but is narrated in the city, we can assume that this contrast is significant. And if, like in *Against Gravity*, a narrative describing a journey across countries is systematically narrated from small, coffin-sized rooms, we can assume that this

⁷⁶ Genette calls these devices analepses and prolepses, respectively, while Bal uses the concepts of retroversions and anticipations, see: Toolan, *Narrative*, 50.

⁷⁷ Toolan, *Narrative*, 103-104.

⁷⁸ Bal, 139.

⁷⁹ Gerald Prince, *Narratology: the Form and Functioning of Narrative* (Berlin: Mouton Publishers, 1982), 33.

contrast is not accidental either. The symbolic meaning of place or setting is partly constructed in the text and partly subject to interpretation of the reader. As mentioned briefly in the Introduction, the various places Roya and Tala come to call home during their journey and are then forced to leave behind foreground the constant interaction between places and people, and how places become part of people's identity. The narrative of *Against Gravity* quite often foregrounds setting as a leading or limiting factor for the characters, as well as reflections of the characters' positions. Examples of the prominent role of setting are the small and suffocating houses, stuffy garage-apartments, the mercilessly burning sun, the dream-like surrounding of a villa. Through the close-reading of two explicit settings, or 'localities', we will take a closer look at the subtexts that frame the narrative.⁸⁰

Time in Against Gravity

Together with the thematic and structural qualities provided by setting, the organization of time influences the development of the narrative. Time and temporality in *Against Gravity* are organized differently for each character. This narratological intervention underscores the individuality of each story: although the events of the narrative overlap, the interpretation and perception of the events are different for Madison, Roya, or Ric.

Madison's story is structured like a reversed Christian creation myth: "God created His world in seven days; I destroyed mine in six" (1). We are thus invited to read this narrative as a predetermined and above all finite story, rendering Madison's actions idle in the face of the unavoidable destructive outcome.

Roya's narrative constantly jumps between past and present, her dreams about a better life are continuously interrupted by reality. The temporal fragmentation immerses the reader in the insecurity of her reality and at the same time lends it a cyclic character that foregrounds the process of settling, rooting, and finding a home. Despite Roya's desperation that she will

⁸⁰ Subtext is defined as the implicit or metaphorical meaning of a text (Merriam-Webster Online).

never be able to succeed, the narrative itself tells us otherwise. Throughout the novel, and especially after reading Ric's part of the narrative, we gradually learn that she is not in the least as incapable as she presents herself, and that her insecurity and fear are the hardest things to overcome. The alternation between past and present can then be interpreted as a representation of Roya's self-doubt: as a migrant she has to live in the present and let go of her memories of the past, but as long as those memories plague her in her dreams and in the form of her unfinished memoir, she cannot focus on the future.

Ric's narrative is organized along his three encounters with 'Death' and his life with his girlfriend, son, and dog respectively. It is almost entirely chronological, informing the reader in a subtle way of his stability. The encounters with 'Death' are in fact turning points in his life, moments of realization and growth. After his last encounter the reader understands that he is freed of his biggest fears now that he has found love and a trusting relationship with Roya: a happy ever after to conclude the fairy tale stated in the beginning of Roya's story.

Setting in Against Gravity

India as a Setting

The first setting I will examine in detail is the room Roya and Tala occupy when living in India. Focalized by Roya, we learn that it is a servant's room, adjacent to the house one Mr. Varma occupies, a "kind, sickly man" who works for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Presumably the house is quite large as Mr. Varma regularly hosts parties there, but the servant's quarters are small and offer very little privacy. Roya and Tala share the space with a couple that makes love every day and resort to do it in the storage room if they don't get the chance to go out. This amorous couples' use of the space is in sharp contrast with that of the mother and her young daughter. Roya uses the same storage room as a place to work 'religiously' on her memoir. It is an utterly unsuitable place to do work of any kind – "[it] was the size of a coffin and was filled with the odor of our roommates' sex" – and becomes even

more of a confinement when the water is rationed and the air conditioner gives out during the hottest parts of the day. The couple's love-making is symbolic for creativity and productivity, for cherishing memories and creating new ones.

