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Gina Bonakdar Nahai: Fantasies of Escape and Inclusion

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Cry of the Peacock, *Moonlight on the Avenue of Faith*, and *Caspian Rain* are the enticing titles of Gina Bonakdar Nahai's Iran-focused novels, published in 1991, 1999, and 2008 respectively. And the titles hold true: the narratives reflect the pain, melancholy and dream-like beauty conveyed in the titles as they divulge characters who strive to escape the restrictions of their community, religion, government, and gender. In the meantime, as the author depicts these fantasies of escape and attempts at flight –and frequently harshly punishes them–, the characters achieve a hitherto unknown feat, namely the depiction of Jewish Iranian main characters at the center of everyday Iranian life. Nay, the author goes further than that even as her characters become entangled in the lives of great or notable historical figures, from the Qajars to the Pahlavis, creating an arc of Jewish presence through Persian history.

Gina Nahai is a Jewish Iranian-American writer who uses her role as a writer of the Iranian diaspora in America to portray the life of another diaspora in Iran. Her forefront representation of the Jewish religious minority distinguishes her work from other best-sellers by Iranian-American writers. Even Dalia Sofer's powerful and popular *The Septembers of Shiraz* focuses solely on loss incurred as the result of the rise of the tyrannical Islamic Republic to power, whereas Nahai's account reaches into ancient times. The quality and poetic beauty of her work elevate it to yet another level and fuel the imagination. The novels paint with the broad brush of magic realism and give accounts of Jewish life in Iran, establishing the hitherto ignored Jewish presence within the story of Iran. By firmly placing her characters within Persian history, Nahai undermines the popular imagining and imaging of the Jew as the Other, the mere Zionist transgressor, and creates a new and modern collective Persian/Iranian narrative.

Nahai's novels exhibit a gradual progression, with various aspects evolving or devolving as might be the need. Her first novel, *Cry of the Peacock*, interweaves a narrative expanse of two hundred-some years with a recalled

2500-year history of Jewish life in Iran, reaching all the way to the post-Islamic Revolution era. This novel provides the richest ground for an examination of Nahai's fictional Persian Jewish identity. Her second novel, *Moonlight on the Avenue of Faith*, emphasizes the limitations of lives led by female Jewish characters in Iran as they are doubly limited for being Jewish and female, and denied opportunity for self-assertion and fulfillment. Making great use of the magic realism device, this novel shows the author's preoccupation with the potential of exile, a theme that is also lightly referenced in Nahai's fourth novel, *Caspian Rain*.

In examining Nahai's work, we see her craft imbue her characters and narratives with poignancy as she creates a literally magical world; we also ascertain the recurrent use of literary devices and modes of storytelling: First, her use of magic realism permits a circumvention of temporal and physical restrictions; therefore, her characters easily cross boundaries and revise the Persian Jewish story. Second, her centering of Jewish characters within the story of Iran transforms the traditionally marginalized or absent Persian Jew into a central presence in literature and thus the cultural memory of Persia. Third, Nahai responds to the restrictions of life in Iran for women and the Jewish community by evaluating the potential of exile and the American Dream.

Let us first consider how Nahai's use of magic realism serves her purpose in these novels. A well-read audience, especially those familiar with the works of Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Günter Grass, and Isabelle Allende already has a working knowledge of magic realism, a literary device that depicts extraordinary and fantastical events as realistic and renders characters and reader complicity in this form of reading as they suspend all judgment on the realism or probability of these magical occurrences or properties. This suspension of disbelief is central to reading Nahai, especially her first two novels as the opening paragraphs set the magical realist framework. The Prologue of *Cry of the Peacock* introduces the fantastical elements: "She had sat there in her clothes that shocked the eye and defied all Islamic codes, in layers of bright chiffon and fiery silk ... Her pockets were stuffed with gold and precious stones. In her shoes she had thousand-rial bills. Still, it was not her clothes that so shocked the mullahs, it was her age. Peacock the Jew was so old, they said, she remembered God when he was a child" (*Cry of the Peacock* 3-4). The first page of *Moonlight on the Avenue of Faith* urges the same suspension of disbelief: "She had been so light and delicate, so undisturbed by the rules of gravity and the drudgery of human existence, she had grown wings, one night

when the darkness was the color of her dreams, and flown into the star –studded night of Iran that claimed her. . . . Roxana the Angel had kept flying, never once bothered by the pull of the earth or the sound of her loved ones calling her” (*Moonlight* 5).

