Hamsa

Journal of Judaic and Islamic Studies

2 | 2015

Varia

Becoming Iranian: The Iranian Jewish Negotiation of Impurity Out of the *Mahaleh* and In Exile as represented in literary texts by exiled Iranian Jewish women

Jennifer Langer

Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/hamsa/761>

DOI: 10.4000/hamsa.761

ISSN: 2183-2633

Publisher

CIDEHUS - Centro Interdisciplinar de História Culturas e Sociedades da Universidade de Évora

Electronic reference

Jennifer Langer, "Becoming Iranian: The Iranian Jewish Negotiation of Impurity Out of the *Mahaleh* and In Exile as represented in literary texts by exiled Iranian Jewish women", *Hamsa* [Online], 2 | 2015, Online since 31 December 2015, connection on 13 May 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/hamsa/761> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/hamsa.761>

Hamsa est mise à disposition selon les termes de la Licence Creative Commons Attribution - Pas d'Utilisation Commerciale - Pas de Modification 4.0 International.

Becoming Iranian: The Iranian Jewish Negotiation of Impurity Out of the *Mahaleh* and In Exile as represented in literary texts by exiled Iranian Jewish women

Jennifer Langer

SOAS Centre for Gender Studies

Director of Exiled Writers Ink¹

Resumo:

Neste artigo analiso a questão de alienação e de pertença relativas à permanente projeção da noção de impureza sobre os judeus do Irão, durante o reinado de Mohammad Reza Shah, tal como surge representado na memória cultural de textos literários contemporâneos, da autoria de mulheres judias iranianas exiladas. Discuto, além disso, a mudança dos protagonistas relativamente à questão da impureza ou *najes*, que se verifica no seu novo espaço de exílio. Os indivíduos que fugiram do Irão, antes, durante e depois da revolução islâmica de 1979, eram membros da comunidade judaica aí estabelecida há 2.700 anos. Viveram durante o reinado de Mohammed Reza Shah e na sociedade muçulmana shi'ita, num contexto de transformação do estado e das ideologias religiosas, até 1989, quando fugiram para a América e para a Bélgica. Os textos literários são espaços de resistência e de negação, representando o desejo inato dessas mulheres em serem vistas como iranianas, numa reação à percepção da sua rejeição como judias.

Palavras-chave: Irão, judeus, Shi'a, impureza, pertença

Abstract:

In this paper I examine the question of alienation and belonging in relation to the continued projection of impurity on the Jews of Iran outside the *mahaleh*, during the reign of Mohammad Reza Shah as it arises in the representation of cultural memory in contemporary literary texts by exiled Iranian Jewish women. In addition I discuss the protagonists' shift regarding impurity or *najes* that occurs in their new exilic space. The subjects, who fled from Iran before, during and after the 1979 Islamic Revolution, were members of the Jewish community established in Iran for 2,700 years. They lived in Shi'a Muslim society in the context of shifting state and religious ideologies during Mohammed Reza Shah's reign and the Revolutionary and post-Revolutionary periods up to 1989 when they fled to America and Belgium. The literary texts are sites of resistance and denial and represent the innate desire of the Iranian Jewish women to be seen as belonging to Iran whilst resisting their rejection as Jews.

Key Words: Iran, Jews, Shi'a, impurity, belonging

¹ www.exiledwriters.co.uk

The protagonists in the memoir *Wedding Song* by Farideh Goldin and the novel *Moonlight on the Avenue of Faith* by Gina Nahai initially live in the *mahaleh* where Jews traditionally lived because they were forbidden from associating with others, facing severe restrictions. Because of the fundamental importance of the Shi'a Islamic concepts of *taharat* (purity) and *nejasat* (impurity) non-believers such as Jews, were considered impure so that any contact with them or objects touched by them required the ritualistic act of purification. Sarshar suggests that the *mahaleh* represents a long history of discrimination, marginalisation and disenfranchisement that began with the Safavid Dynasty². In *Wedding Song* the inhabitants' fear permeates their lives and unmitigated verbal abuse by the Muslims humiliates them, causing shame and constituting a potent wound. Farideh conveys the Jews' constant struggle against the interiorisation of humiliation, shame and powerlessness. Shopkeepers forbid their fruit to be touched by Jews because Muslims would refuse to buy it but the Jews feel unable to protest (WS: 123). Farideh and her grandmother are abused when they refuse to make a purchase in the market: 'Cheap Jews! The shopkeeper screamed at us. People turned around and stared. A few laughed' (*ibid*: 96). The continuous trauma is due to the fact that Shi'a Muslims perceive them as symbols of religious impurity. The trauma of anti-Semitism in the *mahaleh* stems from Jewish experiences of the present, as well as from narratives and the silences of those who were past victims so that individual and collective wounds are temporally connected. Jewish silence in response to the Muslim accusation of Jewish guilt because of alleged Jewish impurity is represented in the literary texts. The protagonists eventually move out of the *mahaleh* to live in mainstream space amongst the Muslim majority.

Under Reza Shah (r.1925-1941) Jews began leaving the *mahaleh* yet it is apparent that Jewish belonging was still problematic under Mohammad Reza Shah (r.1941-1979) as they continued to be considered ritually impure by conservative Shi'a Muslims³. The belief in the impure Jew had deep roots that could not be instantly eradicated⁴. Historians concur that the ritual impurity status imposed by Shi'ite Islam on the Jews has affected Iranians permanently in the form of anti-Jewish sentiment⁵.

Out of the Mahaleh

My objective is to explore whether a tension exists in and between the Jewish desire to belong to the Iranian nation and the trauma of fear or perpetration of overt or covert anti-Semitism because of the Shi'a notion of the impure Jew. I set the discussion within the parameters of theories of shame and Jewish self-hatred in order to assess the ways in which the varying degrees of attempted assimilation represented in the literary texts, conform to or resist the theories. Further, I examine the ways in which trauma, gender and class are intertwined in the Jewish attempt to claim belonging to the Iranian nation.