The confinement of the room is an analogy of Roya's life as an immigrant: a suffocating experience, like a bad dream from which she cannot escape. She is unable to give her full attention to developing herself further and also does not have the time or energy to be fully dedicated to her memoir. This situation brings Virginia Woolf's 1929 essay "A Room of One's Own" to mind. In this essay, Woolf is asked to say something on 'the question of women and fiction'. She explores and illustrates the predicament of women writers in a time patriarchy has a tight grip on the distribution of wealth, space, and education. Her conclusion is simple: "a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction".⁸¹ Regardless the obvious differences – the power structures an English woman from the late nineteenth century finds herself entangled in can hardly be compared to those a refugee from Iran in India encounters – this conclusion nevertheless holds remarkable truth for Roya. There is no space, neither literal nor metaphorical, for her to be an author and write without being disturbed, which makes her unable to develop herself the way she had envisioned for herself. Roya agrees with Woolf: "I remembered writing in Camp One, when explosions shook our project apartment. I remembered writing in a smelly storage room. (...) How could I buy my peace?" (176). The constant and everyday worries about finding a 'home', earning enough money, raising a child, are detrimental to her creativity. It is no wonder the memoir begins to suffer from it: "the writing was dry and lifeless and read like a cold report" (124). This cycle of working continuously without succeeding is broken for the first time by a man. Jean-Marc offers Roya a glimpse of a life of luxury. He is the personification of a cliché: a handsome French with the looks of a movie star: "golden hair" and "dark green eyes" (127). He has a

⁸¹ Virginia Woolf, "A Room of One's Own" (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1989), 1.

job at the embassy, a beautiful wife and ditto daughter whom he adores – and now also a short-lived affair with beautiful ‘angelic’ Roya. His character is like a mirror to Roya’s reality: by showcasing his material wealth we are increasingly aware of her position in the margins of society. He is handsome, social, affluent, successful, has a ‘cool, spacious house’ with a study and an ‘enormous desk’. The description of his house is full of antonyms from the description of her coffin-sized room: spacious, cool, bright, wide. Here Roya can be someone else for a while, not the lonely, unattractive immigrant woman, but a comfortable woman who can fill her day with walking barefoot on the house’s cool tiles, eating leisurely from the fridge, writing, and listening to Chopin. For a short while Roya is allowed to dream and to enjoy these luxuries. But once Jean-Marc’s daughter returns Roya is reminded that she is not special or important at all. On the contrary, in reaction to her being dumped she becomes the cliché of a ‘lover scorn’, stalking her ex-lover from behind the bushes. Roya’s encounter with Jean-Marc does not leave her better off, it just increases her feelings of injustice and highlights the deterministic quality of the text: she is apparently not meant to lead that kind of life, she is too different.

Looking at the text with this in mind we can see that the setting and the binary oppositions used to describe them are markers of the subtext of the narrative. For example: rich-poor, hot-cool, closet-villa. This subtext is foregrounded in some instances and suggests that the migrant is bound to a position in the periphery of society primarily because of economic disadvantage. This set of oppositions along with the subtext mentioned above is repeated in another part of the story, when Roya and Tala are invited to the house of her cousin in Houston who *has* assisted her in coming to America but now does not seem interested in her at all – she is invited mainly so she can speak Persian with another visiting family member. This house, too, is the opposite of the dingy apartment Roya now occupies: exclusive, shaded, green, spacious. After one afternoon at their pool, she has to go back to her

own small space again, knowing that her own cousin does not find it necessary to share his wealth with her. As Darznik argues, this draws attention to the conflict that can arise between established and newly arrived immigrants: “They have no use for her stories of suffering and exile. (...) Coming to America, Moshiri suggests, requires a perpetual forgetting on the part of the immigrant – an erasure of the past in favor of an imagined future”.⁸²

Afghanistan as a Setting

The migrant thus needs to balance forgetting and remembering in order to establish a space for themselves in which they can build a ‘home’. I want to argue that familial structures are therefore among the most important notions the story expresses. To show how this notion is instilled in the text I will examine the setting of the refugee camp, “Camp One”, in Kabul, where Roya and Tala reside after escaping Iran. They are placed in a government apartment, part of a larger housing project protected by the Red Army, the Soviet-led Afghan forces that took part in the decade long Soviet-Afghan war (1979-1989). This war is the backdrop of Roya and Tala’s stay at Camp One. They live in a one-bedroom apartment together with the two women they met during the journey from Iran to Afghanistan. Together they form a make-shift family: besides Roya and Tala there is Simin – a doctor and “Marxist-Feminist revolutionary”, and Pari, a former teacher fired from her job for teaching subversive material but at the same time a “child-woman” who “didn’t know what sorrow was” (109-110). Both women become like mothers to Tala who, unlike Roya, becomes rooted quickly and easily in their ‘home’ in Kabul. Both of them are also like mothers to Roya, who herself feels like a child, homesick and miserable and in need of strong personalities to keep her going. Being a refugee shelter, Camp One is a place of transit, people keep coming in and leaving again – this produces a feeling of temporariness that runs through the narrative as a whole and highlights the transitive nature of the lives of migrants and refugees. The name ‘Camp One’

⁸² Darznik, 89.

points to the symbolic ‘camps’ that will follow in the lives of Roya and her friends as they move from place to place.