In her book *Magical Realism*, a historical and regional study of magic realism, Bowers asserts that the “predominant and increasingly frequent form of magical realism in the United States tends to be written by cross-cultural women with a political agenda relating to gender and the marginalization of cultures” (57). That specifically is what Nahai does in *Cry of the Peacock* and *Moonlight on the Avenue of Faith*: she brings to the forefront the stories of voiceless and unrepresented minorities by incorporating marginalized figures into a collective’s, or nation’s, story, undermining the versions authorized by monarchial or Islamic governments or the literary canon. As the most famous practitioner of magic realism, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, saw storytelling as “a way of expressing his own cultural context” and realized “that reality is also the myths of the common people, it is the beliefs, their legends; they are in their every day life and they affect their triumphs and failures” (Marquez qtd. in Bowers 40), Nahai too mirrors Marquez in using family lore as a source. Growing up with the stories of the Judeo-Persian community and of the women in her family, she incorporates the same confusion of time scales where characters, such as Esther the Soothsayer and the hundred-sixteen year old Peacock, live beyond usual life spans; she presents exaggerations and/or superstitions as reality, such as the changing of the order of night and day in the Jewish ghetto in Tehran at the birth of Roxana or the surrounding smell of sea and fish that causes a near-pogrom (*Moonlight* 26). To adapt Garcia Marquez’s phrase, Nahai expresses her own cultural context and allows beliefs and legends to be part of everyday life, affecting triumph and failure.

In achieving this suspension of disbelief in the reader, Nahai’s liberation from temporal, physical, and historical restrictions provides an unprecedented opportunity to address issues of Judo Persian history and identity.

Individual and communal identity derive from one’s own story and one’s role within a collective story. History, we frequently think of as a collection of facts, dates and events. Stories, however, are narratives that define individuals, communities, and nations. As such, the self-understanding of U. S. Americans is founded on Plymouth Rock, the Founding Fathers, and the Civil War. Revisions are constantly made as the story expands to include

the Native American tribes, the enslavement of Africans, and the Civil Rights movement. The self-understanding of Iranians is founded on 2500 years of monarchy, Cyrus the Great and Persepolis, linguistic and nationalist revival through Ferdowsi's *Shahanmeh*, the poetry of Hafiz and Saadi and Rumi, the magnificence of Isfahan, the nationalistic and democratic drives of the 20th century, the Green movement of the 21st. Like the story of any nation, it is a story of conflicts but it is also an homage to the power of the word, of literature. Conspicuous in this version of the Persian story is the absence of Persian Jews. Through her fiction, Nahai incorporates this community into the national story.

In her first book, *Cry of the Peacock*, Nahai is completely bound to the history of the Persian Jewish community and sets to recreate and thus revise it in its entirety. She recounts the lives of five generations of men and women in and outside the Jewish ghettos of Isfahan and Tehran, while asserting Jewish Iranian presence over the course of 2500 years. This effort is supported through a relentless incorporation of authentic locations and historical figures into the plot. As a result, Nahai's fiction is read by many of her reviewers as history. *The Washington Post* finds that it "shed[s] light on an enigmatic part of the world with which Westerners must reckon" (Titchener) and the *New York Newsday* finds that "Nahai is the only writer who has given us an intimate account of Jewish history in Iran during the last two centuries" (*Peacock* front).

In *Cry of the Peacock*, we have Nahai's most conspicuous use of authentic location and historical figures as it provides a general history of ancient Persia through two characters who overcome the boundaries of space and time: Esther the Soothsayer and her granddaughter Peacock. The first central character, Esther the Soothsayer seemingly wanders between the world of the living and the dead; the second central character, Peacock, has a life span of hundred-sixteen and even then proudly declares, "and still, I intend to live" (*Cry of the Peacock* 5).