A radical shift is represented in the Jewish relationship to the Muslims out of the *mahaleh* in Muslim mainstream space. Some protagonists in the novel *Caspian Rain* by Gina Nahai consider that the Shah has granted them freedom from being despised and inferior and that they are more accepted and welcomed by the Iranian nation than at any other period in history (CR: 137; MO: 52). Yet, given the explicit trauma of persistent oppression in the *mahaleh* which is an individual and collective wound, for most Jews fear and mistrust are intrinsic to interacting with Muslims resulting in the new space being an unstable, liminal

² Hooshang Ebrami, "The Impure Jew", in Houman Sarshar, ed., *Esther's Children: A Portrait of Iranian Jews*, Beverly Hills, Calif. and Philadelphia, The Center for Iranian Jewish Oral History and The Graduate Society Foundation, in association with the Jewish Publication Society, 2002, p. 104.

³ Robert Wistrich, *A Lethal Obsession: Anti-Semitism from Antiquity to the Global Jihad*, New York, Random House, 2010, p. 839.

⁴ Hooshang Ebrami, "The Impure Jew" ..., p. 102.

⁵ David Yeroushalmi, *The Jews of Iran in the Nineteenth Century*, Leiden, Brill, 2009, p. Xxxii.

space. In *Wedding Song* once Farideh's family moves out of the *mahaleh* to a more affluent Muslim neighbourhood, they are compelled to negotiate relations with the Muslims and hence, cross a border into an unfamiliar, Muslim space. The protagonists negotiate the new border space in terms of past trauma, of alienation and of their aim to gain acceptance as Iranians.

Yet, Jews are represented as possessing agency manifested in their more explicit attitude towards Muslims. Farideh's family possesses an uncompromising, mistrustful attitude towards Farideh's new Muslim friends, her uncle ordering her to desist from mixing with them as they will rob the family (WS: 120). In *Caspian Rain*, Jewish Chamedooni who is politically active with Muslim students against the Shah, resists his elders' warnings that the Muslims will eventually stab him because he is a Jew (CR: 184). In the memoir *Land of No* by Roya Hakakian, when Uncle Ardi intends to marry Muslim Neela, Roya's family creates and recites spells: 'He'll ruin us. We'll be shamed...A goy!' (NO: 65). Similarly, some Muslims are determined to resist the ostensible Jewish threat to their subjectivity. Overt anti-Semitism is represented by the neighbour's son raising a colossal, bright red, glass swastika in his bedroom facing Farideh's house (WS: 122). Rubbish is dumped by the family's house and someone sets fire to their trees. These anti-Semitic acts constitute traumatic, unexpected emotional shock acting as a signifier for Farideh's immediate conclusion of incessant anti-Semitism. She suspects the Muslims of perpetuating negative perceptions about the Jews convinced that Jews are hated for being meek and poor and are despised when wealthy and strong (*ibid*). The protagonists thereby attempt to withstand the power of abjection which threatens them in the shock of the sudden Jewish transposition to a Muslim space. The abject exists in the space between Jewish and Muslim identities and the subject feels endangered. Therefore, the abject must be radically cast out from the place of the subject in an attempt to prevent the object's transgression of the border space⁶.

Farideh is fearful when meeting Muslim girls who themselves are wary having never met a Jewish person. The Muslim girls maintain their distance from Farideh who assumes they are concerned that her touch might defile them. When she uses a drinking fountain at school, a few girls assault her protesting that she makes the drinking fountain *najes*. The literal sign of the abject is the food the Muslim girls might offer Farideh which she suspects will be poisoned and will certainly be non-kosher (WS: 119). Similarly, the Muslim girls' embedded belief that Passover matzos is made from the blood of Muslim children⁷ means that the Jewish food is a literal sign of the abject for them. Kristeva suggests that food loathing is the most archaic form of abjection⁸ and both cases here would confirm this reading insofar as the food is constructed as life-threatening. Both groups might be read as metonyms for abjection which is a rite of defilement and pollution representing exclusion or taboo. The Jewish minority is insistent on maintaining their boundaries and the Muslims perpetrate anti-Semitism to maintain their borders.

Having traditionally been denoted by Shi'a Muslims as impure, unclean and inferior, the Jews aim to gain acceptance as Iranians. My examination of attempted assimilation by the protagonists revolves around notions of Jewish self-hatred which are mainly set in Western contexts. Gilman defines it as a term that is interchangeable with Jewish anti-Judaism or Jewish anti-Semitism and that expresses the mode of self-denigration by Jews⁹. They accept

⁶ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. L.S. Roudiez, New York, Columbia University Press, 1982, p. 2.

⁷ Azar Nafisi writes about Iranian popular beliefs about Jews: 'It was also natural for some families to shun the minorities because they were "unclean"...the Jews were not just dirty, they drank innocent children's blood' - Azar Nafisi, *Things I've Been Silent About: Memories*, London, Heinemann, 2009, p. 29.

⁸ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror...*, p. 2.

⁹ Sander Gilman, *Jewish Self-Hatred Anti-Semitism and the Hidden Language of the Jews*, Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press, 1986, p. 1.

and internalise the negative image that others possess of them but attempt to deny this negative image by behaving in accordance with the rules of the dominant group in order to gain its acceptance¹⁰. As such, the Jews must deny part of their identity and the intimation by the reference group is that if the Jews abandon their difference, they will become part of the dominant group. This need to minimise or negate Jewishness implies a failure of national identity and further suggests that Jewish identity remains controlled by the hegemony.