Roya is described as being affected deeply by her surroundings, which becomes a metaphor for her inner life. The grey and cold winter, the sharp and dry winds that never cease to blow, the unfamiliar deserted streets – they all parallel and amplify her feelings of despair. The ‘family’ is the sole thing that keeps her grounded and prevents her slipping away in depression: Simin and Pari are lively, upbeat, energetic and provide a certain amount of stability through their everyday routines and habits. But Roya is bewildered by the whole situation and unable to make sense of her new life: “I looked around with detachment and disbelief and wondered what I was doing there and what had happened to me and why” (108). For the first time since their dangerous journey out of Iran, their lives are now on ‘on hold’: the refugees can neither make a permanent home in the camps nor can they go back to Iran and go on with the lives they have left behind. The in-betweenness and aimlessness paralyzes Roya, and she begins to fantasize about escape and death. Let’s take a look at the sequence that introduces her depression to the reader: “I experienced the dark waves of despair in the first winter in Kabul when I had to walk three miles against the whipping wind to the radio station” (108). Note how nature becomes a destructive force in the story, working against Roya and eroding her strength. The metaphors used to describe Roya’s state of mind continuously refer to being isolated, numb, and being alone amongst others. For instance: “a cold fog enveloped me”, as if she is detached from the others somehow and unable to reconnect (108). This feeling of detachment is characteristic of Roya’s experience as a migrant, also later on when she moves to America. The setting of Camp One thus serves on the one hand as a decor to amplify loneliness and existential crisis, and on the other hand it also shows the importance of familial structures in providing a safety net when all other guarantees have disappeared or been taken away.

Throughout the novel it gradually becomes clear that the structure of the narrative does not allow the actors to ‘escape’ from the path that has been laid down for them: there is no true, all-encompassing ‘freedom’ or free will. Instead all characters are limited by their socio-economic status, their upbringing, the country they are in, the choices the government makes. However enmeshed they all are in these powerful metanarratives, the characters negotiate and create degrees of freedom within them. By forming social structures like Ric’s organization PAC (People’s Aid Center) for example, they oppose the dominant discourse how and when they can – showing that you can accomplish more if you are together than on your own. Perhaps the most important thing Roya has to realize if she wants to be able to call anywhere ‘home’ is to learn to rely on others, like her daughter relies on her. In this way, Tala’s character is a mirror to Roya, reflecting her weaknesses, and enlarging them while also showing that there is hope because the next generation will continue the quest for a home.

CONCLUSION

In this case study of *Against Gravity* I have tried to unravel the notion of 'home' as it is explored by the main characters and understand it in the framework of Iranian migrant literature. This notion is complex and multifaceted and above all strongly connected to that of identity and writing. Writing and storytelling become means of actively relating the memories of a past left behind to a future yet to be reached: the in-betweenness that is such a unique characteristic of the migrant proves to be a fertile ground for critical self-reflection as well as reflection on the host country through its treatment of 'Others'.⁸³ Jasmin Darznik, one of the first scholars to complete a large project on Iranian migrant literature in America, sees a "disturbing tendency to conflate the work of a great number of Iranian women writers, judging their books solely according to political import and commercial success, and all but abandoning text-based analysis as a meaningful mode of scholarly inquiry."⁸⁴ By doing precisely the opposite and taking text-based narratological analysis as the basis of my research, I hope to have combined a meaningful literary analysis with an informed view on the Middle East, and to have contributed to a different approach of Iranian migrant literature. To quote Darznik's insightful study once more:

It's possible we will begin to think of Iranian immigrant literature as an American literature, one that sometimes participates and sometimes resists the growing political, ideological, and cultural divide between Middle East and the West. And maybe we will learn to read literature of the Iranian diaspora for how it asks that most American of questions: What does it mean to live in the places in between? (Darznik, 163)

⁸³ "[L]iterature mediates between the real and the imagined. [L]iterary texts, being complex clusters of languages and signs, can be identified as extremely fecund sites for such ideological interactions. Moreover, they also show the complex articulation between a single individual, social contexts and the play of language." Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/ Postcolonialism* (London: Routledge, 1998), 70.