Some highlights from these central characters' historical involvement in *Cry of the Peacock* follow: Esther the Soothsayer imagines a new life in Isfahan's Jewish ghetto, JuyyBar (13), fails and is shamed. She wanders into Shah Square and the Palace of Forty Pillars (24) only to run into Agha Muhammad Shah (25) and prophesise his end: "Beware ... of the avenging hands of slaves." (31). She visits her son every night in his dreams and whispers a story: of the time of creation and Ahura Mazda's twin sons Ohrmazd and Ahriman (38), of Persia and King Cyrus who "conquered Babylon.... Freed the Jews.... Became founder of the Persian Empire" (38), of Alexander

marching on Persia, followed by the Turks and Muslims as “Islam brought an age of enlightenment ... a tolerance of other religions. ... But in the fourteenth century, Ishmael I ... made Persia Shiite ... The mullahs declared the followers of all other religions ... impure and untouchable” (40). At Fath Ali Shah’s court, she predicts “You will die old ... at peace in your throne” (54), and as Esther’s granddaughter, the second central character is born, the Soothsayer says,

A man shall come, riding from the north, with blood on his hands and the anger of God in his eyes. He shall sit on the Throne of Sun, and with a sweep of his hand he shall reach across his empire to free our people. His son shall call himself the King of Kings, heir to the empire of Cyrus. He shall raise this child from the ashes and give her pride. But beware! For the King of Kings shall fall, and his throne shall crumble, and the men of God shall paint the skies of this nation with blood. (89)

Aptly, the child receiving this foreshadowing of the Peacock Throne is called Peacock. During the 1871 famine, Peacock is asleep as her nine-year old sister Hannah is dressed in bridal finery (102-5), led through Isfahan’s Char Bagh, Shah Square and abandoned in Ali Ghapoo to finally be taken into the Palace of Forty Pillars by Nasser-ed-Din Shah’s son, Zil-el-Sultan as his child bride (104-5). Peacock’s husband, Solomon the Man, leaves Peacock for Tala, granddaughter to Nasser-ed-Din Shah, and daughter of Hannah (127). Peacock’s move to Tehran follows her through “Tekkyeh, Tehran’s central square” (160) to Sar Cheshmeh and the Square of Cannons and makes possible meetings between Peacock and Reza Khan (180) who learns that he is to “Never underestimate the friendship of a Jew” (181) and who when disheartened by lack of success in his studies is consoled by Peacock, “Doesn’t matter what they say ... Doesn’t matter that you were a peasant. You’re going to be King someday” (182). Peacock’s son Arash is trained by Reza Khan (197), is present at the assassination of Nasser-ed-Din Shah (198-202), and guards the young king, Ahmad Shah (221). In 1926 Peacock helps with the “building of a crown, the mending of the Throne of the Sun” (241) for Reza Khan’s coronation. Reza Shah opens the ghettos (257) and hires Peacock’s son-in-law to purchase ladies ready-to-wear apparel from Europe before he bans the veil (260). And when in his support of Hitler, Reza Shah betrays the Persian Jews (267), it is Peacock who asks him, “What of the Jews you saved?” (269). Peacock’s family witnesses the rise and fall of Mossadeq (295ff.) and the family saga comes to an end with the Islamic Revolution as Peacock is nearly executed for speaking truth to power (332, 336). The only true survivors of this family are those who

have made their way to America (308, 320).

In the second novel, *Moonlight on the Avenue of Faith*, the regional and historical scope are smaller, as if having placed Persian Jews within the mainstream of Persian history and having acknowledge the previous generations that bound her, Nahai is now free to move on to individualistic stories focusing on Persian Jewish women who dream of flight and freedom. And the sea and “everlasting waters” (*Moonlight* 36) of the Caspian come to represent hope and freedom. But, significantly, within the general history of Persia in *Cry of the Peacock* and *Moonlight on the Avenue of Faith*, Nahai has embedded various details of Persian Jewish history and life: the massacres of Persian Jews in Tabriz (55), Juyy Bar (73), and Kermanshah (212); the recurrence of the blood libel (55); the restriction to ghettos; the wearing of identifying clothing (99); the lack of “access to fresh produce” for Jews (*Moonlight* 15), and restrictions on Jewish cemeteries, such as Beheshtieh “which the Muslims had not allowed to expand, so that for centuries corpses had been placed one on top of the other” (*Moonlight* 71).