Some Jewish protagonists aim to avert the trauma of impurity and anti-Semitism by integrating in order to be considered Iranian and attempt to negotiate belonging through exteriority, mimicry and dissimulation. Gilman's analysis of exteriority conforms to Sartre's who postulates that the Jewish community suffers from exteriority meaning that they perceive themselves with the eyes of the mainstream group and are petrified that they will conform to the hegemonic stereotype possessed by this group¹¹. He elaborates explaining that while 'the Jew' observes himself from the perspective of the non-Jew, he feels detached from himself, becoming a witness of himself. Yet, Gilman develops Sartre's concept of the inauthentic Jew, suggesting that Jewish self-hatred is manifested by the outsiders' acceptance of the stereotype of themselves¹². Some protagonists' behaviour and inhibitions reflect the unconscious strategy of exteriority which is indicative of trauma because it suggests an incoherent, fragmented self-caused by memory of oppression and by the unequal power dynamics of Muslims and Jews. Farideh's father has difficulties adjusting to a Muslim area: "He was obviously missing the security of its tall wall and insulated community, where all faces were familiar, where he didn't have to keep on a mask of politeness, humility, and even servitude at all times to present neighbours with the opposite of what he thought they expected of a Jew" (WS: 122).

While Gilman's assumption is that behaving in accordance with majority precepts, which entails a minimisation of manifestations of Jewish identity, indicates Jewish self-hatred, in *Land of No* Roya's initial reaction when first socialising with the Muslim Maroofs does not suggest Jewish self-hatred. The struggle for a shared Iranian identity with Muslims involves risk-taking. Roya describes a subtle but pronounced shift in mood and physical comfort from being among Jews: "Being amongst Muslims, friends or neighbours, was like being in my party dress...I had to adjust myself into fitting into something less familiar" (NO: 56). She interprets the new dynamic as a positive, phenomenological experience given her increased awareness: "But it also gave me the chance to see myself anew...I liked how all of us reshuffled to put on our dress as a family, to make room for the Maroofs" (*ibid*). The episode seemingly provides the Hakakians with the opportunity to interact with the majority group and does not suggest an acceptance of a negative Jewish stereotype. However, Roya subsequently re-interprets the episode more cynically questioning whether it was a charade or the attempt at shedding Jewish differences in order to merge with the Muslim Maroofs as Iranians. She becomes aware of her family's concern with exteriority exemplified in the need to scrub themselves clean to prove they are even cleaner than the Maroofs in their attempt to resist the stereotype of Jewish impurity. The ramification of the encounter is that Roya represents the negotiation of subjectivity as a crisis and trauma as she fears the engulfment of her Jewish identity to become Iranian and is therefore fearful about being situated in a space of ambiguity about her identity. The encounter subverts the borders of the self through minimising manifestations of Jewish identity for the sake of claiming an Iranian identity.¹³ Therefore, Roya's response to the episode does not suggest Jewish self-hatred but, on the contrary, the fear of Jewish effacement, a dynamic which results in a tension between Jewish and Iranian identities.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

¹¹ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew*, New York, Schocken, 1965, p. 95.

¹² Sander Gilman, *Jewish Self-Hatred...*, p. 2.

¹³ In some respects, there are parallels with the Kristevan concept of abjection.

As the Jewish community is fearful of being constructed as society's exteriority, it adopts what I call passive resistance to anti-Semitism, attempting to mimic the dominant group's behaviour in an attempt to make themselves similar to their surrounding environment. The only way to survive and redress the lack of not belonging is to resort to mimicry of the Muslims. The adaptive behaviour of mimicry is a means for the Jews to be assimilated and conforms to the implicit demand by the reference group that on condition that the Jews renounce their difference, they can join it in the hope of acceptance: "Become like us, abandon your difference, and you may be one with us"¹⁴. This mimicry is evident in *Caspian Rain* in which the wealthy, Jewish Arbabs embrace a national Iranian identity by mixing with other upper class Iranians comprising Jews, Muslims and Baha'is. The factor that therefore unites them in an Iranian identity is membership of the upper class. To integrate with the upper class, the Arbabs minimise their observance of Jewish traditions: "they're modern Jews who believe themselves Iranians first and Jews second" (CR: 137). Nonetheless, their continuing acknowledgement of Jewish identity in the form of the retention of facets of Jewish observance is analogous to the manifestation of Jewish self-loathing which arose from the specific circumstances of German Jews and which resulted from their attempts to assimilate into German society and to distance themselves from their Jewish identity¹⁵. Similarly, German Jewish self-loathing is not an absolute rejection of Jewish identity and practice but an assimilated form. The Arbabs observe Yom Kippur but not Rosh Hashanah because they celebrate the Christian New Year and Nowruz and swear on the holy Qu'ran instead of the Torah, wearing gold plaques showing the Shah, instead of a Star of David (*ibid*: 138). Therefore, their religious and cultural practice suggests a confusion of identities in their attempt to be wholly Iranian. Because the Shah protects the Jews, many upper-class Western-educated Muslims embrace the Jews sincerely believing there is no difference between a Jew and a Muslim. In *Caspian Rain*, Yaas observes cynically that in return for acceptance as Iranians, the Jews diminish their Jewishness taking pride in their acceptance (*ibid*). However, despite the apparent assimilation, a disjuncture exists between the affluent Jews deluding and persuading themselves of Muslim acceptance, and the perception by most Muslims of the Jews as outsiders. Yaas observes that most Muslims believe Jews are not Iranian because they are imposters and spies of Israel implementing Israel's order to control Iran, as they have controlled America. Their aim is to become rich by exploiting God-fearing Muslims (*ibid*: 137). The second reason Muslims believe Jews are not Iranian is that for centuries the Jews were second-class citizens condemned by the mullahs to living in poverty in the *mahaleh*. Hence, these Muslims perceive the Jews as both threatening and inferior. Therefore, irrespective of Jewish self-definition, the Jews are negatively defined by most Muslims.

Some protagonists are fearful that any manifestations of Jewishness will mar belonging particularly as they associate the latter with impurity demonisation and exclusion in the *mahaleh*. While Gilman constantly refers to the *myths* of society about the outsider group¹⁶, the *mahaleh* Jewish community were actually designated as religiously impure by Shi'a Islam. Jewish self-hatred is demonstrated by the assimilated Jews' abhorrence of traditional Jews' continued practices and customs which they perceive as a betrayal of their aim to be considered Iranian. Self-contempt and self-blaming are facets of Jewish self-hatred. Indeed, Gilman maintains that the minority group identifies with the reference group's definition of their unacceptable otherness, and therefore projects the flawed characteristics onto an extension of themselves¹⁷. Some of the assimilated Jews apply these unacceptable

¹⁴ Sander Gilman, *Jewish Self-Hatred...*, p. 2.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 298. Jewish self-hatred is a term that gained particular currency from the early twentieth century to the beginning of Nazism and wider circulation from the philosopher Theodor Lessing's work *Der Jüdische Selbsthass* (1930).