⁸⁴ Darznik, 160.

We should, in other words, learn to see Iranian women writers not as existing outside American literature, but as occupying a unique position that is both within and without, acting as a bridge or ‘contact zone’ between the Middle East and the West. This position is also what enables authors to be critical towards the culture of the host country in ways native authors cannot. As Terry Eagleton has argued in *Exiles and Émigrés*, literature by expatriates is able to shed light on cultural limitations and ambivalences precisely because the authors possess an awareness that “the culture they confront [is] in no full sense their own”.⁸⁵ It is in confrontation with alternative discourses that “great art is produced, not from the simple availability of an alternative, but from the subtle and involute tensions between the remembered and the real, the potential and the actual, integration and dispossession, exile and involvement”.⁸⁶ The novel’s emphasis on social and economic obstacles makes these subtle tensions between immigrant and host society overt. *Against Gravity* shows the gradual commodification of the life narrative. In Roya’s search for her identity and voice, both as an individual and as an author, she becomes entangled in contemporary American consumer culture upon agreeing to tell her story to an American audience of benefactors in exchange for funds needed to pursue her academic career. Thus Roya’s story becomes detached from her, while at the same time coming to define her as a ‘refugee’ in a way she does not feel comfortable with. Throughout their journey from Iran to America, writing her memories down and making this memoir was Roya’s goal and dream. But the quest loses its grip on her once she is able to settle down and build a home together with Ric. Now that she has a future to focus on, the past loses some of its urgency and importance. In Ric she has found someone who will listen to her story without reducing it to simply a ‘tale’, but instead is able to see how it has shaped her as an individual – just like his experiences have shaped him. Still the importance of writing in overcoming trauma, thinking about identity, and coming to terms

⁸⁵ Eagleton, *Literary Theory*, 18.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

with the past remain undisputed. In the last pages of the novel the torch is passed on to the next generation when Tala, Roya's daughter, is introduced as a narrator for the first time. Darznik suggests that "Tala will be the one to unravel the untold story of their immigration – that it will be the role of the next generation to unearth such stories in the new country".⁸⁷ The suggestion that life narratives of migrants are reworked and retold in different ways through the generations after arrival is also present in *Tremors: New Fiction by Iranian American Writers*, a recent anthology edited and introduced by Anita Amirrezvani and Persis Karim. The authors observe that "as Iranian American writers have come of age, they have branched out [from first-person memoirs] into the genre of fiction, allowing their imagination to delve into thousands of years of Iranian culture, politics, and history".⁸⁸ While this is an interesting notion that undoubtedly holds truth, the subsequent labeling of this 'new fiction' as "the foundation for a new ethnic literature" in my opinion places too much emphasis on the perceived singularity or uniqueness of this literature. Rather than foregrounding either the 'Iranian-ness' or the 'American-ness' of these works, let us appreciate the merging of the two into a strand of literature that can be classified as neither in particular but relevant to both. Isn't it just that intangibility that makes this literature so compelling to read, as it reveals things about societies and culture that might otherwise not be visible? This is why I think Iranian migrant literature should not be seen outside of the host culture but in constant relation to it. Beside the importance of literature in the emancipation of immigrants in their host societies, it has also been essential in emancipating women writers, of which Moshiri is but one example: "[the Revolution of 1979] heralded the establishment of women writers as a powerful literary force with their own concerns and ideologically varied but distinct identities".⁸⁹ Starting with the proliferation of memoirs in America some ten years after the

⁸⁷ Darznik, 92.

⁸⁸ Amirrezvani and Karim, ix.

⁸⁹ Houra Yavari. *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, IX/6, 580-592. "Fiction ii(b): The Novel." Available online at <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/fiction-iibthe-novel> (accessed 30 May 2015).

Revolution, Iranian women writers have been able to incite a meaningful and substantial tradition that now includes life narratives, fiction, poetry, film, music, and graphic novels. These narratives reflect on political, social, and personal issues that they have encountered and challenge existing stereotypes and cultural expectations. It follows then that migrant literature is not just a way for these authors to reflect on their lives – past and present – but it also occupies a unique position to challenge prejudice, bias, and misconceptions that would remain invisible otherwise.

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