In *Moonlight on the Avenue of Faith* Nahai’s intense focus on Jewish Iranian women and the use of magic realism allow a coming to life of fantasies of escape: the women flee their communities, their homes, their men, their bodies, and their obedience to the laws of society and nature. These attempts at flight draw increasingly large circles and finally bridge the gap between the East and the West, Iran and the United States, as Nahai’s plots and characters straddle both. Ultimately the characters are successful if they find their way West, to the land of opportunities, where they are awarded space for individualism. “Chances and choices” (*Moonlight* 209). come with life in the U.S. and the redemptive power of exile.

Today, second or third-generation immigrants might define the American Dream as the elusive “green light on the other side”; however, in its original form it is the belief in freedom, equality, and the right to pursuit of happiness. This early definition holds for Nahai’s characters. In *Cry of the Peacock* and *Caspian Rain*, the survivors are those who immigrate to America. In *Moonlight on the Avenue of Faith*, reinvention is only successful if it occurs in the West, free of the restrictions of the East. Reinventions in the East, such as Alexandra the Cat who reinvents herself as a displaced Russian (*Moonlight* 42) or Golnaz who reinvents herself as the German Fraulein Claude (*Moonlight* 101) are all doomed to fail. In Iran, these attempts are transgressions of moral, social, or sexual restrictions. Only those who in their hearts never subscribe to

the restrictive rules and eventually turn their backs on Iran achieve a measure of happiness: those women are Mercedez who “at sixteen ...stopped going to school altogether and spent her time mostly in Tehran, hunting for a rich Muslim man” (*Moonlight* 57), and Effat who meets an Englishman, takes him to a brothel in “ ‘New City’ where ... She showed him her bare breasts.” (*Moonlight* 124-26). Ultimately, the West, “The Land of Choices and Chances” (209) is where they end up. Mercedez, in Hollywood, “had managed to ... to reinvent her life.... had become rich in her own right” (226). Effat marries her Englishman and becomes “the mother of two sons and a daughter” (*Moonlight* 126). As Lili, the young narrator of *Moonlight on the Avenue of Faith*, pines for her parents and grieves her state of quasi orphanhood, Mercedez aptly points out, “I had to cheat and lie and sleep with a dozen men just to get myself out of that ghetto and to America. Your father just handed you this freedom on a platter and let you be whoever you want. If you’re smart, you’ll thank him and never want to see him again ” (*Moonlight* 261) and Lili eventually agrees by realizing that “they had sent me across the ocean and, by doing so, given me a new destiny.” (*Moonlight* 263)

Interestingly, Nahai’s view of America is not uncritical. After all, “Americans don’t get devastated and don’t lose their cool at funerals because they have no idea what real loss is. It doesn’t affect them as completely, as irreversibly...” (*Caspian Rain* 14). America is a land of Chances and Choices, not the promise of happiness. Some of the closing lines of *Moonlight on the Avenue of Faith* say it clearly “This much I know about living in exile ... You can love the old country all you want. Sometimes, exile is the best thing that can happen to people...*Maybe here, in this land of chances and choices, [the journey] does not need to end in sorrow...It is possible to know and, at last, feel at peace.* (*Moonlight* 359, 371, 374).

In conclusion, Nahai’s novels are not scholarly examinations of Iran but rather broadly painted accounts of Jewish life in Iran, where Nahai has had to acknowledge that she is a product of generations before her. They bring with them remembrance and obligation while she must also look ahead to the future. These obligations she has fulfilled through undermining physical, regional, and historical boundaries, culminating in the revelation of the redemptive power of exile and the potential of freedom.