¹⁶ Sander Gilman, *Jewish Self-Hatred...*, p. 5.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

characteristics to *mahaleh* Jews as they feel shame about their own *mahaleh* roots and according to Gilman the Western German Jews similarly projected their Jewish self-loathing on to the poorer, Eastern Jews¹⁸. They thereby created the image of a Jew who embodied all the negative qualities that they feared within themselves. According to Tangney and Dearing shame involves negative evaluations of the self-accompanied by a sense of worthlessness and powerlessness¹⁹. Those who feel shame blame others for negative events and are prone to resentful anger and hostility. In *Moonlight* Fräulein Claude or Golnaz from a poor Jewish background married to wealthy Teymur, is repelled by Roxanna's *mahaleh* relatives because they remind Fräulein Claude of her own humble roots (MO: 115). In *Caspian Rain* when Bahar invites her husband's Jewish contacts for a meal they are deterred by "the Jewishness" in her food, manners, accent and choice of words (CR:71). Because of their wish to escape from this past the seemingly assimilated Jews adopt behaviour that is its antithesis.

The need to adopt mimicry is ostensibly indicative of the trauma of continuing lack of a coherent self and stable space of belonging. Adorno and Horkheimer maintain that mimicry is a form of death of the self that is undertaken for protection because of fear²⁰. They assert that undisciplined mimicry, indicative of domination, is inscribed in the dominated and transgenerationally transmitted by Jews, thereby displaying the old fear²¹. Due to the extensive imitating, the self become destabilised and I question whether it becomes purely other. Indeed, Sartre's stance is that because of the necessity imposed upon the Jew of subjecting himself/herself to self-examination, the Jewish person finally assumes a phantom personality that haunts him/her and which is not his/her personality but which is himself/herself as others perceive him/her²². Yet, these concepts are not substantiated by the Jews in the literary texts who become self and other to varying extents as they become false others because of the split or layered self incorporating both self and other which is an ambivalent self. Rather than Jewish self-hatred, this layered behaviour incorporating Jewish insider autonomy, suggests an ingrained strategy for achieving an Iranian identity to successfully function in Muslim society. Crucially, mimicry here is solely imitative behaviour while retaining an underlying Jewish identity and in my view, therefore, it is disciplined rather than undisciplined mimicry.

In *Wedding Song* and *Land of No* the protagonists use language as an instrument of mimicry. Judeo-Persian is inseparable from their *mahaleh* roots and Farideh comments that all the Jews were trying to disassociate themselves from the language in the hope of integrating into the larger community (WS: 140). Uncle Ardi had shed "ghetto" speech and the inflections of the Jewish dialect (NO: 50). Gilman's argument (1986: 15) is that nonetheless, the reference group perceives the minority as lacking possession of the dominant language because of the latter's own hidden language which represents the real enunciation of their Jewish otherness²³. In an episode in *Land of No* Uncle Ardi's Jewish business contacts initially assume he is Muslim as he is an almost assimilated Jew (NO: 49). They are obsequious, well-mannered and speak flawless Persian, quoting passages from the Qu'ran. However, when they learn he is Jewish, they revert to the Judeo-Persian dialect and satirically avenge the Jewish need for mimicry of the majority by using the pejorative term, *goy* to refer to the Muslims and by jokingly asserting that Muhammad was an "illiterate war-mongering bandit" and that he paid a learned Jew to ghost-write the Qu'ran (*ibid*: 50). They also feel able to openly criticise the

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 270.

¹⁹ June Price Tangney and Ronda L. Dearing, *Shame and Guilt*, New York, London, Guilford Press, 2002, p. 18.

²⁰ Benjamin Adorno and Max Horkheimer, "Elements of Anti-Semitism" in *Dialectics of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming, London, Verso, 1979 [1944], p. 180.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 182.

²² Jean-Paul Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew...*, p. 78.

²³ Sander Gilman, *Jewish Self-Hatred...*, p. 15.

behaviour of fellow Jews in business but this insider self-criticism is not analagous to self-hatred. This antithesis suggests that self-identity is dependent upon the existence of the Muslims but that Jewish subjectivity enables identity to be controlled by the Jewish self and this duality is an effect of the Jewish desire for acceptance as Iranians.

The notion of a layered, Jewish self is substantiated by the protagonists resorting to dissimulation and equivocation to ensure survival and to respond to the fear of persecution. The practice of dissimulation linked to the internalised fear of persecution had become an integral part of the Judeo-Persian psyche that could not be eradicated from the collective instinct. Iranian Jews adhered to a tradition of dissimulation both for survival and to safeguard their ancient heritage and Houman Sarshar constructs constant dissimulation as a positive paradigm which is an intrinsic part of Iranian Jewish identity and collective memory. It is evident that, rather than Jewish self-hatred, Jewish layered behaviour suggests the compulsion to preserve Jewish identity²⁴. In *Caspian Rain* (CR: 138) some Muslims appear to embrace the Jews but being sophisticated, merely pretend to do so. This covert anti-Semitism takes the form of disguising their views in interaction with the Jewish person while promulgating them. Yet in addition, because of their innate insecurity, the Shi'a Muslims similarly practise dissimulation which is *taqqiyah*²⁵. Furthermore, all Iranians generally, conceal their secret intentions (*baten*) and their external aspects (*zاهر*). They use various techniques to protect the self and to advance personal goals, notably *taqqiyah* and *zerangi*; the latter is cleverness, meaning the art of disguising one's intent to obtain what is wanted. Hence, neither Jew nor Muslim discloses the self leading to a layered Jewish self communicating with a layered Muslim self. Yet, more dissimulation is necessitated by the Jews for Muslim acceptance and to avert anti-Semitism.

However, the adoption of the diminution of Jewish tradition and of exteriority, mimicry and dissimulation result in what I call 'passive' anti-Semitism which is a further trauma. By 'passive' anti-Semitism, I mean anti-Semitism as a lack of recognition of Jews, Judaism and the Jewish heritage resulting in their negation. Both G. Cohen (IV 26.6.2009) and Yacoubian (IV 21.10.2009) assert that Iranian Muslims lack any knowledge about Judaism. Hakakian (IV 2.9.2006) insists that Jewish obscurity is the worst trauma the Muslims have inflicted upon the Jews. The invisibility of the Jews to the Muslims is caused by the Jews adopting an Iranian identity which elides their Jewish identity. Although in my view, exteriority, mimicry and dissimulation constitute a defense mechanism to disavow the trauma of the fear of not belonging, mimicry also disguises and conceals nature. Crucially, the Jewish adoption of mimicry in their attempt to achieve an Iranian identity entails an exclusively Jewish approach towards the Muslims resulting in a lack of Muslim reciprocity. Hakakian contends that Jews have always been admired for being "completely Iranian" meaning indistinguishable from Muslims (IV 2.9.2006). Because of the Jews' Iranian identity, Muslim Iranians have never gained an insight into Jewish life: "Muslim Iranians...have never known us as Jews: in our synagogues, wrapped in prayer shawls, at our holiday tables recounting the history of our struggles" (*ibid*). Farideh comments that her progressive Muslim friend has no knowledge of the oppression Jews had felt for generations (WS: 183) while Yaas observes that most Muslims have never seen or tasted traditional Jewish-Iranian food (CR: 82). The protagonists thereby

²⁴ Houman Sarshar, "The Culture Heroes: Dissimulation and the Legacy of Esther's Children" in Houman Sarshar, ed., *Esther's Children: A Portrait of Iranian Jews*. Beverly Hills, Calif. and Philadelphia, The Center for Iranian Jewish Oral History and The Graduate Society Foundation, in association with the Jewish Publication Society, 2002, p. xviii.

²⁵ Taqqiyah developed when Shi'ites were endangered or persecuted. Beliefs, convictions, ideas, feelings and opinions are concealed or disguised at a time of danger in order to avert physical or mental harm. Some Shi'te sects survived and developed in this way under the dominant Sunnis - Moojan Momen, *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam: The History and Doctrines of Twelver Shi'ism*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1995, p. 39.

enunciate a desire for Muslim recognition as Jews as it is a trauma that their Jewish identity is unacknowledged.

Indeed, the dynamic of non-recognition of Jewish identity is reminiscent of Sartre's discourse of the democrat's perspective²⁶. While the anti-Semite sees in Jews only their Jewishness and not their humanity, the democrat regards Jews exclusively as human beings. Paradoxically, the anti-Semites and the democrats both long for a world without Jews. The anti-Semite wants to eliminate the Jews and the progressive wants them to be assimilated and thus become only citizens. The democrat advocates the universal subject of the rights of man and the citizen and fears collectivities. Yet, national Iranian identity is that of the privileged (Islamic) collectivity and hence Jewish identity is not recognised as Iranian. Yet, the protagonists resist the democrat's call as they desire recognition as "authentic" Jews, meaning Iranian Jews. This is a facet that differs from Sartre's imagined "authentic" Jew who is defined solely as a Jew by the anti-Semite: "for he accepts the obligation to live in a situation that is defined precisely by the fact that it is unlivable; he derives his pride from his humiliation"²⁷. Drawing on Sartre's notion of the "authentic" Jew's recognition that he is a projection of the anti-Semite's imagination, Baum stresses the Jew's consciousness of his negative situation and position of passivity and humiliation²⁸. Accordingly, she postulates that the "authentic" Jew lacks agency and therefore needs advocates such as Sartre, to testify for him/her. However, the obverse applies to the Iranian Jews as they are aware of the dangers of being "inauthentic" Jews, resulting in a lack of agency and their own voice. Therefore, it is the "inauthentic" Jew, rather than the "authentic", who recognises himself/herself. The effect of Iranian Jewish shame, some self-hatred and layered behaviour is not only the diminution of Jewish identity or the adoption of an ambivalent identity, but also the invisibility and insignificance of the Jewish religion for the Muslim majority. This paradigm suggests that manifestations of Jewish identity are incompatible with Iranian identity and that adopting an Iranian identity and suppressing their Jewish identity is indicative of exile as they are overtly alienated from one facet of their identity.

Jewish Gendered Trauma

In some Jewish women's attempts to achieve an Iranian identity, Jewish shame and self-hatred are particularly marked and function to project qualities unacceptable in their own self-image on to Jewish women whose qualities they deem to resemble those of poor, traditional, *mahaleh* Jews who were denoted impure. The contempt for female *mahaleh* Jews by more assimilated Jewish women represents a Jewish, gendered, class divide. Affluent Jewish women attempt to obviate anti-Semitism and claim an Iranian national identity by demonstrating to the dominant Muslims that they are not inferior Jews. This involves forgetting, concealing and repressing their humble, *mahaleh*, Jewish roots which is a traumatic memory reminding them that they were once denigrated, meek and poor which in their view equates to being the despised *mahaleh* Jews. The derision represents the contempt for the self as innately *mahaleh* Jews. Sartre differentiates between the "authentic" and "inauthentic" Jew suggesting that the authentic Jew lives to the full his condition as Jew whereas the inauthentic Jew denies it or attempts to escape from it²⁹. The main problem with Sartre's position is that he denies any subjectivity to the Jewish person as he claims that it is the non-Jew who designates a person as a Jew and that it is the anti-Semite who makes the Jew³⁰ and defines Jews in exclusively *negative* terms. While he applies the notion of "authentic" and "inauthentic" Jews to the

²⁶ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew...*, p.57.

²⁷ Ibid. p. 137.

²⁸ Devorah Baum, "Trauma: An Essay on Jewish Guilt", *English Studies in Africa* 52:1 (2009), p.20.

²⁹ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew...*, p. 91.

³⁰ Ibid. p. 69.

framing of Jews by non-Jews, the protagonists attempt to integrate through the Jewish community hierarchy of “authentic” and “inauthentic” Jews which the wealthier Jews apply to poorer Jews.

Exteriority results in Jewish female mimicry of wealthy women, which is inscribed by means of the Jewish female body. In *Moonlight*, Golnaz, a former “*mahaleh* Jew”, aims to eradicate the memory of Jewish impurity by creating a new, fictitious, identity through her changed physical appearance and behaviour, which is of a wealthy, elegant, German woman called Fräulein Claude (MO:102). Her other motivation for her new role is her desire to marry Teymur. Rather than adopting an Iranian identity, she places herself outside Iranian Jewish identities at risk of continuing to be categorised as impure, yet she has still interiorised the trauma and shame of being an impure, *mahaleh* Jew. She thereby ostensibly eradicates her Jewish identity in an act of Jewish self-hatred. Fräulein Claude is therefore devastated when her son decides to marry Roxanna, a poor, *mahaleh* Jew, to the extent that she tries to poison her to prevent the marriage. She is scathing about Roxanna’s relatives: “twenty-seven ghetto-dwelling Jews...with under-nourished faces and patched-up clothes” (MO: 115).

Because they are desirous of belonging, the assimilated Jewish women attempt to repress the construct of the mythical Jew mediated through the persistence of memory of having been “*mahaleh*” Jews. They project this construct on to those women who remain “*mahaleh*” Jews, thus emphasising the potency of the reflection back in a mirroring process of the “*mahaleh*” Jewish women to the integrated Jew. Hence, the seemingly integrated Jewish women perceive the traditional Jewish women as marring the former’s acceptance by the wealthy dominant women. In *Caspian Rain* Mrs Arbab’s antipathy towards Bahar and her mother, who are “*mahaleh*” Jews, represents a manifestation of Jewish self-hatred as Mrs Arbab deems the traditional Jewish woman’s appearance as a betrayal of her aim to be an assimilated Iranian. An insight is provided into Mrs Arbab’s thoughts about Bahar’s mother which reveal considerable concern for exteriority: “her skin is cracked like the desert floor and she obviously hasn’t heard of hair dye...it’s people like her who give Jews a bad name” (CR: 20).

The Jewish female body acts as a site of control to enforce the hegemonic values of the wealthy Jewish assimilated women aiming to avoid anti-Semitism. Bahar is deemed not to dress, look and behave in accordance with Mrs Arbab’s values. Thus, she is affected by the latter’s membership of the Iranian upper class as Bahar’s inability to meet Mrs Arbab’s standards reminds Mrs Arbab of the “*mahaleh*” Jew she once was. Bahar is mirrored by the wealthy, female Jews, who in turn are mirrored by the wealthy, secular Muslim women so that a process of exteriority occurs. The wealthy, Jewish women thereby construct an illusionary self and hence the mirror is an instrument of deception so that a two-way mirror is created and thus stereotypes can be seen both from the inside and from the outside. Hence the mirroring is doubled, as the identity of Jew and woman is reflected, both containing a mirror within.

Although Memmi deploys the metaphor of the false mirror to illustrate the notion that the Jew admits to his/her own guilt believing he/she has negative attributes which are in fact the mythical portrait of the Jew³¹, the exteriority not only applies to Jews but to Jewish women. The metonymy of the mirror is a symbol of being reflected by the other and of the mirror within the self. This discourse is exemplified when Bahar is sent to Mrs Arbab’s Armenian dressmaker who is resentful about having to work for a poor Jew. The wealthy women in the waiting room observe Bahar in her underwear as the dressmaker leaves the door ajar to demean Bahar. The mirror is a metaphor for the reflecting back of the wealthy women: “She stands there as Alice takes her measurements and tries not to look in the mirror where she knows she will see the other women looking back at her” (CR: 34). The dressmaker’s dummies are a symbol of the threat of Bahar becoming a manipulated embodiment of mimicry: “In the

³¹ Albert Memmi, *Portrait of a Jew*, New York, Orion Press, 1962, p. 179.

mirror, Bahar sees a young woman,...naked mannequins lie on the backs of wooden chairs, ... she stands in surrender, arms stiff at her sides, face inundated by tears of humiliation and rage" (*ibid*: 35). Because of the desire to belong, the affluent, Jewish women deem the poor, Jewish woman subverts their perceived acceptance by the Muslim women encapsulated in female embodiment.

Bahar's resistance against mimicry is represented in a conversation with Mrs Arbab with each denigrating the other. Whereas Mrs Arbab minimises her Jewishness to privilege her Iranian identity, Bahar's family are practising Jews: "Let's not forget we're all Jews", Bahar tells Mrs Arbab once...and then Mrs Arbab answers, "Yes, but some of us are not ghetto Jews" (CR: 138). Mrs Arbab's situation is one of ostensibly being accepted by the wealthy Tehran elite but yet is one of fear of exclusion if the secular Muslims perceive her as an impure "*mahaleh*" Jew. Unlike the Arbabs, Bahar's family's primary identification as Jews is not imposed from the outside which challenges Sartre's position³² that the "authentic" Jew follows Judaism to assert his claim because he is subject to disdain by the wider society. Bahar's family live in an area where poor, religious Jews and Muslims practise their religion regardless of the difficulties it might cause (CR: 138). When Bahar visits her family there is a sense that they accuse her of betrayal and as she is accused of betraying Mrs Arbab by her "*mahaleh*" behaviour, she is situated in a border space between the binary of "assimilated" and "traditional" Jew represented by her weekly journey from affluent North Tehran to poor South Tehran. While Bahar's family implicitly impose guilt on her for not adhering to a traditional Jewish identity and Jewish self-hatred reveals guilt, Sheyda's female relatives inculcate her from childhood with the strict taboo of Jewish girls forbidding non-Jewish males to approach them. Sheyda therefore endures intense guilt, feeling utterly dirty and distraught because she has sinned by kissing a non-Jew (CR: 235). Jewish female autonomy is demonstrated in the need to prevent "impure" non-Jewish males from tainting Jewish females in the gendered imperative of memory to retain the "purity" of their distinctive Jewish identity.

The double-double bind of being Jewish and female is demonstrated and is intertwined with the tension of negotiating Jewish and Iranian identities. Some Jewish females distance themselves from Jewish identity which is a manifestation of shame and Jewish self-hatred. Hence, the self is an illusionary self and the categories of subject and object are unstable and this is a continuum from the subject-object relationship in the *mahaleh* where differing behaviours were represented in the inner and outer spaces.

The anti-Semitism represented in the literary texts is overwhelmingly rooted in the Iranian historical, Shi'a Islamic context, particularly focused on Jewish impurity yet it is far more covert out of the *mahaleh*. Moreover, whereas minimal Jewish agency asserted itself within the *mahaleh*, Jewish subjectivity and agency manifest themselves out of the *mahaleh*. The protagonists' feelings of Jewish and Jewish female guilt are intrinsic to the anti-Semitism and attempts at integration but irrespective of the projection of impurity, the Shi'a Muslims are the protagonists' object of desire concerning belonging and hence a tension exists between the protagonists' simultaneous trauma and desire.

Exilic Shift in Jewish Memory on Impurity

Exile provides a new perspective for the Iranian Jews but they nevertheless struggle to be freed from past constraints and dependency on being shaped by the Iranian Muslims in terms of their collective memory. Both Iranian Jews and Muslims reside in exile in Los Angeles but a significant factor that problematises the exilic Iranian Jewish-Muslim relationship is the exiled, Iranian Jews' collective and transgenerationally transmitted memory of prejudice against them and of not having been fully accepted in Iran. Both guilt and shame are potent factors. Katchadourian defines moral shame as a loss of honour leading to disgrace with the

³² Jean-Paul Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew...*, p. 91.

implication of moral failure³³. This shame results in a negative evaluation of the self. In Iran the Jews were accused of tainting Shi'a purity as they were considered unclean resulting in the shame caused by Shi'a contempt for the Iranian Jews.

To varying extents the protagonists construct an imagined past attempting to subvert the reality of the past. Some of my interviewees rationalized previous discrimination against Jews, and while the reasons they provide are undoubtedly valid, the interviewees' stance is arguably indicative of desired meaning in the need for nostalgia and commensurate belonging. They explained the Muslim belief in *najes* in various ways: Muslims who believed in the impure Jew were illiterate (IV F.Sedighim, 25.10.2009); ignorant, believed government propaganda (IV Yacoubian, 21.10.2009; G.Cohen, 26.6.09), were indoctrinated by their parents (IV G.Cohen, 26.6.09) and Jews themselves were to blame as they separated themselves from Muslims (IV Kamkar, 4.11.2009). Goel Cohen states that traditionally, Iranians treat a fellow citizen who holds a different belief as inferior and this belief in the inequality of human beings is a deeply rooted phenomenon³⁴. The protagonists thereby ascribe selective meaning to past oppression to obviate conflicted memory and in order for nostalgia to occur.

Yet, Iranian Jewish exilic memory calls into question this rationalisation and serves to expel oblivion and forgetting and to remember the insults and offensive behaviour towards the Jews. A shift from being defined and victimised as object in Iran, to being subject defining their own experiences in exile, is thereby represented. As they were silenced for so long, in exile they want at last to speak out to tell their version of the truth. One catalyst is their experience of political conflict, revolution and the shock of displacement. The other factor is the distance of exile enabling new insights, perspectives, vision of Iran and critical distance to be gained and the Iranian Jewish opportunity to control events of the past through re-shaping and re-telling them. They do so through verbal discourse which is analogous to testimony and is tantamount to a site of catharsis and transformation in relation to the transmitted narrative of oppression of the Jewish community: "It is narrative integration that produces the memory of the traumatic event. It is when they become full-blown narratives that these memories tell stories of blame and guilt"³⁵. The contrast between the repressed narrative of trauma and the verbal representation from the space of exile is striking and suggests a tension between the narrated time about the past which is written time, and the discursive, verbal time about the past narrated from the exilic present³⁶.

³³ H. Katchadourian, *Guilt: The Bite of Conscience*, Stanford, Stanford General Books, 2010, p. 16.

³⁴ Goel Cohen, ed., *A Follower of Culture: Brief History of the Alliance Israelite Universelle in Iran. Memoirs of Elias Eshaghian*, Los Angeles, Sina Research Based Publications, 2008, p. 26.

³⁵ Mieke Bal, Jonathan Crewe and Leo Spitzer, eds., *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*, Hanover, University Press of New England, 1999, p. 255.

³⁶ Ricoeur defines catharsis as a process linking cognition, imagination and feeling (1988: Vol.1, 50). He observes that history becomes human time through narration and. narrative only becomes meaningful in the context of temporal existence (*ibid*: 52). For Ricoeur the interrogation of Aristotle's Poetics provides the opportunity to compare lived experience and discourse in the context of time and narrative. Aristotle's mimesis is not an identical replica of action but he privileges emplotment or muthos which is the organisation of events into a system. The heterogeneous elements of a life story are brought together as a coherent narrative of causality and continuity which is a sequence of events configured in such a way as to represent symbolically what would otherwise be inexpressible in language, namely the human experience of time. The verbal narrative is a constitutive narrative that elaborates on the traumatic past in terms of past actions being reconstructed and interpreted from the perspective of the present. Hence a form of emplotment is enacted which recovers the past verbally. In exile the protagonists are situated outside familiar time and space and thus there is an absence of linear time in exile which Ricoeur calls cosmological time. A further form of time is phenomenological time, experienced in terms of the past, present and future and he postulates that human time combines cosmological and phenomenological times. Furthermore he links lived time with cosmological time to form historical time but is aware of the difficulty of using this theory for a past that has disappeared as

The elaboration on trauma about discrimination out of the *mahaleh* under the Shah took place in interviews through which I began to understand that the trauma was internalised significantly more than my initial reading of the literary texts had suggested. In a sense the interviewees fill in the absent words not represented in print. All the interviewees were aware of past *najes* asserting that it was very prevalent in juxtaposition with fear and humiliation, that significant prejudice against Jews existed and that Jews always had to be on guard. Muslims had a higher status with more rights and Jews were under their control and hence a dual system existed. A constant theme was the profound humiliation experienced by the Jews and the concomitant agony of being shaped by another. There was a Jewish consciousness that Jews were regarded differently by Muslims and not as real Iranians (IV Nahai, 27.10.2009; Kahen, 4.12.2009). Negative incidents and experiences occurred because 'in the end we were Jews who were never allowed opportunities in Iran' (IV Mossanen, 26.10.2009). Nahai observed mistreatment of Jews by Muslims including derogatory name calling and was aware that Muslims demonised Jews exemplified by the accusation that they killed Muslim children to make matzo. Jewish children were stoned by Muslims in the 1940s and up to the mid-1950s (IV Sedaghatfar, 2.11.2009; G.Cohen, 26.6.2009). Muslim shopkeepers would forbid their fruit to be touched by Jews who felt unable to protest about it (IV Sedighim, 25.10.2009; S.Chanukah, 23.7.2009; G.Cohen, 26.6.2009) and at Muslim weddings tea glasses were turned sideways to denote Jews had drunk from them (IV Kamran, 27.10.2009). Nonetheless, it was claimed that a settled understanding existed between Jews and Muslims rather than animosity (IV Homa Sarshar, 29.10.2009) and many of the interviewees had Muslim friends (IV Sedaghatfar, 2.11.2009; Nahai, 27.10.2009; Sarshar, 29.10.2009; Kahen, 4.12.2009).

Because the exiled Iranian Jews refuse to forget the memory of discrimination, a discrepancy exists between Iranian Jewish memory and hegemonic Iranian memory. In Iran, because the majority Muslim population perceived Iranian Jews as a marginalised group, they did not consider them to be full members of the nation. Although Connerton assumes that the collective possesses unconscious collective memories, in my view the exiled Iranian Jewish memories appear to be located in the conscious as if the memories are too traumatic to be repressed any longer, as they were in Iran in the attempt to belong to the imagined nation. Hence having mutual origins in Iran does not automatically translate to a Jewish sense of belonging to the Iranian, diasporic community. The lack of a homogeneous memory between Jews and Muslims is one factor accounting for the problematic relationship between them in exile.

Crucially, in exile, collective, Iranian Jewish discourse attempts to resist and eradicate the ambivalence of Iranian Jewish identity. It takes the form of some Iranian Jews insisting that they belong to Iran and indeed, that they are the true Iranians who profoundly affected Iranian culture and language³⁷ and lived in Iran before the Muslim conquest and therefore lived there longer than the Muslims (IV Sedaghatfar, 2.11.2009; Yacoubian, 21.10.2009; Kahen, 4.12.2009; Hakakian 2.9.2006 [www]). In *Land of No* Hakakian emphatically states that Iranian Jews' history preceded that of Muslims by several hundred years (NO: 7) and in *Septembers of Shiraz* Farnaz's father categorically informs his daughter that Jews are Iranians who have been in Iran a very long time, since before the time of Cyrus (SH: 166). Iranian Jews thereby resist their exclusion from the Iranian nation and the assertion by some Muslims that Jews are not real Iranians. Exile enables the Iranian Jews to attempt to take control of their own collective memory to resist and eradicate the ambivalence and guilt of Iranian Jewish identity and to

history has connotations of reality. Exilic time may represent freedom from past lived time as present time represents time-out-of-joint as it has been ruptured from familiar lived time so that the present state of temporality leads to the interviewees' externalisation of the transmission of trauma, ascribing of blame and attempt to understand the past, thereby constructing their interpretation of historical time.

³⁷ The oldest modern Persian is written in Hebrew and is Judeo-Persian.

resist their exclusion from the Iranian nation. They insist that they are more authentic Iranians than Muslim Iranians and this declaration therefore represents an insistence on belonging and on casting off the guilt of impurity. Through the imagined return to origins, the Iranian Jews create an Iranian Jewish collective memory which represents Iranian Jewish identity as fully Iranian because of its Jewish identity. By creating a counter-memory, the Iranian Jews seek to exert some control of Iranian memory, inscribing themselves in Iranian history in contestation with hegemonic, Iranian Muslim memory. Their re-instatement and glorification in the Iranian narrative of nation is crucial for them because in exile it enables them to claim belonging to the Iranian nation thereby establishing self-identity for survival in exile.

In this paper, I demonstrate the complex multiple effects on and within the Iranian Jewish community of the projection of impurity on to the Iranian Jews by the Shi'a and the ambivalence in the Jewish desire to belong as Iranians despite their continued designation as *najes*. Yet, it is apparent that the Iranian assumption is that the Jewish community must suppress manifestations of Jewish identity to achieve or acquiesce with national identity. The Jewish attempt to establish subjectivity in the new exilic space has ramifications in terms of their collective memory and new constructions of Iranian Jewish belonging to Iran.

Abbreviations:

IV – Interview

Literary works

- Goldin**, Farideh (2003) *Wedding Song*. Hanover: Brandeis University Press. **(WS)**
Hakakian, Roya (2004) *Journey from the Land of No*. New York: Three Rivers Press. **(NO)**
Kahen, Mojgan (2011) *Les Murs et Le Miroir*. Paris: L'Harmattan. **(MM)**
Nahai, Gina (1999) *Moonlight on the Avenue of Faith*. New York: Harcourt Brace. **(MO)**
Nahai, Gina (2007) *Caspian Rain*. San Francisco: MacAdam/Cage. **(CR)**
Sofer, Dalia (2007) *Septembers of Shiraz*. London: Picador. **(SH)**